

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The Biden administration's foreign policy is based on the concept of "legitimacy." Constantly excusing Iranian actions, including military attacks, in order to pursue supposedly legitimacy-granting negotiations; and admonishing the Taliban about their "legitimacy" in the eyes of the international community are examples of a moralistic approach to norms and institutions. This approach alleges to bolster a narrative of American "legitimacy," but is in fact designed for American consumption as a cover for neglect of US interests. As the gap between rhetoric and reality increases, American trust in US institutions continues to decline.**

The foreign policy of the Biden administration is based on the idea that all actors, state and non-state, seek legitimacy within the international community in order to maximize gains and maintain a "rules-based order" that is beneficial for all parties. This shared goal creates incentives to behave and negotiate in good faith.

Reality disagrees. Two examples demonstrate how this premise has undermined American and global security.

The Iran negotiations to restore the JCPOA nuclear agreement have proceeded as many expected, with ever-increasing Iranian demands for compensation coupled with shockingly bold direct action against Israeli and other targets. At every stage, the American diplomatic response has been capitulation. There have been no US military responses.

Even the thwarting of an Iranian plot to kidnap an opposition journalist from her home in Brooklyn was treated essentially as an unrelated law enforcement affair by the foreign policy establishment. The lead American nuclear negotiator, Rob Malley, tweeted that he was "greatly disturbed" by the plot, but White House and State Department spokespersons restated US determination to "pursue the diplomatic path forward." Even Iran-friendly American journalists like Robin Wright had the honesty to note that kidnapping regime opponents outside Iran is a fundamental part of Iran's "paranoid" strategy.

But the administration continues to see America as the only party with free will. The election of "hardliner" cleric Ebrahim Raisi—responsible for thousands of deaths during and after the 1979 revolution—as president and his appointment of Ahmad Vahidi—wanted for the 1994 AMIA bombing in Buenos Aires—as interior minister is regarded by administration-friendly media as the fault of Trump and his "maximum pressure" strategy. And despite describing Raisi's election as "pretty manufactured," the State Department

immediately resorted to imploring Raisi, "We urge Iran to return to the negotiations soon... For us, this is an urgent priority."



FILE PHOTO: Iran's President-elect Ebrahim Raisi gestures at a news conference in Tehran, Iran June 21, 2021. Majid Asgaripour/WANA (West Asia News Agency) via REUTERS

According to this view, Iranian legitimacy can be restored by negotiations, a legitimacy that is apparently compromised while negotiations remain stalled. That this, and the certainty of further American concessions, is precisely the Iranian strategy seems utterly lost on the Biden administration. What it will do if JCPOA talks officially collapse is also completely unclear. For its part, the EU signaled disapproval of murderous Iranian attacks on shipping, though it immediately undercut that disapproval by sending a representative to Raisi's inauguration, stating, "It is crucial to engage diplomatically with the new administration and to pass directly important messages to facilitate the way back to full JCPOA implementation."

Then there is the collapse of Afghanistan. Whether or not the US should have remained in

Afghanistan to prevent the return of barbarous Taliban rule, the reestablishment of al-Qaeda, and the creation of an immense refugee crisis that will soon threaten Europe is a legitimate, though now moot, question. The American investment of a trillion dollars and 2,400 lives in the name of chimerical nation-building was tragically for naught. The US withdrawal is a rout and the Taliban takeover complete. The specter now looms of an immense hostage crisis involving tens of thousands of Americans and allies.

Of interest here are the American responses. The rapid collapse of the Afghan military and civilian authorities purportedly "stunned even some seasoned military and national security officials in the US government" who "privately express little confidence in the Afghan security forces, citing military incompetence, disorganization and poor communications skills." That this utterly predictable outcome was perfectly clear to non-specialists watching events on Twitter should demolish what little faith remains in the perspicacity of the American military and intelligence establishments. So, too, should equally predictable finger-pointing between those establishments and the political echelon, and between Republicans and Democrats.

One commentator after another has noted that American military and intelligence officials lied continually over nearly two decades regarding the effectiveness of Afghan forces and now blame American civilian authorities for giving up. The American military itself has responded by going "woke," succumbing to the destructive but *au courant* moral panic over "race," while retired senior officers have cashed in with lucrative corporate positions.

The propensity of military leaders to lie to themselves and to civilians is an old phenomenon shared by democracies and autocracies alike. But the command's abject willingness to jettison even a semblance of American interests and values has long been on display. From tolerance of Afghan cultural norms regarding the sexual abuse of minors, to official corruption that stole billions in American aid, crime and failure have been covered up by direct lies and through bureaucratic obfuscation.

The July 2021 report by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction—the 10<sup>th</sup> such report—adduces lessons learned in the manner of a business school analysis, including that "The absence of periodic reality checks created the risk of doing the wrong thing perfectly: A project that met contracted deliverables and performance-indicator targets would be considered 'successful,' whether or not it had achieved or contributed to broader, more important goals."

Process, not results, gives legitimacy to an enterprise, no matter how flawed or even doomed it may be. This is a conceit shared by many of the American expert class, who until a few months ago were still touting "pathways to peace" based on concepts such as civil society and the "influence" of donors on a "post-agreement Afghan state."

Just a few days ago, experts claimed that the Taliban can be enticed to negotiate because "What they're forgetting... is that today's Afghanistan is not the Afghanistan that was 20-25 years ago... It has the largest youth population in the world. They are not going to submit to the Taliban," and that "Crisis atrocities unfold if the Taliban don't agree to a peaceful settlement of the current violence in Afghanistan." Atrocities negate legitimacy, until they don't.

The Biden administration itself clings to the premise expressed in White House press secretary Jen Psaki's admonitory comment: "Our view is that if the Taliban claim to want international legitimacy, these actions are not going to get them the legitimacy they seek."

This farrago of delusions—that all options were foreseen and planned for, yet chaos was inevitable; and, most fantastically, that the Taliban stand at a crossroads and can still choose legitimacy, based in part on the need to discharge responsibilities to the population, was stated with a straight face by Biden himself:



FILE PHOTO: U.S. President Joe Biden speaks during a brief appearance at the White House in Washington, U.S., January 25, 2021. REUTERS/Kevin Lamarque/

I think they're going through sort of an existential crisis about do they want to be recognized by the international community as being a legitimate government. I'm not sure they do... But they also care about whether they have food to eat, whether they have an income that they can provide for their [?] that they can make any money and run an economy. They care about whether or not they can hold together the society that they in fact say they care so much about.

A rudimentary, Twitter-level understanding of the Taliban suggests that their goal was always and only to control Afghanistan. Expressions of "legitimacy" were either a transparent Taliban lie or, more likely, simple mirror imaging on the part of the Biden administration, which is itself consumed with America's international image rather than its effectiveness.

The question is this: Why does this administration allow itself to be manipulated and embarrassed over and over again, including by the world's most transparently thuggish

regimes, who repeatedly and clearly state their violent revolutionary goals?

Projecting itself as the antithesis of the Trump administration is part of the answer. Another is simple patronizing. Purporting to understand other country's needs and interests better than they do, and defending "norms" and institutions, was a hallmark of the Obama administration, whose third term is now being played out. Presumably if Iran or the Taliban wishes to defy those norms, their international legitimacy will be diminished. That Europeans willingly attend the inauguration of a mass murderer and the Chinese host Taliban representatives for talks, in no small part to safeguard billions in investment, show that "legitimacy" is an empty concept.

But the administration's pursuit of "legitimacy" is not really about Iran or the Taliban, or even about America's standing in the world. Rather it is about a particular kind of American "legitimacy," a narrative aimed not at the world but at American citizens. At its root is the projection of a high-sounding, expert-driven, scientific moralism that serves, by design or default, to disguise the abject lack of interest of the administration and the ruling class it serves in serious policies that defend American and allied interests.

But this pursuit of "legitimacy" conflicts with experienced reality, not least among Americans themselves. From an open southern border that has permitted a million illegal aliens to enter in six months while preposterously claiming that this has not affected either the economy or public health, to restrictions on American energy production that resulted in pleas to OPEC to increase oil production, to Obama's royal birthday party, which came as health authorities demanded masks and restrictions on public gatherings, the contradictions between policy assertions and observed reality have increased to the breaking point.

In this context, pleading with the Taliban about "legitimacy" as they hold the US at bay is beyond foolish, and undermines the narrative it is intended to support. Even administration cheerleaders are appalled, as are American allies around the world. The gap between words and deeds has become unbridgeable by this administration, and the legitimacy it demanded for itself, the experts, and the ruling class has been lost.

Afghanistan is the capstone, after years of easily documentable narrative malfeasance, and has pushed public trust in American institutions to a nadir. What comes next is a terrifying mystery.

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