

Sujet traité : Ce que Joe Biden a fait de bien / What Joe Biden got right

Source : Financial Times Date : 27 août 2024

Opinion **Joe Biden**

What Joe Biden got right

He managed the decline of American power much better than his recent predecessors

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President Joe Biden speaks at the Democratic National Convention this month. He has not allowed the narrative of US decline to render a still-great power timid © Mandel Ngan/AFP/Getty Images

Janan Ganesh YESTERDAY

What a shame the phrase “managing decline”, especially but not only in Britain, has such a toxic ring. Let’s grow up about this, shall we? A great number of countries, from Spain to Egypt to Japan, are past the all-time peak of their powers. It matters to their hundreds of millions of citizens if that process is handled with skill or with clumsiness. The Ford Motor Company can’t relive its mid-20th century pomp, but 177,000 workers rather mind how well the decline is managed. What is a human being much past their twenties doing if not managing decline?

In 1945, the US had a nuclear monopoly. As late as 1960, it had 40 per cent of world output. It won’t have either again. And so the brief for all US presidents now is to manage decline. Joe Biden did this honourable work better than several of his predecessors.

George W Bush had a grandiose and ultimately ruinous idea of what US power could achieve in Iraq and Afghanistan. Barack Obama retrenched, too much. Doubting America's material or even moral wherewithal to shape events, he was tentative in the face of Russian aggression in Crimea. He pencilled but didn't enforce a red line against the use of chemical weapons in Syria. How much this coyness emboldened the west's enemies in the following years, we are left to guess.

And Donald Trump? Whatever the Republican affiliation, he is more Obama than Bush. Whatever the jingoism, he is a declinist. His aversions — current account deficits, freeriding allies, armed interventions — are those of someone who views US power as a wasting asset to be husbanded jealously. His nearest Republicans, the Asia First crowd, regard each cheque for Ukraine as a waste of scarce resources that should be conserved for the larger menace of China. There is a superficial common sense in this outlook. But as well as failing to recognise that a show of strength in one place can pay off elsewhere (would America's stature in Asia go up or down if it let Ukraine fall?), it exudes pessimism about US power.

And so, of recent presidents, Biden has struck much the finest balance. There has been no Bushian adventure, but that's the easy part. The trick is to not overcorrect: to not allow the narrative of US decline to render a still-great power timid.

Consider Biden's assertiveness in Europe. He knew in late 2021 that Russia was going to attack Ukraine, and let the world know too. He then armed the victim well enough to frustrate the invader for two and a half years and counting. (Though he could have done more.) Nato, which was casting around for a *raison d'être* when Biden took office, has new members, and existing ones that are tooling up. The alliance, a force-multiplier for the US, has been renewed for at least a generation.

Nor did this European focus come at the cost of Asia, where the Aukus pact, which might soon encompass Japan, entrenched US influence. The "Quad" held its first meetings of heads of government. The Philippines and Vietnam drew closer to the US. Biden's statements on Taiwan were firm to a fault. (The Asia Firsters might compare them to Trump's.)

Hubris has long ceased to be the American problem. The opposing risk, that acting as a nation on the wane becomes self-fulfilling, is the clear and present one. How did Biden skirt it?

He seemed to understand the most important thing about imperial decline: it takes ages. A great power can drag out its time in the sun for decades and even centuries after challengers start eating away at its underlying economic supremacy. Britain began to lose its industrial lead in the 1800s, but its empire kept growing in territorial extent into the 1920s. It became one of the UN's permanent five as an exhausted debtor in 1945. Russia itself shows that a state can sustain a global role, if only as a spoiler, past its natural lifespan as a first-class power.

It wasn't logorrhoea that drove Edward Gibbon to write six volumes on the passing of the Roman empire. Or his thwarted love life, which left him with bundles of energy to dispose of. Rather, Rome's decline and fall really did take an age to play out in real life. His book, which coincided with the American Revolution, is sometimes parsed for lessons that a beleaguered empire on the Potomac might take from a long-dead empire on the Tiber. Here's one. Between the peak of something and its ultimate demise, a vast amount can be achieved. Perhaps it took a man who became president at 78 to see the point.

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