

## FOREIGN POLICY

Intervention or Restraint? A Washington debate on pressing issues for policymakers.

# Will 2022 Bring More War and Chaos?

*2021 has been a lesson in the limits of U.S. foreign policy.*

By Emma Ashford, a senior fellow in the New American Engagement Initiative at the Atlantic Council's Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security, and Matthew Kroenig, deputy director of the Atlantic Council's Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security.

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Matthew Kroenig: Hi Emma. It is hard to believe this is our last column of 2021. The year flew by. I thought it might be a good time to take a look back at the major events of 2021 and maybe peer ahead to what might be in store for us in the new year.

Also, I think we can write whatever we want this week; I heard our editor is sick with COVID-19 like everyone in London.

[Ahem. Still here. -ed.]

Emma Ashford: I'm not going anywhere for Christmas. But on the upside, I get to take a vacation from my first full-time job to focus on my second full-time job: planning Christmas, playing Santa, baking, cooking, decorating, and peeling sugar-high toddlers off the ceiling.

Nothing gets one in the holiday spirit like reflecting on the past year in foreign policy. How would you sum up 2021? Any big themes or overarching ideas that come to mind?

MK: It was an eventful year. We are still dealing with the mutating COVID-19 pandemic. U.S.-China relations became more confrontational. The United States' and NATO's longest war came to a chaotic end in Afghanistan. And much more. What stands out for you?

EA: You forgot the Free Britney movement—a case study in the power of transnational nonstate protest movements to achieve their goals! But in retrospect, there were a few big themes that emerged in the last year. First, the tension between national borders and international interconnections. Even as the pandemic has waned, the travel restrictions it brought across the world have not fully loosened. And many Western states are getting more and more determined to close off borders to migrants wherever possible. So the free movement of people across the world is in decline.

Meanwhile, 2021 provided constant reminders that the free movement of goods is still an essential part of our economy. Global supply chains have been a mess all year, whether it was caused by the Ever Given—that ship that got stuck in the Suez Canal—or by pandemic disruptions.

MK: Good points. And how could we forget, but the year started with Donald Trump in the White House. The U.S. presidency passed to Joseph Biden, but only after a riot at the U.S. Capitol building on Jan. 6 that is still being investigated and sparking polarization in the United States. Even Fox News is splintering over a controversial Tucker Carlson special on the riots.

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For many around the world, the return to a more traditional politician leading the free world was a breath of fresh air, but the Biden administration's actual performance has been uneven.

EA: Yeah, I think that was the other big theme of the year: democracy and dictatorship, even in the West. We started the year with the Capitol riot, followed swiftly by a second Trump impeachment. We ended the year with the Biden administration's Summit for Democracy. It's not clear to me, however, that democracy in the United States is in a much better state than it was at the start of the year. It's still shaky, and no amount of democracy summits will change that.

It also felt like this year had more than the usual share of military and security crises, even in the absence of Trump's saber-rattling. We've had at least two war scares in Ukraine, a chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan, ongoing civil wars in Ethiopia and Yemen, a coup in Myanmar, and the assassination of Haiti's president.

MK: The year is not over yet and I fear that one or more of these crises could erupt before we sing "Auld Lang Syne." Russia continues to mass troops on Ukraine's border. Iran's nuclear breakout timeline has shrunk to just weeks—leading to more serious discussions of military options. And China continues to make threats against Taiwan.

If we manage to make it through the year in peace, these will continue to be among the major issues of the new year.

EA: Fair enough. My big point was that it feels to me like 2021 was actually a pretty awful year for U.S. foreign policy. There were lots of big shifts around the world, and a growing feeling that the United States isn't well-placed to respond to any of them. Just look at the Iran nuclear negotiations: Talks in Vienna are ongoing, but Iran has made major strides in nuclear development and seems less and less willing to actually talk. Or consider Washington's complete inability to work with other countries on trade issues. What's your take?

MK: The record is certainly mixed, but I am more optimistic. Let me start with the positive. You are right that the United States is not and has never been omnipotent. But the United States is still the single-most influential country in the world, and its leadership is still required to solve most global challenges. After all, a major complaint from U.S. allies and partners this year—from the Afghanistan withdrawal to responding to the Russian threat against Ukraine—is that they want more, not less, involvement from Washington.

I also think the Biden administration's basic philosophy is correct. Biden has been right to promise to revitalize alliances and the rules-based system and to stand up to dictators. His doctrine of rallying the world's democracies to take on the threats posed by revisionist autocrats is exactly right.

EA: I'm not exactly sure we should judge U.S. foreign policy by the complaints of countries that don't spend enough on their own defense and want the United States to pick up the tab!

But 2021 has also been a lesson in the limits of U.S. foreign policy. The Biden administration emerged in early 2021, promising that “America is back.” But what it’s found, I think, is a world that’s moved on and is concerned about U.S. stability and reliability in the future. Just look at the Iran nuclear negotiations: The United States hasn’t been able to get the Iranians back in the deal because it’s no longer able to credibly offer them carrots to do so. Trump may be gone, but his shadow still looms over foreign policy.

MK: I see it differently, and it leads to one of my criticisms of Biden’s first year. He hasn’t done enough to follow through on his promise to stand up to dictators. Supreme Leader of Iran Ali Khamenei’s negotiating position is unserious, as even the Europeans have acknowledged.

Iran does not want to return to the deal because China is buying its oil and it is on its way to entering the nuclear weapons club. Biden’s plan to engage Tehran has not worked, and it is time to return to the pressure track with tougher sanctions (such as secondary sanctions on China’s oil imports) and military pressure.

EA: Hang on. The Trump administration’s maximum pressure campaign didn’t work; it didn’t bring Iran back to the table to negotiate an ostensibly better deal. And your solution is to dump the negotiations Biden has started—and go back to maximum pressure?

MK: We need a dual-track approach of pressure and engagement. We can continue the talks, but Tehran needs to know that failure to reach a deal will result in unacceptable consequences for Iran.

There is a reason the Iranians are increasingly skeptical of a deal. It’s because they know that, in less than three years, a new administration could come into office and tear it up again.

EA: This makes me a little crazy, I’ll be honest. There is a reason the Iranians are increasingly skeptical of a deal. It’s because they know that, in less than three years, a new administration could come into office and tear it up again. Trump’s choice to withdraw from the deal has made a mockery of the United States’ ability to credibly commit to diplomatic agreements for longer than one administration. That leaves the negotiators in Vienna stuck trying to find a deal that will appeal to Iran even if it only lasts a few years—a tall order, to be sure.

MK: The temptation to blame Trump for everything wrong with the world drives me a little crazy, to be honest. Iran is building nuclear weapons and that is Trump’s fault? Let’s focus on the real problem. Iran has been pursuing the bomb for over two decades; Iran’s diplomats are using the credible commitment argument as a rhetorical device.

Again, both U.S. and European negotiators report that Iran is not serious about the negotiations. Tehran does not want a deal because it sees the current path as pretty attractive; it is about to become a nuclear weapons power. If dead-end negotiations will not solve the problem, Washington needs to look at other options.

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EA: Yes, it is Trump's fault that Iran is advancing down the nuclear path. But let's be precise here. At least for the last decade or so, Iran has been pursuing what scholars call latent nuclear capabilities. That means enrichment and other technologies that are needed for nuclear weapons. But it hasn't actually taken those steps yet, and probably won't unless negotiations fail.

MK: That degree of precision muddies, rather than clarifies, the situation. Iran has spent billions of dollars and suffered through sanctions and military threats for decades to get to a point where its scientists are within weeks of enriching enough weapons-grade uranium for a first nuclear weapon that would advance many of its stated security goals. And you expect it to voluntarily stop short once it gets there? That interpretation defies common sense.

Look at the differences in the way the United States treated Qaddafi—who ended up dead in a ditch after giving up Libya's nuclear weapons—and North Korea's Kim Jong Un to see why countries might want the bomb.

EA: On the contrary, I think if negotiations fail, then the Iranians would be insane not to push all the way to weaponization. Iranian leaders probably haven't yet decided whether they're going to go for the bomb, but anyone who says they aren't at least considering it is being unbearably naive.

But here's the key difference between you and me: I think it's important to stop and think a little more about why. You only have to look at the differences in the way the United States treated Libya's Muammar al-Qaddafi—who ended up dead in a ditch after giving up his nuclear weapons—and North Korea's Kim Jong Un to understand why countries might want the bomb. I certainly don't like that assessment, but I try to be realistic about the world.

Perhaps more importantly, if they do go for the bomb, it's a clear failure of the last U.S. administration's maximum pressure campaign. The deal had defused this situation by putting Iran in a monitored holding pattern, at a lower level of nuclear development. Trump's choice to rip up the deal ruined that, and his sanctions campaign was worse than useless. If the talks in Vienna fail, Iran may become a nuclear power and Americans will have only themselves to blame for it.

And I'd note that if we don't want 2022 to be the year of a potential Israel-Iran conflict, then the Biden administration needs to redouble its efforts in Vienna.

MK: Let's pause this argument and return to the broader one. Biden's approach to Iran is consistent with a pattern of going too easy on the bad guys. He should put more pressure on Iran. His exit from Afghanistan handed the country back to the Taliban.

He should do more to outline the negative consequences for Russia should Russian President Vladimir Putin decide to invade Ukraine again. And, while I have been happy to see him continue to tighten the screws on the Chinese Communist Party (including a new ban on investments in CCP tech companies this week), he could go further by, for example, clarifying the U.S. commitment to defend Taiwan. While he has now promised twice to defend Taiwan, his White House walked those statements back, and many observers assumed it was a gaffe. His administration should clarify that he really means it.

In short, I hope Biden's New Year's resolution is to follow through on his campaign promise to get tougher on the revisionist autocracies threatening the democratic world order.

EA: The Biden administration is in a tough spot. It was left a really terrible hand by the Trump administration: to manage the Afghanistan withdrawal, get Iran negotiations back on track, build a better strategy for the Indo-Pacific, and try to stabilize the relationship with Russia.

MK: Fair. But it has been in office for almost one year. At some point, we need to stop blaming his predecessor and hold Biden accountable for the challenges he was elected to address. I hope Biden's New Year's resolution is to follow through on his campaign promise to get tougher on the revisionist autocracies threatening the democratic world order.

EA: Right, and I don't think the administration played that hand particularly well. I'm not concerned that it's not being tough enough on the bad guys. There are no good or bad guys in international affairs, just states looking out for their own interests. But with the laudable exception of the Afghanistan withdrawal, Biden has largely dodged making tough choices. Whether it's his unwillingness to challenge domestic manufacturing lobbies and push for a new Asian trade deal, or his waffling on arms sales, nuclear modernization, or the role of democracy in U.S. foreign policy, his policies are largely stuck in an unhelpful middle-ground.

By far the best decision that Biden made in 2021 was to continue the Afghanistan withdrawal, and to stick to his guns in light of all the criticism he received for it. I hope Biden's New Year's resolution is to be that decisive on other tough foreign policy choices.

Let's wrap up here with predictions. What can we expect in 2022?

MK: It may be wishful thinking, but I predict that we finally return to a new, post-COVID-19 normal. Some of our foresight experts at the Atlantic Council are even predicting a new vaccine that would work for all coronaviruses.

I also predict that Chinese President Xi Jinping's dictatorial tendencies will continue to weaken China and cause the rest of the world to balance more firmly against him. 2022 will be the year we stop debating whether the free world is in a new Cold War with China, because it will be so glaringly obvious that it is.

EA: I hope you're right. I hate to be the depressing one, but I fear 2022 will see at least one major conflict. There are simply too many flashpoints around the world right now for me to bet that they will all be resolved peacefully. I'd give war in Ukraine a 50/50 chance at this point.

I'd also not overlook the Balkans: There's a pretty good chance we'll see a flareup of ethnic conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina or elsewhere. In short, I think 2022 is likely to be a reminder, as my friend Michael Kimmage put it recently, "that Europe is what it has always been, a battlefield of competing ethnic, national and imperial entities ... and tragically far from whole, free and at peace."

MK: As usual, I hope you are wrong! But in this case, I fear you might be right. Let's hope we can enjoy our holiday in peace. It looks like 2022 will be another eventful year.

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