

Senator Cotton vs. Progressive Foreign Policy

COMMENTARY

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Responsible foreign policy in a free and democratic nation-state is a matter of balance. Interest and principle; the logic of geopolitics and the sway of tradition, faith, and political ideology; force of arms and diplomatic finesse; national interest and alliances; spheres of influence and the laws binding all nations; necessity and justice – these and more must be constantly combined and reconciled to meet the demands of the moment and long-term strategic objectives. The Biden administration has thrown this combining and reconciling out of whack.

Despite President Trump’s bluster and bravado, his administration transmitted to the Biden administration a variety of foreign-policy accomplishments. Foremost among them was reorientation of U.S. diplomacy around the threat posed by the Chinese Communist Party to American freedom and prosperity and to the nation’s interest in preserving a free and open international order.

In addition, the Trump administration revived the Quad – Japan, India, and Australia, along with the United States – to advance shared interests in the Indo-Pacific. It withdrew from the Iran deal, which omitted reliable mechanisms for monitoring Tehran’s nuclear programs and put the terrorism-exporting Islamic republic on a clear timetable to join the nuclear club. It brokered the Abraham Accords, inaugurating a new era of comity between Israel and Arab nations. It persuaded several NATO partners to meet – or come closer to fulfilling – their agreed-upon obligations to fund the

alliance. It fostered U.S. self-reliance by encouraging development of domestic oil and natural gas. And it reasserted control over America's southern border, substantially reducing the influx of illegal immigrants.

Biden and his team laudably followed the Trump administration in breaking with decades of engagement with China by recognizing that the CCP acts as a strategic competitor determined to reshape the world order to suit the party's authoritarian convictions. But Biden's diplomacy has left America in a weaker position than the one his White House inherited.

The Biden administration opened the southern border, producing record numbers of non-citizens illegally entering the country and permitting the importation of deadly drugs. It restricted production of domestic oil and natural gas, which enriched oil-and-gas-rich Russia and increased European dependence on Vladimir Putin; then, when U.S. gasoline prices predictably skyrocketed, the Biden administration went hat in hand to Venezuela and Saudi Arabia (despite during the 2020 campaign Biden scorning the Kingdom as a "pariah") pleading for them to pump more oil. It entreated Iran to conclude a second nuclear deal which, like the first, would lack adequate monitoring procedures and provide Tehran tens of billions of dollars in relief while allowing the ayatollahs to continue to develop ballistic missiles and foment terror and sectarian strife throughout the region. It strained to pronounce the words "Abraham Accords" let alone celebrate the historic agreements. And the Biden administration's calamitously ill-conceived withdrawal from Afghanistan cast doubt in friends' minds about America's competence and trustworthiness and emboldened adversaries to surmise that the United States need not be feared.

To the United States' detriment, Biden administration foreign policy reflects the spirit and duplicates the consequences of Obama administration foreign policy. To take one example, in August 2013, in the Syrian civil war, President Bashar al-Assad attacked adversaries with the chemical agent sarin. Instead of enforcing his openly declared red line – and decades after the Soviet Union's expulsions

from the region – Obama invited Moscow back into the Levant to preside over removal of Assad’s chemical weapons. Six months later, on February 20, 2014, Putin invaded Ukraine. Similarly, on February 24, 2022 – almost exactly eight years later and six months after President Biden’s August 2021 Afghanistan debacle – Putin again invaded Ukraine. By misjudging foes and leaving friends high and dry, the Obama and Biden administrations dishonored the nation, encouraged aggression, and eroded world order.

The continuities between the two Democratic administrations are not a matter of bad luck, overpowering events, or impersonal and irresistible forces, argues Sen. Tom Cotton. In “Only the Strong: Reversing the Left’s Plot to Sabotage American Power,” Cotton (an old friend whom I’ve known since his undergraduate days at Harvard) contends that the method to the messes made by Presidents Obama and Biden stems from their progressive convictions and dispositions. With characteristic forthrightness, shrewdness, and tenacity, he sets forth a devastating indictment of the progressive mindset in foreign affairs. He also provides a blistering critique of the deleterious policy choices and ham-handed execution of military operations and diplomacy to which, for more than half a century, progressivism has disposed Democratic presidents. His goal is “to reclaim the tradition of American strength.”

Cotton knows full well that over the last half century conservatives, too, have made costly foreign-policy errors. But his analysis, informed by serious study of American political ideas and institutions, reveals a crucial difference: Whereas conservatives go wrong when they depart from their principles, which derive from the American founding, progressives do damage by acting on their principles, which repudiate the Founders’ wisdom.

Cotton contrasts the Founders’ sobriety to progressives’ utopianism. The Founders “built America on eternal principles and timeless truths” rooted in a realistic assessment of human nature. They knew that human beings were unequal in many respects and prone to selfishness and

shortsightedness but also inclined to cooperate to achieve common goods and, when put to the test, capable of self-sacrifice and nobility. The Founders embraced the Declaration of Independence's self-evident truths: Human beings are equally endowed with natural and unalienable rights; government's chief purpose is to secure these rights; and just power derives from the consent of the governed and is limited by what is necessary and proper to secure citizens' rights.

Progressivism arose in the late 19th century and early 20th century in opposition to the Founders' ideas about human nature and government. Progressives tended to deny that human nature served as a moral guide and political standard. Instead, they supposed that science and enlightenment could steadily perfect human beings, and they placed their faith in a theory of history as ineluctably impelling humanity towards peace, prosperity, and happiness. Owing to the elites' moral improvement and intellectual refinement coupled with the people's persisting backwardness, progressives argued, government must be expanded beyond the Constitution's obsolete limits to enable officials to instruct and improve ordinary voters.

Opinions about human nature and government shape accounts of America's dealings with other nations. The Founders, Cotton stresses, fashioned a "hard-nosed" foreign policy that made a priority in a dangerous world of ensuring the American people's safety, freedom, and prosperity. The flux of circumstance, the Founders readily acknowledged, compelled prudent statesmen to adjust policies to achieve America's abiding national interests. President Reagan's diplomacy, culminating in the U.S.-led victory in the Cold War, epitomizes, for Cotton, a foreign policy that secures American freedom and prosperity through a blend of principle, competence, and courage.

In line with the belief that history drives humanity's unification and perfection, progressive foreign policy tended to put the international community first. Progressives appealed to a transnational corps of supposedly disinterested technocrats, diplomats, and judges to overcome great-power politics and

make war obsolete by crafting rules, regulations, and agreements that knit together all peoples and nations in a global society under unified government.

In practice, argues Cotton, the progressive sensibility issues in dithering and inconstancy, overestimation of America's persuasive powers, underestimation of adversaries' ruthlessness, and aversion to use of American military force. The senator chronicles the high price paid by the nation – and military men and women in particular – for progressive heedlessness and irresoluteness. His “brutally frank” examination covers President Kennedy and the Bay of Pigs; President Johnson and the Vietnam War; President Carter and the Iran hostage crisis; President Clinton and Somalia; President Obama and Libya, Iraq, and Afghanistan as well as Syria and Iran; and President Biden and Afghanistan and Iran.

To secure anew the American people's freedom and prosperity, Cotton argues, we must recover the Founders' wisdom, rebuild the military, strengthen the southern border, achieve energy independence, distinguish friends – including non-democratic ones – from foes, maintain our global network of partners, and gear up to prevail in the strategic competition launched by China.

“Only the strong,” Cotton concludes, “can defend a city on a hill.” This stirring image does not mean that the patriotic warrior's grit, discipline, and courage alone secure justice.

Fidelity to America's founding principles and the finest in its constitutional traditions obliges America also to educate its young people in, rather than against, constitutional democracy. Such fidelity fosters the political cohesiveness that enables partisans of many stripes to recognize one another as fellow citizens. And it disposes a responsible U.S. foreign policy to champion human rights while respecting the harsh realities of world affairs and the diversity of other peoples and nations.

Striking the right balance is the fullest and truest expression of national strength.

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