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Taking US Foreign Policy for the Middle Class Seriously

Over the previous decade, a bipartisan consensus has emerged on the importance of placing the interests of the middle class near the center of American foreign policy. Of course, lamentations concerning the health of the American middle class and presidential programs to revitalize it have been a staple of postwar history, particularly during economic downturns.¹ But only over this previous decade have they been tied so closely to foreign policy concerns—something which has happened in otherwise very dissimilar administrations. The first time the American middle class was mentioned in a US National Security Strategy (NSS) document was in 2015, when Barack Obama pledged to “strengthen the middle class” by “opening markets and leveling the playing field for American workers and businesses abroad.”² In a similar formulation, Donald Trump’s 2017 NSS promised to be one which “creates middle-class jobs” through “rebuilding economic strength at home and preserving a fair and reciprocal international economic system.”³

Biden has taken the middle class line of thought further than either of his predecessors

The Biden administration has taken this line of thought further than either of its predecessors, with the new president promising that he will run a “foreign

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policy for the middle class.”⁴ The administration’s March 2021 Interim National Security Strategic Guidance similarly promises to place “the American people—and especially working families—at the center of our national security strategy.” Biden has linked this rhetoric to a theme he touched on many times during his campaign, one of showing that “democracy can still deliver for our people.”⁵

Critics of the idea of a “foreign policy for the middle class” have accused it of vagueness and providing no guidelines for prioritization.⁶ Many foreign policy issues lack clear relevance specific to the middle class as opposed to any other group of Americans. Confusion over which Americans should be categorized as “middle class” and hence expect to feel the benefits of the administration’s policy further compounds this problem.⁷ Analysts might hence be tempted to dismiss the idea as nothing more than rhetoric, irrelevant to either guiding Biden’s foreign policy or measuring whether it has succeeded or not.

This would be a mistake. As its first year in office has demonstrated, the administration does have a coherent idea of what its “foreign policy for the middle class” is supposed to accomplish. Although the administration may be indulging in rhetorical overkill when it claims that the concept will revolutionize or even affect *all* aspects of American foreign policy, it does have concrete and measurable implications in a number of areas. The label captures the administration’s hopes of demonstrating the concrete benefits of an elite-guided, internationalist foreign policy to economically struggling Americans. It aims to do so through a focus on a few key policy areas which have implications for income and inequality within the United States. These policies are primarily economic—trade and taxation—but also implicate broader issues such as geopolitical competition with China and other US adversaries.

Viewed this way, the Biden administration’s foreign policy owes more to that of its predecessor than its proponents might want to admit. This has implications for other countries around the world who are watching closely to see if the era of American economic nationalism is over with the passing of Trump. The early indications from the Biden administration are that not all of Trump’s foreign policy can be ascribed to an aberrant “Jacksonian” tradition which had only temporarily interrupted normal American internationalism.⁸ This serves notice to America’s allies and adversaries alike that although Donald Trump may be gone, the ghost of at least parts of his agenda still haunts the White House.

But—importantly—the ultimate goal of Biden’s “foreign policy for the middle class” is different. While Trump’s “America First” aimed to replace traditional American internationalism with a new populist, anti-elite consensus, Biden’s foreign policy aims to *save* internationalism by making its concrete benefits apparent to economically squeezed Americans. Far from being a vague and useless concept, this provides a yardstick against which the success of Biden’s foreign policy can be measured. But it also suggests that difficult trade-offs and the privileging of

short-term reassurance over long-term gains lie ahead. Biden's promise to the middle class is hence not without its perils to America's global standing.

Stuck in the Middle with Who?

Deciding who exactly is "middle class" is a problem which has long plagued social scientists and economists. Criteria such as income, education, occupational status, cultural values, and self-perception have all been used in various contexts. Someone might be said to be middle class if they fall within a particular income bracket, if they hold a college degree or a white-collar occupation, or if they value hard work, material stability, and providing a better standard of living for their children than they have had themselves.⁹ All of these measures can be useful, but they also pose a paradox for politicians and policymakers. On one hand, it is impossible to craft policy specifically intended to benefit a particular group without having a clear profile of that group. On the other hand, any exclusive definition risks alienating voters who are left out, a particular risk given that large majorities of Americans consider themselves to be part of the middle class even if they are technically not when such criteria are applied.¹⁰

As might be expected, the Biden administration has avoided providing an exclusionary definition of who can expect to benefit from its "foreign policy for the middle class." However, a number of themes have already emerged which allow us to identify more precisely who the administration has in mind, which in turn allows us to better understand the intent behind its policy.

First, it is clear that the administration's middle-class foreign policy is aimed at the broad segment of Americans who find economic security elusive despite self-identifying as middle class. These are the Americans who nod along with the singer Jo Dee Messina when she complains about being "above the below and below the upper / I'm stuck in the middle where money gets tight." Even before the global financial crisis and the coronavirus pandemic, many Americans found economic security elusive due to income stagnation and the spiraling costs of housing, healthcare, childcare, and education. Nearly two decades ago, Elizabeth Warren famously identified this as "the two-income trap," in which both parents in a household are forced to work longer and harder just to maintain the same standard of living.¹¹ A slew of subsequent books with titles such as *Pinched*, *Squeezed* and *Vanishing* attest to the same theme.¹² It is one that resonates strongly today, as demonstrated by a Pew poll in March 2019 which found that 79 percent of Americans expect the average family's standard of living to be either no better off or worse over the next 30 years.¹³

A number of future high-ranking Biden administration officials linked these insecurities to American foreign policy in a 2020 Carnegie Endowment for

International Peace report titled *Making U.S. Foreign Policy Work Better for the Middle Class*. Contributors included National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, CIA director William Burns, State Department Policy Planning Director Salman Ahmed, and White House staffer Jennifer Harris. Based on a survey of households in Colorado, Nebraska, and Ohio, the report concludes that “middle-class anxieties in the United States have escalated over the last two decades as middle-income wages have stagnated and household costs have risen.” The focus in the report is on Americans who feel that their self-perceived middle-class status is under threat from income stagnation, inequality, and inflation. Although the report used income criteria in order to identify which households to survey, it also notes that “‘middle-class’ connotes more than income alone... Many people also associate this term with the dignity of work, position in society, and/or the maintenance of a certain lifestyle.”¹⁴ And, according to the report, it is the Americans who feel they are losing this dignity, position, and lifestyle due to economic forces beyond their control who should be the focus of a middle-class foreign policy.

Second, and even more narrowly, this policy is focused on that subset of Americans whose struggle to maintain their middle-class status has led them to ques-

There is a strong focus on those who feel their economic security has been hurt by globalization

tion America’s post-war internationalist foreign policy. This implies a strong focus on Americans who feel that their personal economic security has been negatively affected by globalization. This is a clear reaction to the election of Donald Trump, whose victory in 2016 called into question middle-class Americans’ support for both an internationalist foreign policy outlook and the foreign-policy elite who had traditionally managed it.¹⁵

In response, Biden’s middle-class foreign policy aims to restore the faith of middle-class voters and decrease the appeal of anti-internationalist, anti-elite viewpoints. The new president links this goal closely to the defense of democracy itself. Biden has described “a strong, aspiring and growing middle class” as key to American “social and political stability” and warned that a weak middle class will create an opening for “radical changes.”¹⁶ The 2020 Carnegie report similarly warns that “[w]hen policy fails to adapt to growing economic and societal stresses at home ... an abrupt change in approach becomes more likely.” A thriving—and politically supportive—middle class is necessary for the United States “to lead abroad from a position of strength.” A middle-class foreign policy also requires—and can legitimate—a restoration of technocratic management, which the middle-class need in order to “shed

light” on how global events impact their lives and which is needed in order to design policies to cushion the impact of globalization.¹⁷

This goal is congruent with the long history of American post-war internationalism. Since the beginning of scientific analysis of American foreign policy attitudes in the 1940s, internationalists have viewed affluent and educated Americans as providing the bedrock of support for an internationalist foreign policy. They have also argued that these Americans rely on expert policymakers to deduce the best course of action in a confusing and ever-changing world.¹⁸ Today, winning back the support of middle-class Americans for this elite-guided internationalism requires demonstrating its concrete, tangible benefits—particularly for those Americans who have suffered through the dislocations of globalization.¹⁹

Finally, it is clear that the definition of “middle class” used by the Biden administration is more inclusive at the lower end than it is at the upper. As James Traub points out, the Democratic Party’s goals have changed dramatically since the era of Clinton’s “welfare reform,” which sought to reduce government expenditures on the poor. 25 years ago, a policy “‘for the middle class’ would have been understood, *sotto voce*, as ‘and not for the poor.’ Today it means ‘and not for the rich.’”²⁰ This focus is the result of leftward shifts in the Democratic Party as well as the long-term trend of growing inequality. The share of US aggregate income earned by middle-tier households declined from 62 percent to 43 percent between 1970 and 2018, and from 10 percent to 9 percent for those in the lower-income bracket. Upper-income households, by contrast, saw their share of aggregate national wealth increase from 29 percent to 43 percent.²¹

That the administration’s middle-class foreign policy is also targeted at advancing the interests of lower-income households is apparent from the Carnegie report, which references “poor” and “lower-income” Americans frequently alongside the middle class.²² Richer Americans, by contrast, are more likely to be cast by the administration as the benefactors of a rigged system. Biden has highlighted this growing inequality as a threat both to American democracy and to its capitalist system, while criticizing policies which disproportionately benefit the wealthy.²³ Likewise, Sullivan has argued that American trade and investment policy “should place less emphasis on making the world safe for corporate investment and more emphasis on international tax and anti-corruption policies that target drivers of inequality.”²⁴ Given the huge numbers of Americans who regard themselves as middle class or aspire to that status, a focus on “the middle class” is rhetorical shorthand which should not be understood to exclude lower-income Americans. Even Donald Trump, the supposed champion of blue-collar workers, used the phrase “middle class” 352 times during his presidency versus only 53 uses of “working class.”²⁵

As a label, a “foreign policy for the middle class” serves a useful rhetorical purpose in selling the benefits of an internationalist foreign policy, especially when compared to loftier and vaguer-sounding organizing principles for American foreign policy. In general, Americans respond more favorably to foreign-policy concepts which can be easily linked to their own material interests.²⁶ Sullivan recounts how he used the phrase “liberal international order” during a 2016 speech, only to have a voter tell him afterwards “I’m not sure what exactly you’re referring to, but I don’t like any of those three words!”²⁷ By contrast, the Biden administration clearly intends its “middle-class foreign policy” to be both easily understandable and to place a rhetorical emphasis on what American foreign policy can concretely deliver for middle- and lower-income Americans, rather than on what America does for the world.²⁸ But beyond its mere rhetorical effect, a “foreign policy for the middle class” also crucially implies particular policy commitments and trade-offs.

Foreign Policy and the Middle Class

Central to the administration’s notion of a “foreign policy for the middle class” is the idea that domestic and foreign policy are so thoroughly intertwined that they

Several steps have been taken to increase linkages between domestic and foreign policymaking

cannot be considered in isolation from one another. America’s foreign policy decisions affect the fate of the middle class at home, and the domestic problems of the middle class also have an international dimension. In his first major speech, Secretary of State Antony Blinken argued that “more than at any other time in my career—maybe in my lifetime—distinctions between domestic and foreign policy have simply fallen away.”²⁹ In recognition of this, the administration has promised that it will break down the siloes

which it says have separated domestic from foreign policymaking in the past.

The administration has taken several steps in its first year to increase linkages between domestic and foreign policymaking. Susan Rice, a former National Security Advisor, was appointed as chair of the Domestic Policy Council, which has been given a new mandate to work with the National Security Council (NSC) on initiatives to benefit the middle class, as have other bureaucratic entities such as the newly-created National Climate Task Force.³⁰ The NSC itself has been restructured to place less emphasis on the Middle East and more on the Indo-Pacific, whose rapid economic growth has been blamed for

the dislocations suffered by the American middle class in recent decades.³¹ At the same time, the administration has frequently drawn attention to the connections between domestic and foreign policy in its public statements. Biden has emphasized many times the importance of a prosperous, well-educated, and successful middle class for enabling America to compete with China, even referencing great power rivalry in a speech touting his administration's childcare policy at a daycare center in Connecticut.³²

These moves have drawn skepticism from commentators. Some have claimed that the problems of the American middle class first and foremost need to be solved at the domestic level, particularly by providing a more adequate social safety net.³³ This seems consistent with the fact that Biden's framing of his agenda has placed less emphasis on what American foreign policy can do for the middle class, and more on what a healthy middle class can do to support his policy of strategic competition with China. The resultant effort looks designed more to win the support of China hawks for new domestic programs than to win the middle class over to internationalism. Meanwhile, the exact role of international considerations in shaping the details of Biden's domestic agenda is unclear. Consider how the administration's childcare policy might be different if China didn't exist, for instance, and you find no easy answers. If a "foreign policy for the middle class" just means giving a new rhetorical spin to domestic programs by linking them to America's international goals, then it is hard to credit its importance as a foreign policy doctrine.

Meanwhile, the exact impact of the administration's bureaucratic reorganizations remains unclear after Biden's first year in office. Absent strong and continuous presidential leadership, attempts to impose broad new priorities on the foreign policy bureaucracy often fail to achieve results even in the short term. In his 1977 inaugural address, President Jimmy Carter vowed that his commitment to human rights would be "absolute," and he made early attempts to involve human rights considerations in large areas of American foreign policy.³⁴ Like the Biden administration, he made this move in part to restore domestic confidence in American internationalism at a time when it was perceived to be widely discredited, in Carter's case because of the debacle in Vietnam.³⁵ Yet, traditional geopolitical priorities such as containment of the Soviet Union soon led to the eclipse of human rights concerns within the government.³⁶

Likewise, the Biden administration has not met—and could not be expected to meet—the standard which Sullivan set when he declared that "*everything* we do in our foreign policy and national security will be measured by a basic metric: Is it going to make life better, safer, and easier for working families?"³⁷ (italics added) Some early tests faced by the administration—such as responding to the February 2021 coup in Myanmar or managing the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan—

provided no clear way to use the interests of the middle class as an organizing principle to inform policy.

While these observations ought to lead to humility about the scope of the idea, it would be a mistake to dismiss a “foreign policy for the middle class” merely as a messaging strategy or a vague whole-of-government mandate. There are a number of specific foreign policy areas in which middle-class concerns are clearly shaping the Biden administration’s approach, and where it hopes to deliver concrete gains before the next election. If we want to judge the worth of the approach—and also the trade-offs it involves with other priorities—then these are the areas to focus on: trade policy and enforcement, multilateral cooperation, and avoiding global shocks.

Trade Policy and Enforcement

Trade policy is the area in which the consequences of adopting a “foreign policy for the middle class” have been clearest in Biden’s first year. For decades, Biden has been an advocate of open trading arrangements, backing NAFTA in the early 1990s, permanent normal trade relations with China in 2000, and American participation in the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) during the Obama administration. As recently as 2019, he bemoaned the ways in which the “extreme left and extreme right” had begun to question globalization and America’s leading role in negotiating new trade agreements.³⁸ Since taking office, however, Biden has not sought to put the US back at the forefront of promoting globalization. Instead, he has adopted a policy which seems mostly designed to accommodate rather than challenge the concerns of those voters who worry about the impact trade has on the American economy.

As a result, some foreign commentators have even begun to wonder whether a “foreign policy for the middle class” is just a continuation of “America First” under a different name.³⁹ These comparisons are in many ways unfair. Biden’s trade policy has been neither as unpredictable nor as aggressive as that of Trump, who launched hostile trade actions against both adversaries and allies, most notably China, the European Union, Japan, and South Korea.⁴⁰ But even as the Biden administration doesn’t seem poised to launch any new trade wars, neither has it moved to undo the trade policy which it inherited. Much as Trump pledged to place American workers first, Biden has promised a “worker-centered trade policy” focused on reviewing the impact that past trade agreements have had on workers and using existing enforcement mechanisms liberally.⁴¹

The president has also pledged that the United States will not enter into any new trade agreements until “we have made major investments here at home and in our workers,” a flexible standard which allows for a commitment to open trade

in theory while avoiding the political risks associated with negotiating new deals.⁴² And in a departure from Trump, but also from a more orthodox framing of trade policy, the administration has described its trade policy not primarily as a tool for spurring economic growth, but rather as a tool for combating wealth inequality, arguing that “trade policy must grow the American middle class” rather than serving only “the privileged few.”⁴³

In its first year, the administration has taken many specific actions which reflect this cautious approach. Most notably, the administration has left in place the \$350 billion in levies on Chinese goods it inherited from Trump. Rather than signaling a softening of the US position, US Trade Representative Katherine Tai has criticized the “Phase One” agreement reached between the US and China in January 2020 for not going far enough to address broader structural issues such as China’s industrial subsidies.⁴⁴ She has also criticized China’s failure to implement the agreement. When Phase One expired at the end of 2021 with China having fulfilled only about 60 percent of the purchase promises it made under the deal, Tai stated that “the United States is prepared to use domestic trade tools strategically as needed in order to achieve a more level playing field with China for US workers and businesses.”⁴⁵

Over the course of 2021, the administration imposed several additional measures on Beijing, including placing dozens of Chinese firms with close ties to the military on a trade and investment blacklist, and banning exports from Xinjiang.⁴⁶ Yet, the administration has also stated that it wants to avoid “[escalating] trade tensions with the PRC,” fearing as it does the economic impact that escalating trade tensions may have on the middle class.⁴⁷ Although Tai announced in October 2021 that she would begin talks with her Chinese counterpart on a new agreement, at the time of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, these discussions had yet to bear any fruit. Nor had the administration announced a formal investigation of Chinese subsidies under Section 301 of US trade law, which could eventually lead to new tariffs. The result has been paralysis on moving beyond the major features of the policy inherited from Trump.

Regarding the European Union, the Biden administration has taken some new steps but has by no means returned to the pre-Trump status quo. On the conciliatory side, Biden in June suspended the threat of tariffs in a long-running dispute with the EU over aircraft subsidies, and in October agreed to lift tariffs on European steel and aluminum imports which were imposed by Trump in 2018.⁴⁸ But these tariffs have been replaced by a system of quotas, similar to those imposed by Trump on other countries, which are designed to continue to protect American metal industries.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, the Biden administration allowed its Trade

The administration has described its trade policy as a tool for combating wealth inequality

Promotion Authority—which enables the executive branch to fast-track new trade deals through Congress—to expire in July without seeking reauthorization, and has shown little interest in starting new trade talks despite interest from allies such as Taiwan, India and the United Kingdom.⁵⁰

As under Trump, the impact of this trade agenda on the middle class has been mixed. The administration is faced with the uncomfortable truth that any trade policy necessarily involves exposing some segments of the middle class to harm while protecting others. Many of the policies the administration inherited from Trump—including the China tariffs and restrictions on European metal imports—benefit workers in protected industries while harming other segments of middle-class Americans via higher prices and lower economic growth. Layoffs and slower job growth have also occurred in industries suffering from the impact of higher prices or from retaliatory tariffs.⁵¹

But focusing on the precise distribution of benefits and harms risks missing the larger purpose of Biden's trade policy, which is essentially political rather than economic. The complexity of the global economy means that few voters are equipped to understand the impact of trade policy on their personal economic situation. As Diana C. Mutz has demonstrated, most voters see international trade as a form of competition between nations, and the main determinant of their support for trade will be whether or not they feel it benefits the American economy or national security on aggregate.⁵² This is the lens through which Biden's trade policy is best understood—not as an attempt to directly improve the economic fortunes of the middle class, but to reassure middle-class voters that the administration is putting American workers and security first.

Recent public opinion surveys appear to validate this approach. While the public remains broadly supportive of trade and globalization, they also expect the administration to be assertive in protecting American interests. Large percentages of respondents agreed in a June 2021 survey that international trade is good for consumers like them (82 percent) and the US economy (75 percent). But 58 percent also said that trade with China weakens American national security, with 57 percent favoring reducing it even if this meant higher prices for consumers. Startlingly, in the same survey, 60 percent of respondents supported imposing tariffs on *any* foreign product which competes with domestic industry, a designation which could be applied to practically any import.⁵³ Such figures demonstrate the political difficulty that the Biden administration would have if it attempted to return to the pre-Trump status quo. Globalization may be acceptable to voters—but it needs to be managed.

Yet prioritizing the politics of reassurance in this fashion also involves trading off with America's geopolitical interests. As the US withdraws from deepening international economic integration, this integration proceeds apace without American involvement. An example of this can already be seen unfolding in

the Asia-Pacific, a region that the Biden administration has identified as crucial in American foreign policy. Not only is the administration still declining to seek membership in the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), which was initially negotiated by the Obama administration, but it is also standing aside as regional powers form a new and broader agreement, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Instead, it has promised to create a new “Indo-Pacific Economic Framework” which will include no new commitments of market access and the exact content of which was still highly vague six months after being announced.⁵⁴ Meanwhile, China has signed on as a founding member of the RCEP and has also expressed an interest in joining CPTPP.⁵⁵ The RCEP—which includes US allies such as Australia, Japan and South Korea—will have a permanent secretariat, suggesting it will be a platform for discussing deeper integration in the future.⁵⁶ Although the RCEP’s planned tariff reductions are relatively modest, the agreement will do much to integrate regional supply chains and so tie the economic fortunes of its participants closer to China. This will make it harder for Biden—and future presidents—to rally allies for “strategic competition” with China, which the administration has also identified as a priority.⁵⁷

Multilateral Cooperation

Biden administration officials have also identified multilateral cooperation—led by the United States—as key to meeting the challenges of globalization. “Not a single global challenge that affects your lives can be met by any one nation acting alone,” Blinken has told the American people, adding that “there is no wall high enough or strong enough to hold back the changes transforming our world.”⁵⁸ Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen has likewise argued that the American middle-class prospers during times of American-led multilateralism.⁵⁹

The intended contrast with the Trump administration is clear: rather than making a misguided attempt to help the middle class by wishing globalization away, the Biden administration needs to be active in managing it. Administration officials have laid out a number of areas in which such cooperation can be beneficial. Some of these involve long-term challenges, such as pandemic preparedness and climate change, and are not necessarily targeted at the middle class specifically as opposed to all other Americans.⁶⁰

But there is one multilateral effort which offers clear benefits to the American middle class, and which the administration made a priority in its first year: resolving a long-running dispute over corporate taxation. For nearly a decade, negotiations have been taking place among wealthy nations to establish new international rules on taxing corporate profits. At issue in these negotiations is the ability of America and other countries to maintain domestic tax bases in

The administration has made resolving a multilateral dispute over corporate taxation a priority

an era when large corporations can shop around different jurisdictions for a head-quarter locale which reduces their tax liability. The talks have also expanded to

cover digital services after several European countries placed a tax on American technology companies who have many customers but no physical presence in their jurisdictions, such as Facebook.⁶¹

The Biden administration sees strengthening the US tax base as vital in order to pay for domestic programs which benefit the middle class, and it made reinvigorating these talks a priority in 2021.⁶² Using a carrot-and-stick approach, it kept in place a Trump-era threat to place tariffs on European countries over their digital-ser-

vices taxes, while dropping the Trump administration's absurd demand that American companies be able to opt out from the new global minimum corporation tax. In October, to the surprise of most observers, 136 countries agreed to the American proposal to adopt a minimum corporate tax rate of 15 percent and to force companies to pay taxes where they operate rather than just where their headquarters are based.⁶³ Holdouts who refuse to participate will be punished by seeing the profits of their own companies taxed at much higher rates when they operate abroad. Taken together, these proposals significantly reduce the opportunities corporations have to shop around for the most favorable tax haven, while also ensuring a more equitable distribution of tax revenue from digital sales.

Though helpful in paying for Biden's middle-class agenda at home, these changes are painful for several European countries who have based their economic model in part on low rates of corporate tax such as Ireland and Hungary. Although both countries won concessions concerning the type of firms which will be affected and the implementation period, the deal still represents a blow to their interests inflicted by the United States.⁶⁴ By putting together a multilateral coalition big enough to pressure countries viewed as the bad actors of globalization into changing their ways, the Biden administration has shown that multilateral diplomacy can benefit the middle class. Although challenges remain in implementing the deal between now and 2023, it already represents a victory for the administration's middle-class foreign policy.

Avoiding Global Shocks

A final way in which foreign policy can make an important difference for the middle class in the short term is by seeking to avoid global shocks, which deliver a setback to the American economy and, by extension, the fortunes of the middle class. Biden

sought to take this approach in 2021, launching a Strategic Stability Dialogue with Russia in order to bring “predictability” to the bilateral relationship.⁶⁵ With regard to China, Biden spoke of a need for “common-sense guardrails to ensure that competition does not veer into conflict,” and sought specific areas of concrete cooperation with Beijing such as on environmental issues.⁶⁶

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was an enormous challenge to this stability plank of Biden’s middle-class agenda. The administration responded by targeting Russia with an extremely stringent set of economic measures, including a ban on Russian oil and gas imports which are likely to hit middle-class Americans in their pocketbooks by exacerbating domestic price inflation and harming the global economy. As the biggest challenge to European security since the end of the Cold War, Russia’s invasion was seen by the administration as sufficient cause to accept some pain for middle-class consumers, highlighting the extent to which geopolitics can still claim priority. The fact that tough sanctions on Russia commanded exceptionally broad and strong bipartisan public support likely also factored into the administration’s calculations.⁶⁷

Yet the middle-class agenda is also visible in how the administration is responding to Russia’s challenge, exacerbating an existing tendency to deprioritize human rights and other concerns in favor of seeking concrete economic gains, particularly in relations with oil-producing nations. Many observers were surprised when the administration decided not to penalize Saudi Arabia over the 2018 slaying of Jamal Khashoggi—but the decision became more explicable in August 2021 when the White House appealed to the Saudis, along with other members of OPEC, to increase oil production in order to safeguard the post-pandemic global economic recovery.⁶⁸ Similarly, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Biden administration attempted new entreaties to Saudi Arabia as well as the United Arab Emirates, and also began exploring the possibility of lifting restrictions on Venezuelan oil imports.⁶⁹ Privileging the material interests of middle-class Americans clearly means cooperation with unsavory regimes, even at the expense of a foreign policy based on the values which the Biden administration is seeking to defend at home.

The middle-class agenda is also visible in how the administration is responding to Russia’s challenge

The Measure of Success

Judging the success of Biden’s “foreign policy for the middle class” involves an unusual emphasis on how that policy is received at home, rather than on its

results abroad. One of the themes of Biden's presidency has been the fragility of American democracy in the face of challengers both domestic and foreign. Demonstrating that the liberal internationalist elite can manage globalization in a manner which protects the interests of middle-class Americans is a way of preventing these voters from returning to Trumpian nationalism, with the myriad implications for America's democratic institutions that would bring.

This means that critics who regard the idea of a foreign policy for the middle class as mostly a branding exercise are not entirely wrong. As their trade policy clearly shows, the administration places emphasis on the domestic politics of its message, continuing a policy which harms the middle class overall but is nevertheless favorably received by many voters. In other areas of policy, meanwhile, the administration's attempts to provide concrete material benefits to middle-class voters have already borne fruit in the first year. As both a branding exercise and a substantive influencer of policy, the middle-class agenda cannot be ignored.

For a policy which is so focused on reassuring voters at home, the true measure of success will be electoral—will the administration succeed at convincing enough voters that Trumpian nationalism is not the best way to defend their interests in a globalized world? This remains to be seen. Tacitly accepting some of the premises of the nationalism he opposes means that Biden is losing an opportunity to fight it, and risks giving voters the perception that they have a choice between the original article and an *ersatz* knock-off. Additionally, while keeping a stridently nationalist Republican Party out of office would be at least a temporary victory, a foreign policy for the middle class will also not be considered a success if it ends up doing too much damage to American internationalism while trying to save it.

This can be understood as meaning that the US needs to be wary of losing its economic competitiveness to protectionism, and its moral standing to the need for increased oil production. But it also means that the administration must not give up on making the positive case for internationalism to the American public, a capitulation which would ultimately accelerate and deepen internationalism's decline. If a foreign policy for the middle class turns out to just be a defensive rearguard action amidst the broader decline of American internationalism, it will be hard to consider it a success, whoever wins the White House in 2024.

Notes

1. See Lawrence R. Samuel, *The American Middle Class: A Cultural History* (New York: Routledge, 2014).
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