



Joe Biden keeps snubbing Netanyahu – here's why

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President Joe Biden's state dinner for Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, a Hindu nationalist who is cracking down on opposition leaders, journalists and minorities, points up the compromises presidents make as they balance America's security needs with its desire to promote freedom and democracy around the world.

Biden seeks closer U.S. ties with India, which recently became the world's most populous country, as a counterweight to an expansionist China, which is challenging U.S. power and influence in the Pacific and beyond.

It's an old story. Since World War II, presidents have met with many of the world's leading autocrats when they thought U.S. security exigencies outweighed human rights concerns. FDR and Truman met with Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin to help win the war and design the post-war world; Nixon met with Chinese leader Mao Zedong to nourish a Sino-American partnership to offset Soviet power; Carter met with Iran's Shah and Saudi Arabia's King Fahd to maintain key regional ties; and Reagan met with Chinese Premier Zhao Ziyang, Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos and Zimbabwean strongman Robert Mugabe as part of his overarching Cold War strategy.

Along with Modi, Biden has met with (among others) China's increasingly authoritarian leader Xi Jinping, Russian strongman Vladimir Putin and Saudi Arabia's human rights-abusing Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS).

All of which raises a question: Why won't Biden meet with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu?

To be sure, Israel is experiencing the most tumultuous period at home in its 75-year history, with the country deeply divided, hundreds of thousands protesting in the streets and mayhem in the West Bank. That certainly would complicate the atmospherics around a bilateral meeting (though not more than the complications spurred by Biden's meetings with Modi, Xi, Putin and MBS).

Netanyahu, an increasingly controversial and polarizing figure at home and abroad, heads a rightwing coalition that remains committed to a judicial overhaul that could threaten the nation's vibrant democracy. Meanwhile, Israeli settlers and Palestinians are engaged in a violent and sometimes murderous tit-for-tat in the West Bank, and key coalition members scoff at concerns over Palestinian victims.

Nevertheless, Biden's refusal to invite Netanyahu to the White House remains mystifying. What can it be about?

It can't be about human rights, because Israeli human rights violations pale in comparison to those of the autocrats with whom Biden has already met.

Xi is overseeing atrocities that include torture, rape, forced labor and sterilization against more than 1 million Muslim Uyghurs in the country's northwest region. Putin launched a brutal war to subjugate Ukraine in which his soldiers are targeting, killing, raping and torturing Ukrainians while sending hundreds of their children to Russia.

MBS directed the assassination and dismemberment of Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi. His government executes minors, treats women as second-class citizens and targets dissidents at home and abroad. And, as noted above, Modi is striking out against political opponents, journalists and minorities.

It can't be about major strategic differences, because Washington and Jerusalem remain aligned on key regional goals (if not the means of reaching them).

Both want to contain Iran's advancing nuclear and related ballistic missile programs, and both want to achieve the potential regional game-changer of Saudi-Israeli peace.

It can't be about Israeli territorial infringements, because Israeli settlements that might infringe on a future Palestinian state pale in comparison to the territorial conquests or aspirations of at least Xi and Putin.

Under Xi, China is threatening to take Taiwan by force, exchanging gunfire with India along their disputed border, conducting military exercises to stimulate attacks against Japan's Nansei Islands and building and militarizing more than a half-dozen islands in disputed areas of the South China Sea.

Under Putin, Russia invaded Georgia in 2008 and still occupies about 20 percent of that country. He is cutting those Russian-controlled areas off from the rest of the country. Meanwhile, Putin seized and annexed Crimea in 2014, encouraged the activities of Russian-backed separatists in Ukraine's east and, even in the midst of military setbacks and threats to his rule, continues his conquest of Ukraine.

And it can't be about personal animus toward Netanyahu, because he's surely met with more difficult leaders.

Biden has served as a foreign policy-minded senator, vice president and president now for the last half-century. He's traveled the world many times over and, whether overseas or at home, has met with scores if not hundreds of foreign leaders. Some were warm and easygoing, but at least as many surely were mean, nasty and deceitful enough to make Israel's prime minister seem charming by comparison.

So, why won't he invite Netanyahu to the White House?

Here's a guess: Biden and his team are seized by the same longstanding affliction as the broader Western foreign policymaking intelligentsia, which is to hold Israel to a higher standard of moral purity than any other nation on earth.

That will do nothing but complicate U.S.-Israeli relations, thrill Israel's adversaries and tempt Jerusalem to seek questionable alliances elsewhere — as we already see with Netanyahu's planned visit to China.

On this one, Biden should get off his diplomatic high horse. If he can meet with Xi, Putin, MBS and Modi, he can meet with Netanyahu, the leader of America's closest and most reliable Middle East ally.