

Comparing Biden and Trump's Foreign Policy Doctrines

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Abstract

This paper explores and contrasts the foreign policy doctrines of President Joe Biden and President Donald J. Trump, with a particular focus on their respective approaches to international alliances, civil-military norms, and crisis management. The analysis examines key regional issues, such as the Middle East, the Russia-Ukraine war, and broader geopolitical implications. While Biden's foreign policy aimed to restore multilateralism, uphold democratic values, and rebuild institutional trust, Trump's approach is defined by isolationism, transactional diplomacy, and a profound scepticism towards traditional alliances. This study posits that the divergence between these two foreign policy doctrines reflects deeper ideological differences about the role of the United States in a rapidly evolving global order.

Keywords: John Biden, Donald Trump, foreign policy doctrines

INTRODUCTION

Foreign policy serves as a critical reflection of a nation's strategic priorities, identity, and leadership philosophy. The contrasting foreign policy approaches of Presidents Joe Biden and Donald Trump represent significant ideological and operational shifts in American international relations. This paper examines the doctrines of both administrations, focusing on three key dimensions: alliances and multilateral engagement, the Israeli-Palestinian issue, and broader geopolitical implications. By comparing Biden's emphasis on collective security and global cooperation with Trump's "America First" and isolationist policies, this study seeks to understand the broader implications of these doctrines on the U.S.'s role in a multipolar global order.

The foreign policy doctrines of Presidents Joe Biden and Donald Trump represent distinct ideological and operational approaches to international relations. While Trump's "America First" doctrine seeks to reduce U.S. involvement in global affairs through unilateralism and transactional diplomacy, Biden emphasized multilateralism, alliance-building, and the restoration of democratic values in global governance. The contrasting approaches to regional conflicts, particularly in the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and the broader geopolitical landscape, underscore a fundamental shift in how the U.S. engages with the world. The divergence between the two policies reflects deeper ideological divisions about the role of the United States in an increasingly multipolar and complex international order.

The foreign policy approaches of Trump and Biden reflect divergent views on America's role in the world. Trump's emphasis on unilateralism and transactional diplomacy has led to significant shifts in international relations, marked by both

diplomatic successes, such as the Abraham Accords, and substantial setbacks in traditional alliances and multilateral frameworks. In contrast, Biden's commitment to multilateralism and the restoration of global alliances aimed to rebuild the U.S. role in the international order, particularly about challenges posed by Russia, China, and Iran. However, Biden's efforts to reintegrate the U.S. into international agreements and institutions met with challenges, and his more cautious approach to the Middle East left long-standing conflicts unresolved. Both administrations, despite their differences, have had to navigate an increasingly complex and multipolar world, with varying degrees of success.

Trump's military strategy is rooted in a desire to reduce U.S. military commitments abroad. His "America First" agenda seeks to end what he termed "forever wars," particularly in the Middle East. The withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria and Iraq, as well as the negotiated peace agreement with the Taliban for a U.S. exit from Afghanistan, were emblematic of this strategy. Although Trump's military disengagement was broadly welcomed by segments of the U.S. electorate that viewed such actions as fulfilling his campaign promise to reduce U.S. interventionism, his administration, Trump's policies also faced challenges in Syria, where his decision to withdraw U.S. troops left Kurdish forces vulnerable and contributed to regional instability.

In contrast, Biden's military strategy was more cautious and calibrated. While Biden also sought to end the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan, his administration faced severe criticism for the botched execution of the withdrawal. Biden's broader military strategy focused on strengthening NATO, reinforcing the U.S. commitment to European security in response to Russia's aggression in Ukraine, and managing limited military engagements in the Middle East, particularly in Iraq and Syria. While Biden's limited engagements avoided the prolonged conflicts of the past, his approach to military interventions remained pragmatic, emphasizing counterterrorism efforts and the maintenance of strategic partnerships.

ALLIANCES AND MULTILATERAL ENGAGEMENT

President Donald Trump's foreign policy is largely defined by a rejection of multilateralism and an embrace of unilateralism, prioritizing American interests above collective global cooperation. Central to his approach was the "America First" doctrine, which focuses on reducing U.S. involvement in international agreements and alliances that were perceived as detrimental to U.S. sovereignty or economic interests. Löffmann (2019) explains that Trump's foreign policy does not spell the end of the liberal international order but does challenge the notion that liberal hegemony lacks a legitimate alternative.

Trump's skepticism toward multilateral frameworks is evident in his withdrawal from several key international agreements that had long been pillars of U.S. foreign policy, such as the Paris Climate Accord and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), also known as the Iran Nuclear Deal. These withdrawals were emblematic of a broader trend toward retrenchment, as Trump believed such agreements placed undue burdens on the U.S. While his decision to withdraw from the Paris Agreement was framed as an effort to protect American jobs and industry from what he viewed as an economically disadvantageous deal, it alienated many global partners and signaled a retreat from climate leadership. MacNeil (2025) argues that the U.S. has shifted dramatically between administrations: Obama joined the Accord,

Trump withdrew, Biden rejoined, and Trump threatens to withdraw again. This cycle creates instability, making long-term planning difficult for other countries.

U.S. policy toward Iran was also shaped by a mix of longstanding antagonisms, complex regional dynamics, and the broader goals of limiting Iran's nuclear ambitions and curbing its regional influence. While President Obama pursued diplomatic engagement through the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which sought to constrain Iran's nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief, President Trump adopted a more confrontational approach, withdrawing from the JCPOA in 2018 and implementing a "maximum pressure" campaign aimed at economically isolating Iran and triggering political change from within (Albarasneh & Khatib, 2019).

Despite these differing methods, both administrations pursued a consistent and coherent strategy rooted in preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons and limiting its regional power projection (Arghavani Pirsalami, Moradi, & Alipour, 2023). However, neither approach succeeded in fundamentally altering Iranian behavior or in building a long-term framework for improved bilateral relations. The antagonism remained deeply entrenched, with each side viewing the other as a strategic threat (Moghadam, 2024).

The Biden administration, beginning in 2021, inherited this complex legacy and sought to recalibrate U.S. policy by returning to diplomacy. Biden expressed a willingness to rejoin the JCPOA, but under expanded terms that included limitations on Iran's ballistic missile program and its regional activities. However, negotiations faced immediate challenges: Iran demanded full sanctions relief before any concessions, while domestic political opposition in the U.S., coupled with hardline leadership in Iran under President Ebrahim Raisi, made progress difficult (Fawcett & Payne, 2022). Despite multiple rounds of indirect talks, the nuclear deal was not revived, and Iran expanded its regional influence during this period (Perletta, 2024).

Iran's nuclear program advanced rapidly, with uranium enrichment reaching near-weapons-grade levels by 2025. These developments triggered renewed concerns in Israel and among U.S. allies in the Gulf, prompting covert operations, sabotage attempts, and increased military deterrence from both the U.S. and Israel. While Obama, Trump, and Biden differed in tone and tools, the strategic objective of preventing a nuclear Iran and limiting its regional dominance remained a consistent thread in U.S. foreign policy (Shukri, 2021). The Biden administration responded by reinforcing alliances, deploying additional naval assets to the Persian Gulf, and tightening sanctions, signaling a return to containment amid failed diplomacy. However, the failure to produce lasting behavioral change in Iran or a stable diplomatic resolution perpetuated a cycle of tension, undermined trust, and left the broader region vulnerable to further conflict. As Iran continues to assert itself regionally and edge closer to nuclear threshold status, the U.S. faces the challenge of balancing deterrence with diplomacy in a far more complex and fragmented Middle East.

Trump's departure from the JCPOA represented a major rupture in U.S.-Iran relations. His administration's "maximum pressure" campaign, aimed at crippling Iran economically through harsh sanctions, exacerbated tensions in the region and led to a breakdown in diplomatic engagements. Trump's stance on NATO was also confrontational, as he frequently questioned the alliance's relevance and its cost to the U.S., especially considering perceived inequities in defense spending among member states. This critical stance strained U.S.-European relations, as allies feared that Trump's approach could undermine NATO's core principles of collective defense and mutual security. Mason (2021) argues that this trend could create further instabilities

as state and nonstate actors vie for security and political influence, as Iran maintains a strong presence in Lebanon through Hezbollah, in Iraq through Iranian-backed militias, and in Yemen through the Houthis, escalating tensions with Saudi Arabia. Iran also deepened its ties with Hamas and Islamic Jihad, contributing to periodic flare-ups in Gaza and increasing pressure on Israel's northern front through Hezbollah in Lebanon, particularly in the wake of Hamas's attacks on Israel on October 7, 2023.

THE CONFLICT WITH IRAN

The change of policy is evident in that, for decades, the U.S. and Israel maintained a strong alliance because both supported the regional status quo. They preferred a stable, predictable Middle East where no major power or movement drastically altered territorial boundaries or political balances (Pinfold, 2025). Iran has maintained a strong ideological opposition to Israel, including explicit calls for Israel's destruction. In response to this ongoing threat, particularly Iran's persistent efforts to develop nuclear weapons, Israel has long depended on the United States as its key ally for security, diplomatic backing, and military support. Karsh (2023) explains that the October 7 events made it unmistakably clear that the United States is Israel's true and reliable ally in times of crisis, and Israel now sees its strategic interests as firmly aligned with Washington, resolving the previous dilemma of trying to maintain balanced ties with two rival superpowers.

After the Hamas attacks in October 2023, Israel's stance became even more revisionist, meaning it increasingly sought to change the regional status quo through aggressive actions, especially in Gaza. The Biden administration tried to restrain Israel's military actions and limit escalation across the region, but ultimately failed to do so in any significant way. In contrast, Trump's support for Israeli actions is more unconditional, viewing Israel as a useful counterweight to Iran. With both Israel and the U.S. embracing a revisionist approach, they pursue aggressive changes in the region instead of promoting stability (Rynhold, 2024). This marks a major departure from their traditional posture and could increase tensions and upheaval across the Middle East.

Under Trump's first term leadership, Israel established normalized relations with several Arab nations, including the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, and Sudan. The accords shifted regional dynamics and contributed to a reduction in hostilities between Israel and its Arab neighbors. Trump's ability to broker this agreement was framed as a pragmatic, transactional success that defied traditional diplomatic models by directly engaging the parties in question without relying on multilateral institutions.

Despite Trump's combative approach to multilateralism, Biden's foreign policy signaled a return to multilateralism, emphasizing the restoration of global alliances and the rebuilding of international institutions that had been weakened under Trump. Biden's approach to foreign policy sought to repair the fractured relationships with traditional allies, particularly those in Europe, and reaffirm the United States' commitment to international cooperation (Charillon, 2023). One of Biden's first acts in office was to re-enter the Paris Climate Agreement, signalling to the world that the U.S. would once again take a leadership role in global climate action. This move was consistent with Biden's broader foreign policy vision of combating global challenges through collective efforts, particularly in the areas of climate change, pandemics, and international security.

Similarly, Biden rejoined the World Health Organization (WHO) to ensure that the U.S. would play an active role in global health responses, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Re-engaging with the WHO marked a significant departure from Trump's decision to withdraw from the organization, a move that had been criticized as an abdication of leadership in the global health sector. Biden's administration also took steps to restore the U.S.'s relationships with NATO and strengthen the alliance in the face of rising threats from Russia and China. Biden's decision to recommit to NATO and reaffirm Article 5 - the collective defense clause - demonstrated his administration's commitment to European security and global stability (Lupovici, 2023). His foreign policy sought to reaffirm U.S. leadership in global democratic institutions, particularly regarding China and Russia. His administration worked to reinvigorate the U.S.-EU partnership, aiming to present a united front on issues such as trade, climate change, and geopolitical competition. Biden's approach contrasted sharply with Trump's more transactional, "zero-sum" perspective on international relations, focusing instead on cooperation to address shared global challenges. This emphasis on multilateralism was particularly evident in Biden's handling of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, where his administration worked closely with NATO allies and the European Union to impose coordinated sanctions on Russia and provide military and economic assistance to Ukraine.

While Biden's multilateralist tendencies were evident in his foreign policy, his efforts to revive the JCPOA with Iran faced significant challenges. Despite his campaign promise to return to the nuclear deal, Biden's negotiations with Iran have been complicated by both regional dynamics and internal political opposition. Iran's continued ballistic missile tests and involvement in regional conflicts, as well as the political polarization in the U.S. surrounding the deal, have made it difficult to achieve the progress Biden had hoped for. Unlike Trump, who saw the JCPOA as a flawed agreement that needed to be dismantled, Biden sought to re-enter the deal as a way to curb Iran's nuclear ambitions through diplomacy (Raine et al., 2024). However, the events of October 7, 2023, reshaped Israel's foreign policy calculus, especially regarding its strategic positioning with the United States (Karsh, 2023).

Historically, the alliance between the United States and Israel has been grounded in their shared support for maintaining the regional status quo, resisting major political upheavals, and preserving existing power structures. This stability-oriented approach helped keep their relationship strong. After Hamas's attack, Israel's response grew more aggressive and revisionist, meaning it shifted away from preserving the status quo to actively reshaping regional dynamics through military force and political dominance. The Biden administration was unable to curb Israel's aggressive actions in Gaza or prevent the conflict from spreading in the region. In contrast, Trump's support for Israel's aggressive policies focuses less on maintaining stability and more on reshaping the region in their favor, potentially leading to greater conflict and instability.

THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN ISSUE: DIVERGING APPROACHES

The transition from the Trump administration to the Biden administration marked a significant shift in U.S. foreign policy priorities regarding the Middle East, particularly regarding Israel. Unlike Trump, who placed Israel at the center of his Middle East policy, Biden initially did not prioritize Israel during the first two years of his presidency. This shift was attributed to broader global and regional concerns and political challenges in Israel. Biden adopted a more critical stance toward Israel's

government, advocating for a two-state solution and occasionally pushing back against Israeli settlement policies, contrasting with Trump's strong alignment with the Israeli right (Cavari and Har-Zvi, 2024).

Biden's approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict marked a contrast to Trump's policies. Trump's administration has adopted an unapologetically pro-Israel stance, culminating in the recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital and the relocation of the U.S. embassy there. This move was deeply controversial and alienated Palestinian leaders, but was hailed by many in Israel as a historic step.

By contrast, Biden adopted a more balanced approach, reaffirming U.S. support for Israel's security while also acknowledging Palestinian aspirations for statehood. Biden called for a two-state solution, but his administration has been more cautious in its actions, avoiding the more dramatic shifts that defined Trump's policies. Biden also expressed support for the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran, in part to address broader regional security concerns, including the role of Iran in destabilizing the Middle East (Brommesson et al., 2023). Nevertheless, Biden was critical of Iran's continued nuclear escalation, particularly its uranium enrichment beyond the limits set by the JCPOA. He emphasized the importance of diplomacy to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons but left open the possibility of other measures if diplomacy fails. While Biden maintained many of the sanctions that Trump imposed, his administration signaled a willingness to ease sanctions if Iran returns to compliance with the terms of the nuclear deal. Biden emphasized multilateral diplomacy and has sought to repair relationships with European allies, who have been more supportive of the JCPOA. He sought to rejoin the JCPOA to restore the nuclear agreement. His administration has engaged in indirect negotiations with Iran, though talks have faced obstacles due to ongoing disputes over U.S. sanctions, Iran's nuclear advancements, and regional conflicts.

Biden's approach sought to maintain traditional U.S. policies while navigating the complexities of regional geopolitics. He voiced support for the two-state solution, recognizing Palestinian rights and encouraging negotiations (Renshon, 2024). However, his administration faced significant challenges in balancing support for Israel with addressing Palestinian grievances, especially as violence escalated between Israel and Hamas. Biden's cautious stance earned criticism from both pro-Israel advocates, who argued that he is not doing enough to support Israel, and from pro-Palestinian activists, who claimed he was insufficiently critical of Israeli policies.

A central feature of Biden's foreign policy was the commitment to restore traditional alliances, particularly with NATO and other democratic allies. This was in stark contrast to Trump's isolationist stance and skepticism toward multilateral organizations. Trump's "America First" doctrine broke from the post-Cold War consensus, favoring nationalism and self-interest over cooperation with international partners (Schoenbaum, 2023).

Biden's response to crises was marked by a return to multilateral diplomacy and a focus on international norms. His administration's leadership in the response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 marked a sharp contrast to Trump's approach to Russia. Biden played a central role in uniting NATO and imposing sanctions on Russia, reinforcing the U.S. commitment to collective security in Europe. His administration has also sought to re-engage with international institutions like the United Nations (UN) and the WHO, reflecting a broader commitment to global governance.

In contrast, Trump's foreign policy is driven by unilateralism and a transactional approach to diplomacy. His policies, particularly towards Iran, were characterized by confrontation and economic sanctions, most notably his "maximum

pressure" campaign with strong support for Israel (Miller, 2024). Trump's first-term approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict diverged drastically from traditional U.S. policy. Through his "Deal of the Century," Trump pushed for a one-sided peace agreement that heavily favored Israeli interests, essentially abandoning the long-standing U.S. stance on a two-state solution (Wiseman, 2025). Trump's second-term handling of international crises is characterized by a mix of isolationism and personal diplomacy. His administration aims to limit U.S. involvement in conflicts abroad while pursuing specific, transactional objectives in regions such as the Middle East.

BROADER GEOPOLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

Trump's presidency is characterized by a clear focus on reducing U.S. involvement in multilateral alliances like NATO, in favor of "America First" policies that prioritize U.S. interests above all else. His administration consistently criticizes NATO allies for failing to meet the alliance's defense spending targets and pushes them to take on a greater share of defense costs. Trump's approach is transactional, emphasizing burden-sharing but framing NATO's value solely in terms of defined expenditures (Smith et al., 2025). By downplaying the collective defense aspect, Trump questions NATO's utility and relevance, further contributing to a perception of instability in transatlantic relations. His policy approach is a departure from traditional U.S. leadership, as he frames NATO membership as conditional and based on the perceived direct benefits to the U.S. rather than on shared values and collective security (Wright, 2025).

In contrast, Biden focused on rebuilding trust and reaffirming the U.S.'s commitment to NATO as a cornerstone of global security and transatlantic stability. He worked to restore relations with NATO allies and emphasized the importance of collective defence under Article 5 (Larsen, 2025). Biden urged allies to meet defence spending targets, but unlike Trump, his approach was grounded in cooperation and mutual responsibility rather than coercion. Biden viewed NATO not only as a defence alliance but as a vital institution for promoting democratic values and maintaining global stability, and he emphasized the need for shared burden-sharing within the context of collaboration, enhancing NATO's unity and strength (Dimitriou et al, 2024). His approach was multilateral and focused on reinforcing U.S. leadership within NATO, recognizing the alliance as central to global security. This contrasts sharply with Trump's unilateral and transactional view, where the alliance's value is reduced to defence spending contributions. Biden sought a more balanced and cooperative approach to burden-sharing, while Trump's policy creates tensions by questioning NATO's relevance and reducing the emphasis on shared values (Gözkaman, 2024).

The Russia-Ukraine war marked a critical divergence between the foreign policy approaches of Biden and Trump. Biden's administration led a coordinated Western response, providing significant military aid to Ukraine, imposing economic sanctions on Russia, and reinforcing NATO's eastern flank. Biden's leadership was central in uniting Western allies, signalling a commitment to collective defence and the protection of democratic values in Europe. This response reshaped global geopolitics, emphasizing the importance of alliances and international solidarity in the face of Russian aggression (Deni & Agachi, 2025).

In contrast, Trump's approach to Russia is characterized by scepticism towards NATO and a tendency to downplay Russian threats. Although Trump imposes sanctions on Russia, his rhetoric suggests a desire for closer ties with Russian President Vladimir Putin, raising questions about his commitment to defending democratic norms and the international order (Lambert-Deslandes & von Hlatky, 2025). This divergence

highlights a fundamental shift in U.S. foreign policy, with Biden’s administration asserting a more proactive stance in global geopolitics and reinforcing the Western alliance system.

The “America First” agenda questions the value of U.S. leadership in NATO and demands that European allies contribute more to their defence. Trump’s past scepticism of NATO and calls for allies to increase their defense spending raise concerns about the continued U.S. commitment to the alliance (Tardy, 2025). Dunn & Webber (2025) argue that Trump’s approach exposes NATO’s underlying vulnerability due to its heavy reliance on American leadership. They maintain that his stance demonstrates that transatlantic unity can be undermined by shifts in U.S. policy, revealing how dependent and potentially unstable the alliance remains when that leadership is withdrawn or redefined. Heisbourg (2025) argues that if Trump ends U.S. aid, Ukraine would struggle to defend itself against Russia, potentially leading to a Russian military victory. A Russian win would force NATO countries to significantly increase their defence efforts and spending to contain further Russian aggression and preserve the post-Cold War balance of power. This would be especially necessary to prevent Russia from reversing the geopolitical changes that followed the Soviet Union’s collapse. He further warns that if Trump pushes Ukraine into accepting a peace deal that involves giving up territory, it could undermine decades of efforts to uphold the principle that borders in Europe cannot be changed by force. This could embolden Russia and cast doubt on the credibility of Article 5 of the NATO treaty - the core principle that an attack on one member is an attack on all.

Additionally, if the U.S. also pulls back militarily from Europe, as Trump has occasionally suggested, European countries would need to spend far more than 3% of their GDP on defense just to compensate for lost U.S. capabilities - something they may not be politically or strategically prepared to do. Since this could extend to weapons of mass destruction, including biological and chemical weapons, Simpson (2024) argues for a shift in international thinking - from normalizing nuclear weapons as tools of security to treating them as unacceptable threats that must be eliminated through global cooperation and policy change.

CONCLUSION

The contrasting foreign policy doctrines of Joe Biden and Donald Trump reflect fundamentally different worldviews and approaches to American power, diplomacy, and global engagement. While Trump’s “America First” doctrine emphasizes unilateralism, transactional alliances, economic nationalism, and a retreat from multilateral commitments, Biden’s foreign policy was marked by a renewed commitment to traditional alliances, multilateral diplomacy, and the promotion of democratic values. Both administrations operated within a shifting global order characterized by rising great-power competition, regional instability, and domestic political polarization - factors that have constrained the consistency and efficacy of U.S. foreign policy.

Trump’s unorthodox and disruptive strategies challenge longstanding norms and reshape relationships in ways that still reverberate. Biden, in contrast, attempted to restore America’s global leadership role, yet had to work within the strategic recalibrations and reputational shifts inherited from his predecessor. This comparative analysis underscores that while leadership styles and guiding philosophies differ, the long-term effectiveness of U.S. foreign policy depends not only on presidential doctrines but also on adaptability, credibility, and the capacity to align national interests with

global challenges. The legacy of both Biden and Trump will continue to influence the trajectory of American diplomacy for years to come.

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