

Opinion

US foreign policy US must scrutinise its militarised policies if it is serious about rights

Michele Dunne

US president Joe Biden made clear in his March 25 press conference that **values will be essential to his foreign policy**. The moment a US president walks away from a commitment to **defending human rights** “is the moment we began to lose our legitimacy around the world. It’s who we are,” he said.

In the **first two months in office**, Biden’s administration has already tangled publicly with adversaries and allies over human rights and democracy. There was the “**Khashoggi Ban**” **sanctioning 76 Saudi officials**, although not Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, followed by **sanctions against Russian officials**, but not President Vladimir Putin, for the poisoning of **Alexei Navalny**. The US secretary of state **Antony Blinken and national security adviser Jake Sullivan** then faced off with their **Chinese counterparts in Anchorage**, with **Blinken pledging the US would continue to object to Chinese rights violations that “threaten the rules-based order that maintains global stability”**. In a March 3 speech, he also linked fighting autocracy to repairing US democracy.

But while the Biden administration has explained why putting **values back into foreign policy serves US interests**, little has been said about how it should be done. Two practices, which I will call solidarity and scrutiny, can help. Solidarity is the easy part. For democratic states it means expressing support for the legitimate demands of citizens, human rights defenders, journalists and peaceful activists abroad in public statements. It entails using private diplomacy, multilateral engagement and international institutions to press authoritarian governments, and giving material support and haven to those who advocate for rights where it is costly to do so. International solidarity with rights activists annoys authoritarian governments, but can be managed by any democratic government.

But even states that are serious about promoting rights can struggle with scrutiny. As the recent experiences with Saudi Arabia and Russia showed, scrutinising the deeds of foreign leaders is often unsatisfying because ultimately their actions are beyond outsiders' control. Even harder, but more meaningful, is scrutiny of what a government can control — that is, how its policies are enabling human rights abuses and inhibiting the spread of democracy.

The Biden administration has taken a few steps towards scrutinising the costs of heavily militarised US policies in the Middle East. In his March 3 speech, Blinken acknowledged the human cost and disappointing results of military intervention, and pledged that the US will not favour dictators over democratic allies. **And Biden ended Washington's disastrous complicity in the war in Yemen, where more than 100,000 have died and millions are starving, pledging to sell to Saudi Arabia only arms needed to protect its territory.**

There are other areas crying out for scrutiny if Biden wants to reverse US policies that harm rights and prospects for democracy. He should redirect the \$1.3bn in annual security assistance to Egypt away from a bloated military that commits massive rights abuses, perhaps offering help with the country's critical water shortage instead. And he should rethink the planned sale of F-35 fighter jets, drones and other advanced weapons to the United Arab Emirates, which threatens to touch off a new regional arms race.

Middle Eastern states could instead look to increase the quantities of arms they already buy from Russia and China, but there are limits on what these nations can provide. Meanwhile, it falls to Washington and its democratic allies to modify their own actions so they stop fuelling conflicts and abetting authoritarian crackdowns, and instead co-operate to support the economic and political transitions that are coming as the Middle East faces the post-oil era.