

# WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 2280  
February 9, 2009

## Biden's Munich Speech: Obama Administration Foreign Policy Projects Weakness and Confusion

*Nile Gardiner, Ph.D.*

In a major speech at the February 7 Munich Security Conference,<sup>1</sup> Vice President Joe Biden outlined the Obama Administration's foreign policy vision for the first time on the world stage. It was an address designed to reach out to leaders in both Europe and the Middle East, "on behalf of a new Administration determined to set a new tone in Washington, and in America's relations around the world."

Biden's speech should be viewed as one of the weakest projections of U.S. leadership on foreign soil in recent memory. The message was confused, apologetic, over-conciliatory, and remarkably lacking in substance and detail. It was the kind of speech, heavy in platitudes and diplo-speak, that could easily have been given by a continental European bureaucrat nestled in Brussels, Paris, or Berlin. It was not the voice of the most powerful nation on earth.

The Vice President went to great lengths in his speech to avoid offending America's enemies, such as Iran and Hamas, or her strategic competitors, such as Russia. One could have been forgiven for thinking that the world was largely at peace rather than facing the threat of global terrorism or a dangerous rogue regime aggressively seeking nuclear weapons capability.

Biden's remarks touched on several key areas, from Iran to NATO reform—all of which gave major cause for concern—and left critical questions unanswered.

**Iran.** The Vice President confirmed the new Administration's willingness to enter into direct negotiations with the Islamist regime in Tehran.

In essence, Biden offered a *quid pro quo* deal with Iran—the kind the European Union has offered for several years with absolutely nothing to show for it except spectacular failure. Such a deal is based on the naïve premise that the Iranian theocracy is a normal state actor that plays by the rules of diplomacy and can be negotiated with. What was missing in Biden's remarks was any explicit statement of consequences—actions ranging from tougher economic and military sanctions or the use of force against Iran's nuclear facilities—that could be inflicted on the dictatorial government of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad or the ruling mullahs if they do not comply. There was no appeal to European Union countries such as Germany to tighten their own sanctions on Tehran or calls for Russia and China to strengthen U.N. Security Council sanctions.

**Missile Defense.** The Vice President stated that the United States "will continue to develop missile defenses to counter a growing Iranian capability, provided the technology is proven to work and cost effective." However, Biden gave no pledge to press ahead with a third-site missile defense system in Eastern and Central Europe, sowing the seeds of further confusion in Poland and the Czech Republic,

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
[www.heritage.org/Research/Europe/wm2280.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/Research/Europe/wm2280.cfm)

Produced by The Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom

Published by The Heritage Foundation  
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE  
Washington, DC 20002-4999  
(202) 546-4400 • [heritage.org](http://heritage.org)

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

two key U.S. allies who have agreed to participate in the defense system by hosting missile interceptors and early warning radar. In addition, National Security Adviser James Jones confirmed in an interview with the British Observer newspaper that plans for third-site defenses had been “put on ice,” a decision that, accord to according to a senior NATO official, is a clear overture to Moscow.<sup>2</sup>

**Russia.** Aside from a refusal to recognize the breakaway Georgian provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, there was little evidence in Biden’s speech that the Obama Administration intends to adopt a tough line toward Russian aggression in its “Near Abroad” or attempts to bully and intimidate its neighbors in the Caucasus as well as Eastern Europe. Significantly, Biden made no mention of U.S. support for Georgian and Ukrainian membership in the NATO Membership Action Plan or Russia’s brutal invasion of Georgia last summer.

The willingness of the Obama team to bring Moscow into its negotiations over Third Site sets a dangerous precedent and is a clear signal that the Russians may be given a bigger say over NATO expansion plans. As Biden put it in his speech, “the last few years have seen a dangerous drift in relations between Russia and the members of our Alliance—it is time to reset the button and to revisit the many areas where we can and should work together.” Strategically, it would be both naïve and risky for the new Administration to turn a blind eye toward an increasingly belligerent and nationalist Moscow that is actively flexing its muscles in Europe and across the globe.

**NATO.** While reiterating the importance of the NATO alliance and the need for its renewal in the 21st century, the Vice President supports policies that will undermine the organization and weaken American influence within it. In Munich, Biden backed the full reintegration of France into “NATO structures,” and French officers are reportedly in

line to take two senior alliance command positions: Allied Command Transformation and Joint Command Lisbon.<sup>3</sup> Biden also made it clear in his Munich address that the United States will “support the further strengthening of European defense, an increased role for the European Union in preserving peace and security, (and) a fundamentally stronger NATO-EU partnership.”

These changes would give Paris (and its key ally Berlin) an extraordinary degree of power and influence within the organization, out of all proportion to its minimal military role in alliance operations. Such a move would ultimately shift power away from Washington and London and toward continental Europe, undoubtedly paving the way for the development of a Franco-German driven European Union defense identity within NATO.

**Afghanistan.** Biden identified the war in Afghanistan as a top foreign policy priority for the Obama Administration, calling for close cooperation with America’s allies in Europe as well as the government of Pakistan. The Vice President, however, avoided the thorny issue of many European nations’ failure to pull their weight in the conflict, an oversight that projected weakness and an unwillingness to challenge European complacency and indifference.

Despite all the fashionable rhetoric in European capitals about Iraq being a distraction to the war against the Taliban, on the battlefields of Afghanistan over two-thirds of the more than 50,000 troops serving as part of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force are from the English-speaking countries of the U.S., U.K., Canada, and Australia. These nations have also taken 85 percent of the casualties. Britain has more troops (8,900) in the country than all the other major European Union powers combined, many of which, like Germany, cower under dozens of “caveats” aimed at keeping their soldiers out of harm’s way.

1. Vice President Joseph R. Biden, Speech at the 45th Munich Security Conference, February 7, 2009, at [http://www.securityconference.de/konferenzen/rede.php?menu\\_2009=&menu\\_konferenzen=&sprache=en&id=238&](http://www.securityconference.de/konferenzen/rede.php?menu_2009=&menu_konferenzen=&sprache=en&id=238&) (February 8, 2009).
2. Ian Traynor, “Obama Administration Offers Olive Branch to Russia and Iran,” *The Guardian*, February 7, 2009, at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/feb/07/us-russia-iran-biden-obama> (February 8, 2009).
3. Ben Hall and James Blitz, “Command Accord Presages French Return to Nato,” *Financial Times*, February 5, 2009, at: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/fbc2122a-f323-11dd-abe6-0000779fd2ac.html> (February 5, 2009).

**War on Terrorism.** Significantly absent from the Vice President's address was any reference to the war on terrorism or the need for the United States and its allies to be prepared for a long hard battle against Islamist terrorism. Biden spoke in soft terms of "a shared struggle against extremism" and of "a small number of violent extremists [who] are beyond the call of reason," as well as the need to seek with the Muslim world "a new way forward based on mutual interest and mutual respect." There was no indication given of the sheer scale of the global fight against al-Qaeda and its allies. Al-Qaeda is mentioned just once in Biden's speech, and only within the context of Afghanistan.

The Vice President also avoided directly mentioning terrorist attacks by Hamas against Israel. There were no words of support for Israel's recent offensive against Hamas in Gaza, suggesting a significant shift away from open support for Israel by the new U.S. Administration.

Biden also chose to ignore altogether the extraordinary success of U.S. counterterrorism operations in Iraq through the surge and the huge improvement in security in the previously war-torn country that enabled the overwhelmingly peaceful Iraqi provincial elections to take place at the end of January.

**A Celebration of Soft Power.** Vice President Biden delivered what was in essence a quintessentially European-style speech on German soil. It was

an address that tried to be all things to all people, lacking in concrete policy prescriptions and cloaked in vague statements designed to cause minimal offense in foreign capitals, including those of America's worst enemies. Biden's address was above all a celebration of "soft power," cynically re-branded by the Obama Administration as "smart power."

American leadership is not a popularity contest but the hard-nosed projection of U.S. interests. Rather than projecting strength and decisiveness internationally, the new Administration's approach to foreign policy appears muddled and incoherent. Biden's words revealed a foreign policy with a dangerously soft underbelly, one that will quickly be exploited by America's opponents on the world stage.

Washington must stand up to the Iranian nuclear threat, the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the global menace of al-Qaeda, and Russian intimidation in Europe with strength, resolve, and conviction. A foreign policy capable of meeting such challenges must include a willingness to wield maximum force where necessary, deploy a comprehensive missile shield in Europe, and increase military spending in the defense of the United States and the free world.

—Nile Gardiner, Ph.D., is Director of the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.