

Patrick Lawrence

The paralyzed imperium

Or: The autumn of the patriarch

22 October 2023

When the Jordanian king, Abdullah II, cancels a planned summit with President Biden, when Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, the Egyptian president, declines to meet the U.S. leader, when Mahmoud Abbas, the head of the Palestinian Authority, will not take Biden's telephone calls: Given the extraordinary rejections that greeted Joe Biden during his days in West Asia last week, it is time to conclude the renewed violence between Israel and Gaza has cost the Biden regime a lot of friends in a region where Washington's influence was once without challenge.

Let us dilate the lens. Xi Jinping, the Chinese president, stopped talking to Biden months ago. Vladimir Putin has made it clear severally he sees no point speaking or meeting with Biden because, the Russian president has said on numerous occasions, it is impossible to take Biden at his word. The Biden White House's grand plan to sponsor the normalization of Israel's relations with the Saudi kingdom—whose de facto leader, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, is openly contemptuous of President Biden—now appears all but dead.

Joe Biden and his top national security people, notably Secretary of State Antony Blinken and National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, began making a mess of U.S. foreign policy as soon as Biden assumed office in January 2021. This was first evident in its initial contacts with China, in March of that year, but was obvious in the case of Russia a couple of months later. Now we see the disaster of the Biden regime's incompetence in matters of state on full display in West Asia. Why? How do we explain the shocking ineptitude of these people as they conduct America's relations with the rest of the world? These are our questions.

There are various ways to account for this abject failure of statecraft. Biden was an habitual liar from his earliest days in the Senate back in the 1970s, as the record now shows, and he has made the mistake of assuming he could mislead other world leaders in the same way he misled his constituents in the state of Delaware for half a century. In essence, Biden is a small-town politician who has been vastly over his head since he first waded into foreign affairs as a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in the late 1990s.

Those close to Biden first noted his incipient dementia more than dozen years ago. This condition has worsened such that his mental incompetence is now painfully evident in every public appearance. In assigning Blinken and Sullivan to execute his national security strategy, Biden effectively turned over foreign policy to a coterie of neoconservative ideologues who spend all of their time believing and none of it thinking. In the Israeli case, next year's elections have made Biden—"You don't have to be a Jew to be a Zionist"—especially vulnerable to the Jewish

lobby in Washington. In political terms, Biden was bound to cave in calamitously last week to the Netanyahu government.

All of these things help to explain why the Biden regime's miscalculated so extremely in its response to the crisis that erupted when Hamas militias launched an assault into Israeli territory on 7 October. Biden's embarrassingly truncated trip to the region last week leaves the U.S. sponsoring the razing of a city of a million residents and effectively encouraging Israel's long ethnic-cleansing of the Palestinian people. Even Washington's ever-loyal allies in Europe privately show signs of disgust.

But we must consider this new, very grave crisis in West Asia in global terms, in my view. If the decline of the American imperium has been evident for some years, as I would readily argue, the Biden regime's craven reiteration of "unconditional support" for Israel has dealt American power and influence a severe, very critical blow. In the simplest terms, a moment demanding a fundamental renovation of U.S. policy across West Asia instead betrays in the starkest possible terms a condition in Washington that can be best described as imperial paralysis.

■

Victory tends to induce sclerosis, we are well to observe. After the triumphs of April and August 1945, the assumption among the policy cliques—evident in the policy literature of the time—was that the U.S. had little to think about. In its conduct abroad it needed simply to continue doing what it has done to lead "the free world" in triumph over the Reich and the Imperial Japanese. This meant

maintaining “the arsenal of democracy,” as the military-industrial complex was benignly called in the 1940s, while dispensing a measure of largesse, always with self-interest the first consideration, on Europe and other needful areas of the world.

The postwar decades were in many respects golden for the United States, as many writers have observed. But they had two deleterious effects. One, the State Department lost its ability to respond to new circumstances. Imaginative diplomats with developed intellects were replaced over time by bureaucratic dullards. Two, as the postwar decades were also the Cold War decades, the Pentagon gradually but in time thoroughly began to have the louder voice in setting policy. By the time I began my years as a correspondent abroad, in the 1980s, Washington did not have a foreign policy so much as a security policy.

This is what Washington has now. This is how policy is devised and executed. The primary instrument of U.S. policy now is military hardware. The rest is platitudes, pabulum, gesture, and lip service to ideals the U.S. long, long ago ceased to observe—this along with coercion or bribery when either of these promises results. On his return from Israel, President Biden wasted no time announcing a request to Congress for slightly more than \$100 billion in military aid—\$14 billion to Israel, \$60 billion to Ukraine, and the remainder to Taiwan. Can we ask for a clearer case in point? In none of these cases do we see serious, innovative diplomacy.

■

For a long time the regime I describe here in pencil-sketch—paralysis in combination with ideology—got one administration after another though its watch. There were disasters—Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq and the Greater Middle East—

but the ship stayed to course. This began to change after the events of 11 September 2001, when the imperium began to show signs of uncertainty and desperation. And by the time Biden took office it was plain that our planet had entered an era of profound transformation. As I have argued many times, parity between West and non–West is a 21st century imperative. This is now our new reality. It requires new thinking of every nation.

If one needs a formal announcement of this turn of history's wheel, the declaration Xi and Putin issued on the eve of the Beijing Olympics last year—20 days before the Russian intervention in Ukraine—will do nicely. I consider their [*Joint Statement on International Relations Entering a New Era and Global Sustainable Development*](#) the most significant political document to be published so far in our century. It is the clearest declaration we have of the New World Order the Chinese, especially, have since frequently referenced.

The Biden regime's response to this document has been extraordinary: It has been incapable of a response. It has belittled the *Joint Statement* while depicting it to as an anti–Western diatribe—a defensive distortion of the text as well as its intent. This is pitiful. It reflects not policy so much as a propaganda ploy.

I rank Joe Biden among the worst presidents, and possibly the worst, in my lifetime. But we must be fair. If Biden has done what may shortly prove irreparable damage to America's relations with the rest of the world, I question whether anyone else who took the White House in 2021 would have done much better. In effect, in the game of musical chairs the music stopped at some point before he

took office, and Biden was the one left without a chair. America is simply not equipped to do well in the 21st century—which is why it prefers to pretend it is still the 20th. Biden had a part in bringing the country to this point, but in the scheme of things a modest part.

We cannot be surprised, then, that Biden’s administration has proven paralyzed for the reasons outlined above. It has no capacity to respond—and as his visit to Israel makes clear, this means none whatsoever—to swiftly evolving circumstances with anything even resembling finesse and dexterity. Creativity, imagination, the courage to tread new soil without a map: The thought of any is preposterous. This is the legacy of postwar history.

Dementia, a coterie of unthinking ideologues, the 2024 elections and the Jewish vote—these are the last things America needs among its purported leaders at this moment. They have made matters much worse, certainly. But would a more mentally competent president or a more reflective group of technocrats have made much difference? As I have suggested, I have serious doubts on this point. In any case, America no longer produces the kind of leaders it needs. It hasn’t for many decades.

Two months after Biden assumed office, I co-authored, with James Carden, an essay under the headline, [“Our two-front Cold War.”](#) We had in mind Biden’s brewing confrontations with Russia and China. Now we face the possibility of a third front, wherein the U.S. provokes an open conflict with some combination of nations in West Asia. Understood in its full complexity, we must recognize this as

the bitter fruit of many decades of intellectual slovenliness, neglect of principles, and undue self-interest. The dreadful irony here is that a dottering old man who has lied his way through life is just the right president to represent America at this time—a patriarch in his autumn, let us say.