The Biden Administration and the Mediterranean: Interests and Policies in Search of an Overall Strategy

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Joseph Biden won the White House at a time of acute crisis both domestically and globally. Domestically, his administration faced a triple crisis at the levels of public health, economic contraction and violent political division; globally it faced a set of alliances in disarray after the Trump Administration, a pressing global pandemic, a looming climate crisis and challenges from a rising Chinese giant and a resurgent Russia.

"Restoring America's Global Standing" is the seventh and last of the White House's declared key priorities. This is a reversal of Trump's transactional approach to foreign relations, but rather reflects an attempt to restore the position the US enjoyed through its alliances in Europe and Asia, and through its influential positions in global institutions such as the United Nations, the World Bank, the IMF and other international institutions; it also includes an insistence on "championing America's values and human rights." Biden also sees a fundamental connection between domestic and foreign policy, in that he believes that "equipping the American middle class to succeed in a global economy" is the best way to ensure America's future standing in the world and respond to China's growth-fuelled international influence.

Multilateralism is certainly part and parcel of Biden's approach to foreign policy. He understands that US influence is greatly enhanced both by its wide networks of alliances and partnerships around the world, but also by its support for a rules-based international order – an order that it had a strong hand in shaping in the aftermath of World War II. And he has chosen a foreign policy, national security and intelligence team that shares this more traditional pre-Trump view of America's global power.

The Biden Administration does not have a clear or articulated "Mediterranean policy," at least – to be fair – not yet. This is partly because the Mediterranean is not a high priority for this new administration, which would demand the President's overall attention, but rather it falls between several state department and defence department regional bureaus – e.g. Europe, Near East and Africa for the State Department, and EUCOM, CENTCOM and AFRICOM for the Pentagon – and it is impacted by various and often disconnected policy baskets.

Outlines of a policy must be pieced together from US interests and policy with regard to the various countries and issue areas that are present in and around the Mediterranean Sea. And this includes US policy toward Europe and the EU, relations with Greece and Turkey, the crises in Syria, Lebanon and Israel-Palestine, relations with Egypt, the civil war in Libya, democratic transition in Tunisia, relations with Algeria, and the question of Morocco and the Western Sahara. This comes in addition to great power competition with Russia, with its hard power presence in the Mediterranean, thanks to the country's interventions in Syria and Libya, and a growing naval presence; and competition with China whose soft power through investment, trade and infrastructure has gained it great influence in many economies and ports around this inner sea.

In this essay, I will look at US policy in the Mediterranean region through the lens of the various US interests that policymakers pursue when dealing with countries and issues around this region. Indeed, US officials have several US interests in mind when they craft policy toward this region. I mention these interests below, although not strictly ranked by priority as they weigh differently in different countries.

US Interests that Inform Policy toward the Mediterranean Region:

1. Restoring strong relations with European allies, and helping Europe maintain or enhance its security, stability and prosperity.
2. Pushing back on rival great powers Russia and China, whether that relates to their influence in Europe or their growing influence along the Mediterranean's eastern and southern shores.
3. Countering the threat of terrorism, which remains serious and pressing in parts of the eastern Mediterranean, North Africa and the Sahel.
4. Containing the nuclear and conventional threat from Iran both to the US and Israel, a threat that is present – at least in its conventional asymmetric form – on the shores of the Mediterranean through Iranian-backed groups in Syria, Lebanon and Gaza.
5. Maintaining the free flow of maritime trade, which applies mainly to the key artery of the Suez Canal.
6. Supporting the security and prosperity of Israel.
7. Shaping policy in favour of democratization, human rights and a rules-based international order; this partly as an overall principle shaped by internal American politics, but also as part of a neo-Cold War perspective to push back on the authoritarian models of Russia and China and leverage the demands for more freedom and democracy among many populations in this region, as witnessed by the Arab Spring and recent large protest movements in Iraq, Lebanon, Sudan and Algeria.

How These Interests Play out in Policymaking

Standing with Europe and Countering Rival Great Powers

Shoring up Europe and countering rival great powers (interests 1 and 2) drive several US policies in the region. Most notably this is seen in the US's position in favour of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF), which links Greece, Italy, Cyprus, Israel, Egypt, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority to ensure that East Med gas gets to Europe through a consortium of US allies and friends, and thus counters Russia's attempts to monopolize energy supplies to Europe. The US congress passed the Eastern Mediterranean Security and Energy Pact in December of 2019, which aims to strengthen cooperation between Greece, Cyprus and Israel and increase American engagement in the eastern Mediterranean. The legislation authorizes new security assistance for Greece and Cyprus – lifting the arms embargo on Cyprus in the process – and authorizes the establishment of a US-Eastern Mediterranean Energy Centre. The US has since started participating in the trilateral Greece-Cyprus-Israel partnership through the US Secretary of State, thus making it a "3+1" process. It is important to note that the US has encouraged steps by this eastern Mediterranean partnership to build clean and green energy into this new energy infrastructure as well; this aligns with the Biden Administration's global goal of fighting climate change and promoting energy transition.

Standing by its European allies also influences US policy toward the refugee and migration question across the Mediterranean. Migrants from Middle East war zones or Africa do not directly impact the US, as there are both natural and policy barriers largely preventing their arrival on American shores – America's migration and refugee problems come from Central America across its southern land border –, but the US is concerned about preventing a repeat of the large-scale refugee flows from Middle East war zones that happened in 2015, and appreciates the strategic risk to its European allies from unfettered migration from North Africa to Europe or from Sub-Saharan Africa, via North Africa, to Europe. The 2015 crisis weakened the European Union and contributed to Brexit and the rise of illiberal political movements in Europe, which undervalued the transatlantic relationship and in some cases expressed proximity to President Putin and his brand of cultural nationalism.

This concern also partly informs US policy toward Syria, where the US is eager to prevent another round of fighting that would drive millions of Syrians into Turkey and possibly Europe. It also informs US policy toward Turkey, where the US has to tread carefully with President Erdogan, as it understands that he controls the spigot of Syrian refugees flowing, or not, into Europe. This concern has also recently informed US policy toward Lebanon, where a risk of total collapse there could also see Lebanese and

Syrian refugees crossing by boat into Cyprus and heading west. It is also in US policymakers' minds as they increase their engagement, along with their European allies, to stabilize the situation in Libya.

Pushing back on great power rivals, Russia and China, which is identified as interest 2 in the listing above, informs US policy throughout the Mediterranean region. The US has accepted as a fait accompli the Russian presence in Syria, and actually sees it as a potential counterweight to Iran and its proxies there, and a potential stabilizing force. But the US looks with serious alarm at Russia's growing presence in Libya, and this is also driving US policy toward that country. The Biden Administration participated in the Second Berlin Conference on Libya in June 2021, which led to an agreement to hold fresh elections in December of this year, and included affirmations that both Russian –and Turkish-backed mercenary groups needed to leave the country. Countering Russia has also been a major point of contention with Turkey, where the latter's purchase of Russian S-400 air defence systems brought about strong objections and grave concerns in Washington and led to Turkish exclusion from the F35 and Patriot missile programmes.

In naval matters, Russia has secured its only Mediterranean repair and replenishment presence in the Syrian port of Tartus, which supports the Russian warships based in the Black Sea. US and Russian navies have almost come to blows in the Black Sea, and Russia is gradually trying to increase its naval presence in the Mediterranean. But that presence, while strong in the Black Sea, is of only limited scope and concern in the Mediterranean from a US perspective, at least so far.

With regard to China, the US is concerned about the influence and leverage that China is accumulating through its Belt and Road Initiative and its deep pockets. This is a concern on both northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean. China has set up a $10-billion fund for Greece[1] and already controls one tenth of Europe's port capacity.[2] It has also developed deep economic and infrastructure relations in North Africa – Egypt, Algeria and Morocco – running into billions of dollars. The US does not have the public funds to counter China's BRI, nor does it have a legitimate pathway to prevent friends and allies from making deals and taking investment from China. Nor has this growing economic presence led – at least yet – to a direct national security challenge to the US. That high level of concern certainly exists with regard to Chinese threats further east in Taiwan and the South China Sea; but in the Mediterranean those kinds of security and defence concerns are seen as still very much in the future, not the present. The Biden Administration is trying to counter China's economic and investment enticements by abandoning Trump's combative what's-in-it-for-America bilateral trade relations with friends and allies, and reviving the pathway of encouraging accommodative trade relations, supporting US-EU trade relations and continuing to encourage American businesses to invest abroad.

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The push back against Russia and China also has a political component. The Biden Administration narrowly escaped a collapse of democracy and transition to authoritarianism at home during the historic 6 January attack on the US Capitol to reverse the results of a presidential election. His team is also well aware that liberal democracy is under threat in Europe and largely in retreat in the Middle East and North Africa. This is partly due to the political repercussions of unfettered globalization and misguided policy decisions in the West, but they are also aware that a resurgent Russia and a globally rising China now provide a powerful example to leaders and some populations in the region and around the world that autocracy works, while democracy falters and stumbles, even in its modern home of origin, the

[1] www.reuters.com/article/us-greece-china-shipping/china-to-double-investment-fund-for-greek-shipping-idUSTRE7242AB20110305
[2] https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/02/02/why-is-china-buying-up-europes-ports/

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United States. To a leader of the Cold War generation like Biden, this contest for hearts and minds and between two political ways of life tracks with some of the ideological battles – at that time with a broader communist or socialist ideal, not the current authoritarian-capitalist ideal presented by Russia and China – between a US-led West and an authoritarian East.

This US perspective is partly seen in US policy toward the Balkans as well as the Black Sea region. Western European countries have largely held as functioning democracies, despite Brexit, and despite the rise to power of illiberal parties in some countries, but Russia and China have gained serious inroads and democracy has suffered more fundamental setbacks in some of the countries of the Balkans and Black Sea region. The US is aware that these regions are an important buffer for western Europe, and unless the US helps Europe push back in support of democratic institutions and against greater Russian and Chinese influence, the threats to western Europe could eventually increase.

The Terrorist Challenge

Countering terrorist groups remains a primary concern of US defence and security officials when looking at this region. This applies primarily to the eastern and southern shores of the Mediterranean, although US officials support their European counterparts in their efforts to contain homegrown terrorism in Europe. But CT (counterterrorism) is a main driver of US policy in Syria, for example, where the US maintains forces, primarily to keep an eye on ISIS and al-Qaeda and a few smaller terrorist groups that survive there and that continue to pose a direct threat to the US homeland. It also drove the US (and allies) military action in Libya in 2015 to help local forces defeat an ISIS presence there.

CT concerns undergird strong security partnerships between the US and many countries of the MENA region, such as Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Israel, Jordan and Lebanon; CT is, of course, a key component of its relations with NATO allies in southern Europe as well. The terrorist threat does not only emanate from the civil wars of Syria and Libya, but is also a US concern throughout the unstable Sahel region. CT was an area of common concern between the Trump and Biden administrations and will continue to be so regardless of who wins the White House in 2024.

Countering Iran

The fourth US interest identified above – countering the nuclear and conventional threat from Iran – is a main driver of US Middle East policy, and hence impacts policy at the eastern end of the Mediterranean. Bringing back the US into the nuclear deal that was struck in 2015 is a primary goal of President Biden, who was part of the White House that signed that deal. And continuing to counter and contain Iran and its proxies – including in Syria and Lebanon, on the Mediterranean's eastern shores – is an enduring US interest. This is so partly because of direct US national security concerns about the threat they might pose to US interests in the region or to the US mainland, but also as part of America's concern for Israel's security. This also enters into the US's calculations with regard to their presence in Syria, and also explains their long term support for the Lebanese army and the survival of a very precarious Lebanese State, and their support for the UN Interim Forces in Lebanon (UNIFIL), which have helped maintain basic calm along the Lebanese-Israeli border for the past 15 years.

Trade Routes

Maintaining the free flow of maritime trade in the Mediterranean region is part of a global interest to maintain global trade and transport. The Suez Canal has been, since its construction in the 19th century, the primary – and often contested – choke point for that trade and transport. The world, and the US, got a strong reminder of the importance of that canal when the giant Ever Given container ship blocked the canal for six days in March of this year, disrupting an estimated $9 billion dollars of goods every day.

The two assets that underpin enduring US-Egyptian relations, despite deep differences between the two

countries, are Egypt's peace treaty with Israel and Egypt's sovereignty over one of the most important international canals in the world. Of course, this US interest in maintaining maritime trade routes also informs its deployments in the Persian Gulf and Bab-el-Mandeb, the southern entrance of the Red Sea, but those are further afield.

Commitment to Israel

Of course, the US has a special relationship with Israel and factors in basic concerns for its security and prosperity into US Middle East policy. We have already mentioned how this concern informs its policy toward Iran and its proxies in Syria and Lebanon, and how it informs US support for Israel's energy cooperation with Cyprus and Greece, and the steadiness of US relations with Egypt.

A new factor in this area have been the Abraham Accords, concluded during the Trump Administration. These started as normalization agreements with the Gulf states of the UAE and Bahrain. But they were followed by an agreement between Morocco and Israel. The quid pro quo for Morocco was the Trump Administration's recognition of Moroccan claims to the Western Sahara. This quid ran counter to previous US policy and whether or not the Biden Administration would uphold it was an open question. After some initially mixed signals, the Biden Administration – placing the benefits of the deal for Israel over the administration's insistence on a return to a rules-based international order – informed Rabat that Biden would not reverse the previous administration's position.

The Biden Administration supports the Abraham Accords and will work to bring other parties to the table. Saudi Arabia is the big prize, but unlikely as long as King Salman is alive or in office. In the meantime, the US will encourage the consolidation of economic, political and security relations between the recent signatories in Israel and will urge older signatories, such as Egypt and Jordan, to follow the UAE example and turn their cold peace with Israel into warmer and deeper economic and people-to-people ties.

Democracy

The final interest mentioned in the Introduction – support for democracy, human rights and a rules based order – is not just a talking point for the Biden Administration. As mentioned previously, the administration recognizes the real threat to these values both at home in the US and around the world, as Russia and China champion an alternative model. We've seen how this concern manifests itself in America's support for its western European democratic partners, and its contestation of political space in the Balkans and Black Sea. Indeed, Biden hosted the first Democracy Summit in Copenhagen in May of this year. This concern also partly informs US policy toward the Middle East and North Africa.

While other more pressing interests, such as all those mentioned above, often take precedence over this concern for democracy and human rights, we are seeing this concern inform policy toward a struggling democratic transition country such as Tunisia, but also in pushback against Erdogan's authoritarianism in Turkey, the US's refusal to engage with Assad's Syria, and a resumption of relations with and support for the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank. It also partly informs US policy in two very troubled and struggling semi-democratic experiments in Lebanon and Iraq.

In Lieu of a Conclusion

As seen above, US policy toward the Mediterranean region is informed by a number of interests – sometimes overlapping, sometimes conflicting. There is also not a unified or integrated US "Mediterranean policy," but rather a collection of US policies toward individual countries and issues in this region that, grouped together, can provide the outlines of what we might call America's Mediterranean policy. US policy toward the Eastern Med energy cooperation involving a number of its allies and partners comes closest to identifying a clearly "Mediterranean" policy. Of course, the Biden Administration is still in its first few months in office, many positions remain vacant and many policy conversations have not taken place – whether within the administration itself, or between the administration and partners around the Mediterranean. So maybe the currently fuzzy outline of a US "Mediterranean" policy, might yet emerge clearer and more strategically thought-through in the months ahead.