

US's questionable track record overshadows the democracy summit



RUBY AMATULLA

POWER with wisdom is a blessing for mankind; power with arrogance and vices is a threat.

US President Joe Biden is no Woodrow Wilson or Franklin D Roosevelt to claim that he has been a vanguard of democracy. On his watch, as the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, he authored legislation that was unjust and morally repugnant, and later, as the vice-president of the US, he subscribed to policies for or remained complacent about gross violations of human rights, and even crimes against humanity, in the Middle East and other places.

Regarding Iraq, the Obama-Biden administration (2009-2017) kept the incompetent, corrupt, and extremely sectarian Nouri al-Maliki—previously endorsed by neoconservatives, but shown as the “hand-picked” man of President Bush—as the prime minister of Iraq until 2014. He further pushed the country towards the sectarian civil war. During this time, al-Maliki’s irresponsible agenda against the Sunni population clashed with US General David Petraeus’ reconciliation efforts, which were making groundbreaking progress at that time. Petraeus was outraged. Instead of removing al-Maliki, the Obama-Biden administration brought General Petraeus back to Washington. Bloodshed and killings soared, and al-Maliki became a ruthless tyrant.

Creating Shia rule, marginalising the Sunni population, and prolonging conflicts were all planned by the pro-Israeli neoconservatives in Washington. By prolonging wars, the elites of the military industrial complex would make enormous money, and their ally, Israel, would establish hegemony in the region by bringing about a regime change in Iran, using America’s military might and money.

Therefore, a solution, peace, and a faster exit strategy were not the objectives of the masterminds behind the deradicalisation projects of the War on Terror, and establishing democracy and a better economy in a Muslim-majority country was farthest from their minds. It is difficult to believe that Joe Biden, being an extremely influential politician in America, did not know about all these schemes of robbing the US Treasury and ruining the possibilities of successes in Afghanistan and Iraq that could help regain the trust and confidence in America’s

leadership in the region—if not in the world.

The fact is that establishing democracy and a thriving economy both in Iraq and Afghanistan were within America’s reach—particularly under its military occupation—as it took place during the Marshall Plan half a century ago. America had the experience, expertise, military, and financial capability to employ the Marshall Plan in these places—at least a smaller version of it. That would bring about sustainable peace and a successful deradicalisation. The major stakeholders and rivals of both countries could have been pushed to achieve a consensus as to the basic rule of the republic, and a power-sharing or coalition-facilitating political system.

This consensus-building before holding a credible election is vital in charting a crafted transition to democracy, especially under the occupation of a global power that is serious about stability and deradicalisation. Similar processes led to successes in places like Nepal after 2006, Kosovo in 2008, and Tunisia after 2011, among others. A power-sharing system also helps integrate a deeply polarised country. These were all within the reach of Washington, as many diplomats, state department officials and experts were hoping for, but they were not in control—they were deliberately marginalised. Instead, the elite-dictated agendas led to disasters in both places. Biden has been an important player during the War on Terror project since 9/11. He has fuelled militarism when many scholars, experts, and military leaders warned that radicalism had no military solution. When democracy, a vibrant economy, and an integrated society were the answers to

radicalism, these ideas were, it appears, deliberately avoided.

Many experts make Joe Biden and his partner, former President Barack Obama, responsible for the horrible massacre in Gaza in 2014 on the pretext of “Israel’s right to defend itself,” when 2,000 unarmed Palestinians were killed—600 of them children. Both remained silent during the 51-day constant aerial bombardments when Israel dropped 20,000 tonnes of explosives

democracy and freedom can emerge in the world—if the American public is alert and involved in global affairs. When they do, the predatory elites fail to exploit Washington. The visionary China policy in the early 1970s and the diplomacy of détente with the Soviet Union in the 1980s ended the Cold War, and globalisation ensued. As a result, two billion people overcame poverty. All these phenomenal global outcomes occurred because the American public, being fed up

determined to bring about a paradigm shift in the world. He compelled Britain to sign the Atlantic Charter in 1941 and masterminded the Marshall Plan, widely considered to be a phenomenal achievement of the 20th century.

Inspired by Wilson and Roosevelt, countless people fought against colonial rule. As a result, 36 countries became independent after World War II.

This progression would have continued if there were no Cold War. Taking full advantage of the vulnerable nation and the world, the elites rose and took the reign to take the world backward towards militarism, authoritarianism, and neocolonial agenda in the 1950s and 60s.

The legacy that both Wilson and Roosevelt left behind for America is that the nation should stand in solidarity with the peoples who are struggling for freedom and better life around the world, to sustain peace. These great American leaders believed that only by helping create a win-win world, America would gain the most.

History is a testament to this truth. Had America retained the trust and confidence in the world gained under the leaderships of Wilson and Roosevelt, the nation could achieve many of its global objectives at a fraction of the price it paid by deviating from the path of moral integrity.

The bottom line is: trust and confidence are invaluable geopolitical capital. These intangible treasures are the decisive force in human affairs in the long run. On the other hand, greed, arrogance, and domination are aberrations, causing conflicts, bloodshed, destruction, and wars leading to lose-lose outcomes.

With the ever-greater awareness of human rights and demand for self-rule, there is no substitute for genuine democratic reforms and America’s foreign policy recalibration. A value-dictated policy always produces a win-win outcome. The Marshall Plan, the China Policy, the détente, and the Balkan interventions are glaring examples of success stories of American leadership. However, the American public needs to be more vigilant, and people abroad need to be working closely with them in transnational people-to-people movements. The government-to-government virtual assembly that has taken place in Washington recently may turn out to be a sham, a political move at home, and a geopolitical ploy for the Biden administration.

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The Summit for Democracy, held virtually on December 9-10, can do little for world democracies if there is no attempt for genuine democratic reforms and the US foreign policy recalibration.

PHOTO: AFP

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on Gaza. All schools, hospitals, the power grid, sewage systems, and water systems were destroyed deliberately to make Gaza unlivable.

In 2005, Condoleezza Rice, the then secretary of state, conceded that the American policy of sacrificing democracies in the name of stability had been counterproductive for the previous six decades. Has this realisation changed anything for Washington? I am afraid not. Then why is al-Sisi, a military tyrant, in power in Egypt, repressing his own people, with the US paying USD 1.5 billion to the Egyptian military every year? Which global power is mainly responsible for creating, sustaining, grooming, and using the monarchs and authoritarian regimes in the Middle East?

Having said all these, I am one who always believes that Washington is the best place from where an effective leadership for

with their government’s confrontational policies, demanded dialogue and constructive engagements with the enemies.

The world owes a lot to American leaders like Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt, for bringing about the global consensus on human rights and self-determination. The international community and the global rule of law were based on Wilson’s famous “Fourteen Points” and his proclamation that self-determination is a paramount human right. His goal was to replace the “might is right” policy of the colonial powers with the democratic rule of law—a new global order. Using the leverage of his victory in World War I, he became determined to use the geopolitical capital in freeing and protecting as many places and as many peoples possible.

Twenty years later, seeing the devastating consequences of deviating from Wilson’s visionary path, Roosevelt also became

Road deaths, and our infatuation with motorised transport



DEBRA EFROGMSON

AS children and others continue to die on our roads, we ought to reconsider just how highly we value our current traffic system. How many deaths and serious injuries are we willing to accept for the sake of the possibility—belied by our constant traffic congestion—of free movement throughout our city? Likewise, if we implemented all of the students’ demands, just how much could we reduce the ongoing slaughter on the roads?

It is easy to believe that if we solved the most egregious problems—crazy driving, lack of proper training or monitoring, the terrible state of vehicles and roads—then we could bring the death toll to a rapid end. Surely, the high-income countries do not suffer the same carnage as we do here in South Asia?

The statistics may, thus, come as a shock. While Bangladesh has 13.6 road deaths per 100,000 inhabitants per year, the US is not much better, at 12.4, and Sri Lanka—which in many ways has a more civilised road system—does even worse, at 17.4. The worst countries are in Africa and the best are in Europe, though Hong Kong, at just 1.5, has the lowest road death rate in the world, doing even better than countries such as Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland, all of which have around two deaths per 100,000 inhabitants per year.

What do all those confusing numbers tell us, except that the US is, as usual, a poorly-performing

outlier? Well, the countries that have done the most to reduce the use of the automobile, improve public transit, and make it pleasant to move about by foot and bicycle do the best in increasing road safety, while those that continue to prioritise using cars do the worst. The simple fact is that motorised vehicles weighing more than a tonne, travelling at over 30km per hour, are deadly. No matter how many measures we put into place to make things safer, accidents will happen, due to any number of reasons—a child running into the street after a ball, low visibility due to fog or rain, a momentary lapse of attention.

Worse, the very fact of driving a big motorised vehicle gives a feeling of power and invulnerability to the

than accepting that situation, we need strict enforcement of the rules. Not only do many people not enjoy climbing stairs for the sole purpose of crossing a road, but foot overbridges send a clear message that the roads belong to the vehicles, and pedestrians should flee for their safety. Where there is no bridge available and people need to cross the road, or where there is no footpath or it is piled with garbage, construction materials or parked vehicles, and pedestrians have no choice but to walk in the roads, the drivers will not slow down for them. Why should they? They assume that pedestrians have no right to be on the roads, despite the fact that walking is, like driving, another (though vastly less harmful) form of

and walking.

The US, meanwhile, is a disaster because the founding principle is sprawling and driving, rather than setting up compact cities that enable and encourage using public transit, walking and cycling.

To put it plainly, at some point, we must decide whether our continued

infatuation with motorised transport and our consideration of it as our default transport option are worth the price in life and limb. If not, simple tweaking at the edges will not solve our problem; a major reconfiguration of transport systems to dramatically reduce motorised transport and encourage and enable

walking, cycling and using public transit will save lives from road crashes—as well as from pollution. As a side benefit, we would also have vastly more liveable cities.

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If we can get rid of the chaotic mix of motorised and non-motorised vehicles and strictly enforce order on our roads, they will automatically become safer.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

driver—and reduces those on the roads to something less than fully human. I sometimes have the same sensation on a bicycle—pedestrians are an annoying obstacle to my progress. It is vastly worse if I am driving a car, which is partly why I stopped decades ago. When I reduce the people who I share the streets with to something less than human, I lose some of my own humanity. The convenience of a car is not worth it.

So yes, we should implement some of the measures the students demand. My main contention previously was with their demand for foot overbridges. I understand not trusting Bangladeshi drivers to respect zebra crossings, but rather

transport. In the Netherlands, when people were fed up with the ongoing road deaths, particularly of children, the public moved not to demand stronger laws or higher penalties, but to create a high quality network of protected bicycle paths, so that people could move about without causing danger to themselves or others. The resulting bicycle network is enviable and helps explain the high rate of bicycle commuting in the Netherlands—and the low death rate on the roads. Hong Kong, in order to avoid the state of a permanent traffic jam, has actively discouraged car ownership and use, and instead promotes public transit

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e-Tender is invited in the National e-GP System Portal (<http://www.eprocure.gov.bd>) for the Procurement of following works:

Sl. No.	Package No.	Name of work	e-Tender ID	Procurement method	Tender/proposal document last selling/downloading date and time	Last date and time for tender/proposal security submission
1	LGED/Rjb/ Residential/ 21-22/ Maint-01	Repair and Maintenance of Garage plus Residential Building of Assistant Engineer and Repair of Boundary Wall surrounding Executive Engineer's Residential Building at the Campus of Executive Engineer, LGED, Rajbari.	636559	LTM	28-December-2021 17:00	29-December-2021 12:30
2	LGED/Rjb/ Office/ 21-22/ Maint-02	Repair and Maintenance of Office Building of Executive Engineer and Repair of Boundary Wall at the Campus of Executive Engineer, LGED, Rajbari.	636613	LTM	28-December-2021 17:00	29-December-2021 12:30

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