

US foreign policy

Joe Biden calls for 'new era of relentless diplomacy' in UN speech

US president's address to General Assembly comes as relations with allies tested by Afghanistan and Aukus



Joe Biden told the UN General Assembly on Tuesday: 'The future will belong to those who embrace human dignity, not trample it' © AP

Katrina Manson in Washington SEPTEMBER 21 2021

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Joe Biden has urged allies and partners to “get to work” and open a “new era of relentless diplomacy” aimed at [countering China](#) and other global challenges including climate change and the pandemic, in his first speech to the UN General Assembly.

“Whether we choose to fight for our shared future or not will reverberate for generations yet to come,” Biden told world leaders, citing threats spanning from future pandemics to climate change and emerging technologies he said risked deepening repression.

“The future will belong to those who embrace human dignity, not trample it,” he said, arguing the US was well-placed to lead these global efforts now that its 20-year war in Afghanistan had ended.

Biden’s impassioned defence of democracy comes as he contends with frayed diplomatic relations with western powers over the chaotic exit from Afghanistan and the launch of a new strategic alliance with the UK and Australia that has left France furious.

His first address to the UN General Assembly stood in contrast to that of his predecessor Donald Trump, whose rejection of the “ideology of globalism” and embrace of America First nationalism drew a chilly response in past years.

In a new commitment, Biden said he wanted to work with Congress to double Washington’s public international financing to \$11.4bn a year to help developing nations tackle the climate crisis.

A goal was set in 2009 for the world’s largest economies to raise \$100bn each year by 2020, which they have fallen well short of reaching. Rich countries donated about \$80bn in 2018, according to UN figures.

Much of the Biden speech appeared aimed at the challenge posed by a rising China, although his only explicit reference to the country was a call to condemn alleged human rights abuses in Xinjiang. Biden nevertheless insisted: “We are not seeking a new cold war or world divided into rigid blocs.”

He added: “All the major powers of the world have a duty, in my view, to carefully manage their relationships so we do not tip from responsible competition to conflict.”

The Biden administration is struggling to keep co-operation with Beijing on subjects such as climate change from being [hampered](#) by rising tensions between the two countries over China's crackdown on Hong Kong, aggressive military stance towards Taiwan and alleged mistreatment of Muslim Uyghurs. Biden has framed Washington's relations with China as a competition "to win the 21st century".

"Biden's overarching message . . . was that strategic competition with China will not in any way diminish America's commitment to working with other nations to tackle shared existential threats like climate change and pandemics," said Thomas Wright, expert in international order and strategy at the Brookings Institution.

The challenge for the US president was to find a way of tackling shared threats in an era of great power rivalry and nationalism, he added.

"He will try to work with China but he also needs a back-up plan if that fails to materialise. Today's speech was a first step in that direction."

Biden might have expected a "hero's welcome" at the start of the year from the UN, where Trump had endorsed a narrow, nationalistic vision, said Richard Gowan, UN director of the International Crisis Group. "Western diplomats in New York obviously vastly prefer the Biden team to the Trump team."

But the US's leadership role at the international body had since then been complicated by discontent over the Biden administration's position towards Israel and the Palestinians during the Gaza war earlier this year, the Afghanistan withdrawal and the risk that Trump could return if he made another run at the presidency in 2024, Gowan added.

Biden has incurred the wrath of close Nato allies in recent days over the deadly drawdown of US troops from Afghanistan, which stranded UK and German personnel and many of the Afghans who helped them.

He has also faced criticism for overlooking France in a new submarine deal with Australia and the UK, prompting Paris to recall its ambassadors to the US. One European diplomat said Biden's claims of support for his allies had been undermined by his actions on Afghanistan and the submarines deal.

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