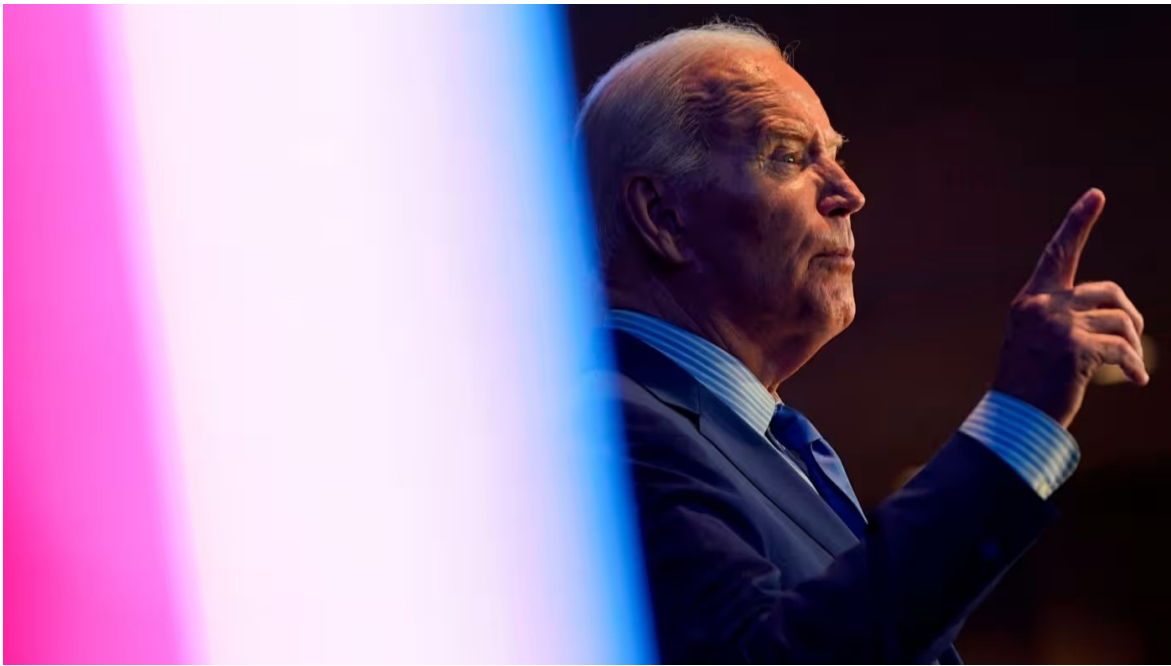


Opinion **US foreign policy**

America's economic security doctrine has taken on a darker hue

Washington seeks to defend the rules-based order with unruly, self-interested interventions

ADAM TOOZE



In a changing world, Joe Biden's unabashed baby boomer conviction that America should be number one comes at a price © Kent Nishimura/AFP via Getty Images

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Looking to the future much of the world is frozen in horror at the prospect that American democracy will, by this time next year, deliver a second Donald Trump administration, hell-bent on tearing up the international order. But what about Joe Biden's record on that score? Clearly, the manners of the Biden administration are less disruptive. It does not indulge in climate denial. It plays nicely with Europe. But in a changing world, Biden's unabashed baby boomer conviction that America should be number one comes at a price.

In economic policy the administration has been nationalist. The US has poured resources into Ukraine and the Middle East, but is unable and unwilling to broker a satisfactory peace. In relation to China the Biden team has, if anything, escalated the tension.

By the spring of 2023, amid military sabre-rattling and tit-for-tat economic

sanctions, Sino-US relations had reached a [dangerous point](#). It is testament to the diplomatic nous of Biden's team that it realised the need to pull back. One way to do so was to insist that in its multipronged economic campaign against [China](#), [America's](#) aim is to do no more than to defend a defined sphere of essential interest — “[a small yard](#)” — with a high fence.

Though meant to be reassuring, what that formula means in practice depends on how Washington defines its prerogatives. The most recent attempt to set some limits comes from Daleep Singh, in a [programmatic essay](#) for the Atlantic Council, issued days before he returned to the White House as deputy national security adviser for international economics.

In his time in the private sector, Singh has had much to reflect on. In 2022 he was one of the chief architects of sanctions against Russia. They have been, at best, a mixed success. States representing more than two-thirds of the world's population have stood aside.

In order to remedy this deficiency, Singh argues, the [US government](#) machine needs to do sanctions better. It should commit to minimising collateral damage and use positive as well as negative inducements. This is sensible and humane stuff. But it does no more than paper over the contradiction that Washington is seeking to defend what it likes to call the rules-based international order with a series of unruly self-interested interventions. And it resorts to such measures because large parts of the US elite no longer believe in the optimistic historical vision that once framed those rules.

When a veteran of 1990s globalism like Treasury secretary [Janet Yellen](#) talks of defending clearly defined American national security interests, what lies beyond that narrow perimeter, she suggests, is the wide-open space of the world economy. Singh's generation of policymakers, led by boss Jake Sullivan, pay lip service to global prosperity, but see globalisation as undermining America's middle class, opening the door to Trump and propelling the rise of China.

Singh insists that “no economy is too big to sanction”. But in a telling concession, he feels it necessary to remind his colleagues that in targeting China “there isn't an obvious knockout blow that coercive statecraft could deliver by itself without incurring severe collateral damage”.

Instead, he urges the US to “to attract non-aligned countries into its orbit with positive inducements, and in doing so to gradually isolate China before any conflict unfolds” Singh is imaginative when it comes to the tools of policy. He urges far

unfamous . Singh is imaginative when it comes to the tools of policy. He urges far more generous use of sovereign loan guarantees. But there is no disguising the fact that his doctrine would make a future war into the final yardstick of US grand strategy.

This is the hangover-inducing cocktail that defines the Biden era — lashings of internationalism spiked with brazen, “America first” power-mongering. Is it any wonder — after Iraq and Afghanistan — that much of the world is sceptical about a coalition led by decision makers who muse openly about imperial orbits and “knockout” blows to China?

One of the few saving graces of the first Trump administration was that the president was more interested in doing deals with America's competitors than knocking them out. The worry must be that a second Trump administration will not only be fired by a desire for revenge and a radicalised Republican party. It will also inherit from Biden a state machinery schooled on a much darker view of the world than that which Obama bequeathed to Trump in 2016. Whatever the electoral outcome, America's deep state, once hailed as a bastion of liberalism, is turning to the dark side.

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