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PRESIDENT BIDEN'S REMARKS ABOUT AFGHANISTAN: THE END OF US LIBERAL INTERVENTIONISM?

In August 2021, the United States completed their military mission in Afghanistan and withdrawn all their troops after 20 years of war. This article provides a discourse analysis of the public speeches released by US President Joe Biden during such a month, from 16th to 26th August. The primary goal is to critically address the US President's speeches on Afghanistan to the contextual situation on the ground as well as to the conceptual basis of the US foreign policy strategy. What emerges from this study is a revised US foreign policy where some of the basic pillars of liberal interventionism are sacrificed in the name of a renewed national interest. In particular, the prospect of directly fostering democracy in foreign states as a way to promote international peace and security seems here abandoned for more surgical interventions of counterterrorism. Likewise, the world is depicted as a zero-sum game where the gain of one player is inevitably associated with the loss of another one. Such strategical change, if confirmed in the next years, will produce noteworthy consequences on the future US global policy.

Key words: Afghanistan, US military withdrawn, Joe Biden, discourse analysis, liberalism.

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Президент Байденнің Ауғанстан бойынша пікірлері: АҚШ -тың либералды интервенционизмінің соңы ма?

2021 жылдың тамызында Америка Құрама Штаттары Ауғанстандағы әскери миссиясын аяқтап, 20 жылдық соғыстан кейін барлық әскерлерін шығарды. Бұл ғылыми мақалада 16–26 тамыз аралығында Америка Құрама Штаттары президенті Джо Байденнің осы айдағы көпшілік алдында сөйлеген сөздеріне дискурс талдауы келтірілген. Мақаланың негізгі ғылыми мақсаты – Америка Құрама Штаттарының Президенті Джо Байденнің Ауғанстандағы жағдайға қатысты мәлімдемелеріне елдегі контекстік жағдай және тұжырымдамалық негіздер тұрғысынан сыни баға беру. Америка Құрама Штаттарының сыртқы саяси стратегиясы. Бұл зерттеуден туындайтын нәрсе Америка Құрама Штаттары тың қайта қаралған сыртқы саясаты, онда либералды интервенцияның кейбір негізгі тіректері жаңартылған ұлттық мүдделер үшін құрбан болады. Атап айтқанда, халықаралық бейбітшілік пен қауіпсіздікке ықпал ету тәсілі ретінде шет мемлекеттердегі демократияны тікелей нығайту перспективасы терроризмге қарсы күресте неғұрлым жедел араласу үшін осында қалдырылған сияқты. Сол сияқты, әлем нөлдік ойын ретінде бейнеленген, онда бір ойыншының жеңісі сөзсіз екіншісінің жоғалуымен байланысты. Мұндай стратегиялық өзгеріс, егер ол алдағы жылдары расталса, Америка Құрама Штаттарың болашақ жаһандық саясатына айтарлықтай әсер етеді.

Тірек сөздер: Ауғанстан, АҚШ әскерінің шығарылуы, Джо Байден, дискурстық талдау, либерализм.

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Высказывания президента Байдена об Афганистане: конец либерального интервенционизма США?

В августе 2021 года США завершили свою военную миссию в Афганистане и вывели все свои войска после 20 лет войны. В данной статье представлен дискурс-анализ публичного выступления президента США Джо Байдена за период с 16 по 26 августа. Основная цель статьи – дать критическую оценку заявлений президента США по ситуации в Афганистане, с точки зрения контекстуальной ситуации в стране и концептуальных основ внешнеполитической стратегии США. Результатом этого исследования является пересмотренная внешняя политика США, в

которой некоторые из основных столпов либерального вмешательства будут принесены в жертву во имя обновленных национальных интересов. В частности, перспектива прямого укрепления демократии в зарубежных странах как способ содействия международному миру и безопасности, похоже, оставлена здесь для более быстрого вмешательства в борьбу с терроризмом. Точно так же мир изображается как игра с нулевой суммой, в которой победа одного игрока неизбежно связана с поражением другого. Такое стратегическое изменение, если оно будет подтверждено в ближайшие годы, окажет значительное влияние на будущую глобальную политику США.

Ключевые слова: Афганистан, вывод войск США, Джо Байден, дискурс-анализ, либерализм.

Introduction

In August 2021, the US proceeded with their complete military withdrawal from Afghanistan. The decision of US President Biden generated diverse reactions. While some people supported the arguments raised by the US President about the need to leave the country, others harshly criticized it because it gave Taliban the chance to get, again, control over the whole country, thus subverting all those efforts made in the last 10 years. One of the main risks is that Afghanistan might turn back to the 2001 scenario, with the Afghan population suffering extensive violations of human rights and terrorist groups finding a “safe-haven” place for their illicit activities.

Understanding the reasons behind the choice taken by US President Biden as well as its consequences for the future US foreign policy strategy is, therefore, a critical issue that deserves attention. In this regard, this article provides a discourse analysis of the speeches publicly released by US President Joe Biden in the month of August. A renewed strategic approach seems to emerge from such remarks: the democratic peace theory, once promoted by former US President George W. Bush, is here abandoned and substituted by a more cynical and focused realpolitik. While not determining a complete turnaround, Biden’s speech still represents an important update of US foreign policy.

So, the object of this analysis is to critically assess President Biden’s remarks about the US military withdrawal from Afghanistan in order to reveal both his communication techniques as well as the renewed features of US global strategy. The subject of this study is the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and its implication for the US liberal approach in the framework of international relations. The research method used in this article is a qualitative content study based on the discourse analysis of US President Biden’s speeches on Afghanistan that have been publicly released in the month of August 2021. The main hypothesis of this article is that Biden’s exit strategy from Afghanistan might foster a renewed US global approach in which

some of the key principles of liberal interventionism will be intentionally sacrificed to redirect the public narrative toward a zero-sum game framework where a selective limited-engagement will be presented as the most preferable choice to defend the US national interests abroad.

Material and Methods

Methodologically, this study is based on the discourse analysis of US President Biden’s remarks about Afghanistan, which have been publicly released from 16th to 26th August. Such type of qualitative analysis entails the codification of the examined speeches and the re-organization of discourse in diverse categories, which share similar patterns and meanings. On the basis of such construct, it is then possible to develop some critical interpretations and coherent implications. Texts like, for example, Isabela Fairclough and Norman Fairclough’s *Political Discourse Analysis. A Method for Advanced Students*. (2012) and James Paul Gee’s *How to Do Discourse Analysis: A Toolkit* (2014) offer some tools and recommendations about how to conduct a critical discourse analysis as the one proposed in this article.

During the content analysis the authors have also put attention on the diverse techniques of persuasion used by President Biden to support his view. Such a condition is of academic relevance since it is a practice of political communication that is regularly used by heads of states to convince the masses about the correctness of their choices. Here, it will be helpful to distinguish between facts and rhetoric.

The main research question of this article is how Biden’s speeches on the US withdrawal from Afghanistan design a renewed US foreign policy strategy. While addressing such key question, additional issues will be considered, such as the use of persuasion as a technique to convince the audience (the US population) about the necessity to militarily leave Afghanistan and the effective reliability of the US official narrative considering the recent history of such a country.

Literature Review

The academic literature stresses the importance to analyse the political discourses as key sources for critical reflections. In this regard, Craig Allen Smith and Kathy B. Smith's book *The White House Speaks. Presidential Leadership as Persuasion* (1994) is a good point of reference to understand US Presidents' approaches toward influential communication and Evan Osnos's book *Joe Biden: The Life, the Run, and What Matters Now* (2020) provides some relevant insights to better understand the political figure of US President Joe Biden. Likewise, Jonathan L. Lee's book *Afghanistan. A History from 1260 to the Present* (2018) offers a comprehensive historical framework, which allows to comprehend the challenges faced by Afghanistan since its independence, and Robert D. Crews and Amin Tarzi's book *The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan* (2008) identifies the factors that made Taliban such a resilient armed group. Concerning the ongoing situations in Afghanistan, articles such as Daniel Byman's *The Good Enough Doctrine. Learning to Live with Terrorism* (2021), Sajjan M. Gohel's *The Taliban Are Far Closer to the Islamic State Than They Claim* (2021) and Anchal Vohra's *It's Crazy to Trust the Haqqanis* (2021) provide judicious reflections on the ongoing situation. Still, a critical discourse analysis aimed to connect US President Biden's speeches on Afghanistan to the contextual situation on the ground as well as to the conceptual basis of the US foreign policy strategy is missing. This article raises some preliminary reflections on Biden's remarks that might be used to partially close such knowledge gap.

Results and Discussion

A critical discourse analysis of US President Joe Biden's remarks on Afghanistan reveals interesting information about the dialectical narrative that have been used to convince the US population on the necessity to military leave the country as well as it presents some noteworthy implications for the future US foreign policy strategy. Five key themes are argumentatively introduced by the US President in his public speeches from 16th to 26th August.

The first point is related to the US national interests in Afghanistan. The objectives of the US mission in the country were, on one hand, to kill Osama bin Laden and, on the other, to make sure that Al Qaeda could not use anymore Afghanistan as a training base for organizing massive terrorist attacks

against the US. According to Biden, in these terms, the US mission has been a success. Differently, 'our mission in Afghanistan was never supposed to have been nation building. It was never supposed to be creating a unified, centralized democracy.' (Biden 2021a) With this phrase, US President Biden denies any national security interests in an active democratization of Afghanistan. And, as President, he does not intend to sacrifice other US soldiers in an endless civil war like the one in Afghanistan. This message is repeated in the remarks of August 20th (Biden 2021b), when he offered an estimation of the US costs for the war – from \$1 to \$2 trillion – and in the speech of 22nd August, when he stressed that 2,448 Americans died during the course of the conflict (Biden 2021e). Even more, while answering the questions of journalists on 26th August, US President Biden clearly states: 'I have never been of the view that we should be sacrificing American lives to try to establish a democratic government in Afghanistan – a country that has never once in its entire history been a united country'. (Biden 2021c) As a result, for Biden a US permanent military presence in Afghanistan is no longer warranted.

As suggested in the book of Osnos (2020, 38), the current US President already expressed a similar perspective while he was working under the Obama administration: two of the key questions that Biden regularly reminded to the former US President Barack Obama were, first, about the US strategic interests in Afghanistan and, second, the amount of resources effectively needed to achieve them. Such an approach clearly breaks with George W. Bush's democratic peace theory, which supported the idea that spreading democratic institutions in foreign countries could foster global peace and security. Instead, a "good enough success", aimed at surgically hit terrorist organizations through tactical counter-terrorism actions so that they can no longer harm the US citizens and their lifestyle, is the new emerging doctrine (Byman 2021). This approach does not represent a complete turning point in the US foreign policy: its basic premises were already partially introduced during the presidencies of both Barack Obama and Donald J. Trump and, in addition, similar operations have been regularly performed by the US in other countries of the world (e.g. Yemen, Somalia, etc.) where the presence of terrorist groups was viewed as a threat for the US national interests. However, it is under President Biden that such a discourse gets officially embraced and defended in front of the US public opinion.

It is also interesting to notice how US President Biden defines the conflict in Afghanistan as a civil war without placing much attention to the central role played by the US in such a scenario. Actually, in some parts of his speeches, the US President seems to admit that some mistakes have been made: ‘...our mission in Afghanistan has taken many missteps’. (Biden 2021a) However, much more emphasis is put on the diligence and sacrifice made by the US soldiers sent in Afghanistan ‘to defend what we love and the people we love’. (Biden 2021c) Otherwise, a harsh criticism is reserved for the Afghani leaders, who failed to unite the country through diplomacy, and the Afghani army, which suddenly dismantled against the Taliban notwithstanding the training and equipment given them by the US along these 20 years. Using Biden’s words, ‘We gave them every chance to determine their own future. What we could not provide them was the will to fight for that future.’ (Biden 2021a) Notwithstanding such criticisms, the US President uses repetition and a chant-like rhythm to emphasize what the US will continue to do for the Afghan population: ‘We will continue to support the Afghan people... We’ll continue to push for regional diplomacy and engagement to prevent violence and instability. We’ll continue to speak out for the basic rights of the Afghan people...’ (Biden 2021a) So, the official choice is to move from hard power to soft power in the promotion of democratic principles. How much effective will be such approach is a different issue.

The second point is related to the arguments used by Biden to justify the necessity to military leave Afghanistan in this precise moment (31st August). Beyond the remarks about the lack of US national interests in Afghanistan, he refers to five additional reasons to support his decision. First, he is enforcing a plan already accepted by former US President Donald Trump: ‘...I inherited a deal that President Trump negotiated with the Taliban. Under his agreement, U.S. forces would be out of Afghanistan by May 1, 2021’. (Biden 2021a) In other terms, the US already committed themselves to military leave the country and the President is just putting in act such a decision. Second, he uses simplification – a technique of persuasion which intentionally reduced the amount of examined options to implicitly suggest that no other choice is possible – by claiming that he had only two possible choices: on one side, the withdrawal of US military forces from Afghanistan as previously agreed or, on the other, the sending of new US troops in Afghanistan with a correlated high risk of a renewed escalation of violence. Such

second “false-option” is dismantled by recurring to emotional appeal: ‘How many more generations of America’s daughters and sons would you have me send to fight Afghans – Afghanistan’s civil war when Afghan troops will not? How many more lives – American lives – is it worth? How many endless rows of headstones at Arlington National Cemetery?’ (Biden 2021a) Third, Biden claims that leaving Afghanistan now or after several other years of fight would not have changed the final outcome for the country. According to US President Biden, ‘no amount of military force would ever deliver a stable, united, and secure Afghanistan – as known in history as the “graveyard of empires.” What is happening now could just as easily have happened 5 years ago or 15 years in the future.’ (Biden 2021a) To further support his point, Biden creates a parallelism between the endless war in Vietnam and the one in Afghanistan, and conclude his statement with an assertion: ‘I know my decision will be criticized, but I would rather take all that criticism than pass this decision on to another President of the United States... Because it’s the right one – it’s the right decision for our people... And it’s the right one for America.’ (Biden 2021a) Fourth, US President Biden uses a metaphorical image to explain how terrorism has, nowadays, “metastasized” all over the world like a cancer. As such, it has to be dealt with surgical interventions because ‘That is about America leading the world...’ (Biden 2021a) So, the idea of a permanent military presence in failed states should be put aside and being substituted by *ad hoc* counter-terrorism interventions, ‘working in close coordination with our allies and our partners and all those who have an interest in ensuring stability in the region.’ (Biden 2021b) Actually, this is one of the rare parts of Biden’s speeches in which the US-centred focus temporarily moves toward a more international perspective. Fifth, Biden believes that remaining in Afghanistan would reward the global competitors of the United States. Both in his speeches of 16th and 22nd August, Biden emphasizes how Russia and China would get strategic benefits from a US endless military presence in Afghanistan. (Biden 2021a; Biden 2021e) Hence, the world is depicted by Biden as a zero-sum game where any unnecessary cost paid by the US would automatically produce some advantages to its long-term “rivals”.

The third critical point of Biden’s speeches concerns the departure of US citizens and of those eligible Afghan civilians who directly cooperated with the USA in the last 20 years. The US President stresses in several occasions the importance of

cooperation with US allied forces for such operations, the high risks – confirmed by the terrorist attack conducted by ISIS-K at the airport of Kabul on 26th August – associated with such evacuation, and the outstanding achievements reached by the USA in the process (over 75.000 people transported out of Afghanistan since the end of July). Biden justifies the delayed begging of the evacuation due to the fact that, before the collapse of the Afghan army, many people did not want to leave the country and the Afghan governments was discouraging an earlier initiative because it could have spread negative signals to the population. Moreover, responding to criticisms about the difficulties at the airport of Kabul, Biden uses pre-emptive arguments to support his view: the images coming from Afghanistan are heart-breaking ('We're all seeing it. We see it. We feel it. You can't look at it and not feel it.'). but the US are nonetheless doing what is right while 'acting bravely and with professionalism and with a basic human compassion'. (Biden 2021a) Likewise, he uses assertion to sustain that the difficulties that are taking place during the rescue activities were inevitable: 'There is no way to evacuate this many people without pain and loss, of heart-breaking images you see on television. It's just a fact.' (Biden 2021a) So, the message (addressed to the US population) is clear: notwithstanding the threats and difficulties, the US are operating at the best of their capacity and, in doing so, they are achieving outstanding results.

The fourth point is related to the Taliban. In his speech of 20th August, Biden asserts three important issues: first, that the US government is in constant contact with Taliban to ensure a successful process of evacuation; second, that any attack against US forces during the process of evacuation would be met with a forceful response; third, that Taliban are looking for legitimacy and, therefore, it might be possible to make international pressure on them. (Biden 2021b) On both speeches of 22nd and 24th August, the US President repeated this last point, while adding that any decisive evaluation will be determined by Taliban's effective behaviour. (Biden 2021c; Biden 2021e) On 26th August, such message is again replicated, but with an important variation: 'No one trust them [Taliban]; we're just counting on their self-interest... They are not good guys, the Taliban. I'm not suggesting that at all. But they have a keen interest.' (Biden 2021d) So, in this last speech all the doubts about Taliban are finally revealed even if there is still the hope that diplomacy and economic pressure might induced

them to operate according to acceptable standards. This cautious, but quite optimistic approach seems supported by Desha Girod (2021) who believes that the diplomatic relations and humanitarian aids from Western countries might possibly push the Taliban to enforce more "moderate" policies whereas they would see such a condition as a necessary step to keep internal political control. This perspective is, however, contested by Anchal Vohra (2021) who believes that there are too many links between the Taliban and diverse members of terrorist organizations to see them as reliable international actors.

The fifth and final point is related to the terrorist group known as ISIS-K (the armed branch of ISIS in Afghanistan). In all his speeches from 20th August on, US President Biden has repeatedly suggested that ISIS-K is an arch-enemy of the Taliban. In such a statement emerges the blurred idea that the enemy (Taliban) of my enemy (ISIS-K) might not really be my friend (the Taliban 'are not good guys', as mentioned above), but at least someone with whom to share a common battle. This narrative about ISIS and Taliban is, however, contested by Sajjan M. Gohel, who affirms that the situation in Afghanistan is far from being a black and white scenario. Thus, 'sworn enemies can fight each other one day and collaborate for mutual gain the next day.' (Gohel 2021) Anyway, in response to the ISIS terrorist attack at the airport of Kabul, Biden demands a firm approach: 'The lives we lost today were lives given in the service of liberty, the service of security, in the service of others, in the service of America... To those who carried out this attack, as well as anyone who wishes America harm, know this: We will not forgive. We will not forget. We will hunt you down and make you pay. I will defend our interests and our people with every measure at my command.' (Biden 2021d) The repetition of the word "service" is used here to remark the positive intents of those Americans who perished during the attack. Likewise, the passage from the inclusive first-person plural pronoun "we" to the singular first-person pronoun "I" sign a sort of personal promise where "we – America" will not forgive or forget them, and "I – the US President" will do whatever I can to defend our interests and our people.

Conclusions

The US foreign policy has always been grounded on a balance between realism and liberalism. Some US presidents in the past have pushed more

weight on the realist side (e.g. Richard Nixon), while others preferred to give more attention to the liberal perspective (e.g. Woodrow Wilson). In the case of Joe Biden, his foreign policy strategy cannot be completely labelled as realist or liberal because, as many of his predecessors, he operates in a grey area where elements of both ideologies are combined into a new chimera. Still, from his speech about Afghanistan it seems that he is completely rejecting the liberal interventionism approach promoted by George W. Bush within the framework of the democratic peace theory. The US will continue to promote human rights and democratic principles around the world, but using diplomacy and economic relations instead of massively employing their military contingency. Likewise, the US will maximize the efficiency of their actions in the war against terrorism by recurring to surgical operations instead of long-term military interventions. After all, as long as Taliban can constrain the advance of ISIS in Afghanistan, they do not represent a top priority for the US national security. In a zero-sum game context, such strategy will suitably limit the potential side

advantages for the US global adversaries (mainly China and Russia).

Interestingly, all the speeches of US President Biden are highly “US-centred”: the techniques of communication selected and used by Biden are specifically aimed for the American electorates, with only a few mentions to the international community as a whole. Arguably, this approach also reveals the prioritization, under Biden, to turn the international role of the US from a global policeman to a specialized surgeon. If such perspective will be confirmed, the US foreign policy strategy under the Biden’s presidency will mostly follow a realpolitik approach where the effective costs and benefits will be, time by time, measured according to the strategic advantages that the US could gain from their global rivals. Possibly, there will be some areas where ideology and internationalism will still represent core assets (like, for example, in relation to the issue of climate change). However, concerning the national security, the US will conduct surgical intervention only when and where the defence of the US national interests will be at stake.

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