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A Credible Grand Strategy

The Urgent Need to Set Priorities

By Christopher Preble

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The Stimson Center promotes international security and shared prosperity through applied research and independent analysis, global engagement, and policy innovation.

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Christopher Preble

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A Credible Grand Strategy

The Urgent Need to Set Priorities

It is time for the United States to rethink how it engages with the rest of the world.

By Christopher Preble

This paper documents *why* U.S. foreign policy should change, and then maps out how it can be done.

It starts from the realization that the era of U.S. global dominance is over. The ends and means of U.S. foreign policy are not aligned; recalibration must start with setting priorities. The United States alone cannot maintain peace and security in every corner of the globe; it should share responsibility with others.

Given the United States' limited resources, policymakers should recognize that the core goals of U.S. foreign policy—preserving Americans' security, prosperity, and freedom—do not rely on sustaining overwhelming U.S. military power in all places, and at all times. Different circumstances, including new constraints on U.S. power, cry out for new approaches.

Specifically, the United States should rebalance its foreign-policy toolkit by elevating diplomacy, trade, and cultural exchanges, and by deemphasizing the use of force and coercion. In a world of many capable actors, U.S. policymakers should work with allies and partners to redistribute defense burdens and costs, focus on reducing the risk of conflict, eliminate barriers to commerce, and restore the United States' reputation as a magnet for the world's talent.

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Executive Summary

The era of U.S. global dominance is over. The last decade has demonstrated the grievous mismatch between U.S. ends and means. The failures in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya show the limits of U.S. military power, while the neglect of the homeland has exacerbated political and social divides. More recently, Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine, China's growing assertiveness, and renewed conflict in the Middle East are all stark reminders that the United States alone cannot maintain peace and security in every corner of the globe; it must share the burden with other states. Global challenges cry out for global solutions.

Evidence of the need for change is abundant. Attempts to maintain U.S. primacy will fail—and erode America's standing and effectiveness on the world stage. Leadership begins with getting the United States' own house in order.

What follows is a wholesale reimagining of U.S. national security strategy aligned to today's world, not an idealized past. This paper begins by establishing *the need to change course*. Rather than attempting to maintain U.S. dominance, the United States must, above all else, set priorities, with a laser focus on the overarching goals of security, prosperity, and freedom for the American people. In an era of constrained federal budgets and limited public support for ambitious foreign policies that would draw resources away from domestic needs, U.S. policymakers should rethink which national security policies must continue as before, which should be modified, and which should be abandoned in favor of different policies suited to the present era.

Having established the flaws with the dominant strategic paradigm of the last three decades, this paper then identifies ways to *achieve Washington's core objectives while minimizing costs and risks*. Failing to set priorities and continuing to ignore persistent economic deficits and looming debt could drive down confidence in the U.S. dollar and undermine the true sources of American power and influence: diplomacy and economic power. Ignoring public sentiment vis-à-vis foreign policy would also expand the already yawning gap between the American people and the elites that purport to represent their interests and be their advocates.

The greatest danger of all, however, is the return of a great-power war. This strategy paper rejects the nature of both the Trump and Biden administrations' approach to managing competition with China, including by restricting Chinese access to certain U.S. and global markets, and blocking certain U.S. investments in China. This strategy has already led to retaliatory moves by Beijing. Such tit-for-tat measures can easily escalate, potentially creating severe economic consequences, or even military confrontation. Though the current climate in both Beijing and Washington is unlikely to produce a policy shift, long-term U.S. interests would be better served by finding ways to lower tensions and cooperate despite deep differences. Such an approach would pave the way for addressing climate change, poverty, disease, and other global challenges.

A refusal to choose among competing goals increases the risk that minor disputes will escalate into wider conflict. Prioritization is essential here as well. By differentiating vital interests from peripheral ones, and demonstrating a capacity and willingness to compromise, U.S. policymakers can establish a foundation conducive to Americans' prosperity and security, rather than one tending toward overreach and ruin. The forward-leaning paradigm spelled out here differentiates between the ways of the past and new approaches suited to the current era. It is intended to help policymakers adapt their thinking and better assess the costs and risks of various policy options (see Table 1).

Table 1: Old Think vs. New Think

Issue	Old Think	New Think
Strategic paradigm	Liberal hegemony; United States as the indispensable nation.	Humility and restraint; the United States must work with others on big global challenges.
Hard choices	Avoid them—doing so is essential to maintaining U.S. dominance in all regions, at all times.	Inevitable—crafting a credible strategy entails reconciling ends, ways, and means as the United States faces challenges at home and probable slower economic growth. Strategists must prioritize.
U.S. economic power	Even as the relative weight of U.S. economic power lessens, U.S.-dollar dominance provides leverage over others.	Economic power is vast but limited, and the U.S. economic position is fragile and susceptible to being undermined by both hubris (overuse) and neglect (from internal decay and political paralysis).
U.S. military superiority	The lynchpin of global peace and prosperity.	A blunt instrument that often crowds out more effective instruments of American power.
China	The preeminent challenger that must be defeated at all costs.	A global powerhouse. Avoiding a catastrophic war with China is a primary objective of this strategy. U.S. policy should focus on finding areas of convergence. A weak/failing China benefits no one.
Russia	An irreconcilable global menace.	An opportunistic spoiler. Although it will be impossible to restore constructive relations as long as Vladimir Putin rules Russia, the medium- to long-term aim of U.S. policy should be to draw Russia back from a de facto alliance with China and encourage Russia's eventual integration into the European security order.

Given the United States' limited resources, policymakers should work to construct a new global compact that does not rely on sustaining overwhelming U.S. power in all places, and at all times. They should reimagine U.S. power in a multipolar world of many capable actors and work with allies and partners to redistribute defense burdens and costs. Policymakers should focus on reducing the risk of conflict and eliminating barriers to commerce. This strategy calls for rebalancing the U.S.-foreign-policy toolkit by elevating diplomacy, trade, and cultural exchanges, and by deemphasizing the use of force and coercion. Specifically, the United States should:

Invest in Diplomacy, Including Public Diplomacy

For most of American history, U.S. leaders relied on diplomacy to extend U.S. influence and secure vital U.S. interests. In the latter half of the 20th century, however, diplomacy was often supplanted by U.S. military power. If diplomacy is to again become a leading tool for advancing U.S. interests in an increasingly complex world, the State Department needs to be fully resourced. Consistent and reliable two-way communication between government agencies and the public is critical to establishing a broad

and durable consensus on foreign affairs. Absent sufficient outreach to the public, U.S. foreign policy will remain a “black box” to most Americans.

Since 1999, the United States has lacked a central clearinghouse to coordinate messages across all government agencies, a role formerly filled by the United States Information Agency (USIA). Person-to-person and cultural exchanges have also dwindled. Although U.S. politics and policies are not always popular in other countries, U.S. science and culture usually are. And the benefits flow in both directions. Bringing scientists, artists, and performers to the United States from abroad helps Americans to get to know others from diverse backgrounds.

Fine-Tune U.S. Economic Power for Greater Influence

This strategy also emphasizes the importance of trade, both to advance U.S. competitiveness and prosperity and because trade is conducive to peace. For the United States to retain its role as a leader in the digital economy, Washington needs to define rules and regulations on data services to ensure interoperability and prevent the growth of hidden sources of protectionism as well as economic and trade fragmentation. At the same time, U.S. policymakers should anticipate domestic skepticism of trade agreements and explain to the American people that jobs in a dynamic economy are more likely to disappear due to technology and innovation than to be outsourced to other countries. Erecting barriers to trade would raise the cost of goods and place other stresses on the economy that could drive down the demand for labor.

The alternative of “managed competition,” in which parties to trade agreements commit to certain purchases from certain suppliers, risks reducing global growth and productivity, particularly in new areas for trade such as e-commerce and digital services. Currently, the three key global digital actors—China, the European Union (EU), and the United States—appear to be evolving into separate and not entirely compatible digital regimes, a potential harbinger of a global economy fragmenting into competing blocs.

Moreover, U.S. policy should avoid unnecessary or arbitrary restrictions on trade. Sanctions should remain part of the U.S. policy arsenal, but emerging trends are likely to reduce their effectiveness. Overuse or misuse of sanctions may reveal U.S. impotence, rather than U.S. power.

Become a Magnet for the World’s Talent

The world’s talent has long sought to come to the United States to be educated, find employment, and raise families. The United States can often have the pick of the highly skilled, an increasingly valuable asset as countries in Europe and Asia are aging quickly and also competing for the best and brightest. Nevertheless, U.S. universities could forfeit their advantage—and billions of dollars—if they are forced to turn away foreign students. Such a move would also hurt U.S. innovation because a majority of new startups are begun by immigrants, many of whom are motivated to come to the United States in order to get a high-quality education. To be sure, immigration is a contentious issue, but it bears on how the United States is seen around the world and is a source of power now and in the future. Achieving consensus on a way forward is important to ensuring the continuation of a young, skilled population, which is critical for economic vibrancy and economic growth.

Finding a Middle Path

This strategy has the same nominal objectives as the one pursued since the end of the Cold War: namely, advancing U.S. security, and preserving Americans' prosperity and freedom. But it adopts very different methods to achieve these ends. It proposes finding a middle path between post-Cold War primacy and raise-the-drawbridge isolationism. It aims to close the gap between the internationalists and nationalists, solidifying a consensus on protecting vital U.S. interests.

The stay-the-course advocates, in continuing to pursue a confrontational strategy underpinned by the use of force or coercion and the presumption of U.S. military primacy, ignore the risk of feeding the populists' case for U.S. global disengagement. Trumpian populism gained traction, in part, because of the growing disaffection with the exorbitant costs of America's seemingly interminable conflicts and owing to a sense that U.S. allies and partners were not bearing their fair share.

American policymakers, and U.S. foreign policy generally, should exert leadership more effectively, through instruments that have served American interests in the past. Certainly, U.S. military muscle was important for deterrence during the Cold War, for example. The true test of U.S. power, however, was its ability to project a superior way of life to that on offer by the Soviets and thereby bring the struggle between capitalism and communism to a peaceful end. The United States benefited greatly from not having to fight a war with the likelihood of heavy casualties and extensive physical devastation.

In recent years, U.S. foreign policy has struggled to set priorities or reconsider goals. Its defenders are often dismissive of the attempt to do so. But a failure to choose risks catastrophe—a decisive and irreparable turn away from global engagement at home and an increased likelihood of major conflict abroad. A credible and sustainable grand strategy must align means and ends. The United States can do more, and more effectively, by prioritizing U.S. strategic objectives, shifting responsibilities to allies and partners, and re-balancing away from military solutions in favor of diplomacy and the more effective use of economic power.

A New Domestic and Global Context Demands New Strategic Objectives

The United States has a long history of successfully adapting its grand strategies to achieve its core foreign policy goals of security, prosperity, and freedom for the American people—and always under changing domestic and international circumstances. The United States lacked, for example, substantial military capacity for much of its history but was highly imaginative in using its available means—mainly diplomacy—to punch above its weight in the global arena. Today, the United States possesses a vast and mighty military, but policymakers have allowed diplomatic tools to atrophy. Meanwhile, despite massive Pentagon spending, that U.S. military has struggled over the last quarter century to bring conflicts to a favorable end.

Strategic objectives have also shifted with the times. Today's world little resembles even the period at the end of the Cold War, let alone 1945 when U.S. economic power was at its height. From the post-World-War-II bipolarity of a world divided between the United States and the Soviet Union, to the post-Cold War unipolarity in which the United States seemed nearly omnipotent, the world has become multipolar.¹ No single state dominates the planet, and even nonstate actors are assuming some of the roles formerly reserved for nation-states. China's economy might not surpass the U.S. economy in market value in this decade—or ever. But behind China is a rapidly rising India, and, over a longer time horizon, Indonesia, Brazil, South Africa, and Nigeria. Meanwhile, a wide array of middle powers, including many wealthy and stable U.S. allies like France, Germany, Japan, and the United Kingdom are playing vital regional—and in some cases global—roles.²

Russia's brutal war of aggression against Ukraine has the potential to transform Europe's approach to its own security, as well as to the United States. This process was already in train before February 2022. Although Europe lags behind the United States in military capabilities, the EU functions as a unitary actor on issues such as trade, economic competition, and technology regulation and increasingly defies or resists U.S. pressure to conform, including, for example, with respect to trade with China.

This is indicative of a broader trend. For the first time in modern history, international relations have become democratized with many non-Western countries taking on more responsibilities in their respective regions—and globally. Many of these rising states share some but not all Western values. Most wish to have good relations with more than just one major power.

Once again, the United States needs to adapt its strategy to a different geopolitical context. With the rise of other non-Western powers, U.S. dominance is no longer widely accepted. Moreover, while the United States aimed to maintain its dominant global position after the end of the Cold War, what the political scientist Samuel Huntington called “primacy,” it was never obvious that doing so was necessary to defend

core U.S. interests.³ More to the point, even if primacy was achievable immediately following the end of the Cold War, it certainly is not in 2024, when the U.S. share of global power is declining and that of other countries is rising.⁴

Advocates of primacy struggle to set priorities or reconsider goals—and are often dismissive of the attempt to do so.⁵ But ignoring obvious global trends risks causing a catastrophe. History is littered with examples of empires that crashed because of overreach. It would be evidence of enormous hubris if Americans believed the United States was immune to the forces that have brought down other great powers. Renewal, not a stubborn commitment to a strategy from an earlier era, is key if the United States wants to remain a prime mover in the global system. Common sense demands humility and a willingness to take others' interests seriously. It is a mistake to assume that every actor that does not accept U.S. hegemonic leadership is an enemy that should be put in its place. For most of its history, the United States thrived in a world that it did not dominate.

The United States will remain a great power, but the emergence of many other capable actors requires a new approach to U.S. global engagement.

In making primacy a God-given right, and a goal that should and must be achieved and maintained at all costs, U.S. officials are setting themselves up for eventual failure. Strategy documents published since the end of the Cold War tend to assume that the United States *can* and *must* maintain its dominant position in all key regions.⁶ Neither of these assumptions is true. The United States will undoubtedly remain a great power—probably even the first among equals in many areas—but the emergence of many other capable actors, what journalist Fareed Zakaria has called “the rise of the rest,” requires a different approach than what has been employed for most of the last three decades.

Nevertheless, the impulse to stay the course—or even double down on primacy—remains strong. Russia's brutal war of aggression against Ukraine has prompted calls for a return to the U.S. unipolarity that existed after the collapse of the Soviet Union. What is at stake, primacy advocates say, is nothing less than preserving the post-World-War-II global order, which Russia's war threatens to upend. If Russia is not severely punished, China might be encouraged to think that an invasion of Taiwan would be worth the costs and risks.⁷ The whole world is watching, and Americans have no choice but to step into the breach, help Ukraine to defeat Russia, and deter China. “In the absence of American leadership,” writes the Brookings Institution's Robert Kagan, the world will trend inexorably toward “dictatorship and continual great-power conflict.”⁸

President Biden's *National Security Strategy*, released in October 2022, reflects these sentiments, asserting “the need for American leadership is as great as it has ever been.” In his letter introducing the strategy, Biden committed America to a wildly ambitious agenda to “support every country, regardless of size or strength, in exercising the freedom to make choices that serve their interests.”⁹ In an Oval Office address to the nation on October 19, 2023, in which he made the case for additional aid to Ukraine and Israel, Biden asserted, “America is a beacon to the world, still” and “the indispensable nation...And there is nothing, nothing beyond our capacity.”¹⁰

For the United States to become the type of global leader that seeks consensus and compromise, and that does not presume to set the terms for others to follow, will clearly require a radical change in mindset. But few Americans appreciate how flexible U.S. foreign policy strategy and tactics have been, even if the goals have remained the same. Most have never known a world in which the United States was not the

clear-cut leader and still revel in the United States' stupendous achievements in defeating fascism and communism. To the extent that U.S. foreign policy has changed during the last 50 years, it has tended to become more, rather than less, ambitious.¹¹

This strategy is built on the understanding that the United States, along with the rest of the world, has been in constant flux. In designing a strategy, U.S. policymakers should embrace that change and welcome contributions to global peace and security from many capable actors, even if those actors are not taking direction from Washington, DC. In short, U.S. grand strategy should be adapted to a current and future world, not an idealized past.

Strategists should first examine U.S. internal priorities and then assess the evolving global environment. Without a strong domestic foundation, any foreign policy will fail. This strategy paper highlights the constraints and opportunities for the United States while considering different means and ways to ensure the essential goals of U.S. foreign policy can be met.

The Constraints on U.S. Power

This strategy begins with a careful look at constraints, the heaviest of which is the domestic political context and how that affects the United States' ability to craft a credible and consistent foreign policy that advances the interests of the American people.

To be sure, this is not a new problem. The idea that politics in the United States stops at the water's edge is mostly a myth. But partisanship and severe polarization has derailed nearly every recent attempt to reform U.S. domestic policy, from immigration to the debt. Foreign policy is hardly immune to these pressures. Elected officials will struggle to find common ground.

For example, drawing on results from its 2023 Survey of Public Opinion on Foreign Policy, the Chicago Council reported that Democrats and Republicans have different foreign policy priorities and different ideas about the best ways to achieve their respective goals. According to the Chicago Council's polling, "Republicans (82 percent) are far more likely than Democrats (49 percent) or Independents (55 percent) to emphasize military strength," and six out of ten Republicans would "prioritize the United States being a leader in manufacturing (62 percent)" versus just 44 percent of Independents and 41 percent of Democrats who agree.¹²

Among Democrats, on the other hand, nearly eight in ten would "prioritize combating climate change (79 percent), [and] human rights (78 percent)" and Democrats "are also distinctly more likely to say that it is very important for the United States to be a world leader in humanitarian assistance (56 percent)." Only 28 percent of Republicans agree.¹³

With respect to the nature of America's global role, the Chicago Council notes that 57 percent of all Americans prefer that the United States "take an active part in world affairs" while over four in ten (42 percent) "say it would be best to stay out." The result, the Council explained, "continues a steady decline in support for international engagement in recent years and is among one of the lowest levels of support recorded in the 49-year history of the Chicago Council Survey."¹⁴ An Associated Press-National

Opinion Research Center (AP/NORC) poll taken in November 2023 found similar results: 45 percent of all respondents wanted the United States to take “a less active role in solving the world’s problems,” whereas fewer than one in five (18 percent) would have the United States take “a more active role.”¹⁵

The perception of a decisive turn against global engagement might derive from how different Americans interpret the phrase “an active role.” In fact, many Americans agree that the United States should engage with the rest of the world—but not assume most of the burdens of managing it. Republicans and some Independents are particularly concerned about collective security. Although “a plurality of Americans (42 percent) want the United States to maintain its level of engagement in international organizations on issues of collective security,” according to a poll taken by the Eurasia Group Foundation (EGF), 34 percent of Republicans and 37 percent of Independents favor less engagement; 37 percent of Democrats favor more.¹⁶ This was more starkly highlighted in the Chicago Council’s latest polls. “Republicans, in particular,” the Council noted, “have grown more doubtful of the value of continued U.S. engagement overseas. For the first time in nearly 50 years. . . a majority of Republicans (53 percent) think the United States should stay out of world affairs rather than play an active part.”¹⁷

LACKLUSTER SUPPORT FOR PRIMACY

These findings are particularly pertinent to the role of the military in U.S. foreign policy. For decades, U.S. foreign policy elites have often viewed the use of force and coercion as the sine qua non of America’s influence. Foreign policy pundits have been most critical of U.S. presidents when they have been unwilling to use force. This elite agreement extends to funding the military. Passing large Pentagon budgets is the one thing on which Republicans and Democrats seem to agree. Even opponents of more Pentagon spending admit there is not much debate on the matter—or, when there is, they lose. “That sets the tone for more, more, more for the military,” explained Rep. John Garamendi (D-CA), a member of the House Armed Services Committee.¹⁸ In this environment on Capitol Hill and throughout Washington, DC, the view prevails that U.S. military dominance must be maintained in order for the United States to continue to be safe and prosperous at home and a leader globally.

The prospects for mobilizing public support for considerably higher Pentagon budgets in the future are particularly dim.

Many Americans beyond the Beltway are increasingly skeptical of this claim, however. A mere 16 percent believe that the United States should spend more on its military, while 34 percent favor cutting the Pentagon’s budget. For the latter group, the top rationale for favoring less defense spending is the desire to see those funds reallocated to “domestic priorities.” And the prospects for mobilizing public support for considerably higher Pentagon budgets in the future are particularly dim. Americans aged 18–29 are nearly twice as likely to support cutting military spending as those over 65 (43 percent to 23 percent).¹⁹

As expected, party affiliation matters, too. Democrats and Republicans sharply disagree over the wisdom or folly of higher military spending, and whether we use it too much, or too little. “Twice as many Independents and Democrats support a decrease in the defense budget as an increase,” EGF reported in October 2023, whereas “Republicans are about evenly split” between wanting to send more or less money to the Pentagon.²⁰

Partisan differences are also revealed in the single largest foreign policy expenditure in 2022 and 2023: aid to Ukraine. In this case, however, Republicans want to spend less. A poll taken in November 2023, for example, found 59 percent of Republicans believe that the United States is spending too much on Ukraine aid, whereas nearly half of Democrats said that Ukraine is receiving the right amount. Overall, only 14 percent of respondents thought that the United States is providing too little support to Ukraine.²¹

Supporters of an ambitious U.S. foreign policy, and the costly forward-deployed military forces necessary to execute such a strategy, therefore, are sailing into strong headwinds. They believe that the United States must spend far more on the military than it does today—and are confident that the country can do so without sacrificing necessary investments at home or threatening the overall health of the U.S. economy.²² At times, the Biden administration seems to agree, calling for higher military spending even as it also plans to spend hundreds of billions of dollars on everything from physical infrastructure to green energy.

The United States has certainly spent more on its military as a share of its economy in the past. Whereas military spending constituted the lion's share of U.S. federal government expenditures before the Great Society programs of the 1960s, it comprises less than 20 percent of all such spending today. That also means, however, that any additional increment of Pentagon spending must now cut into broadly popular domestic programs—or be offset by higher revenues. Neither seems likely.

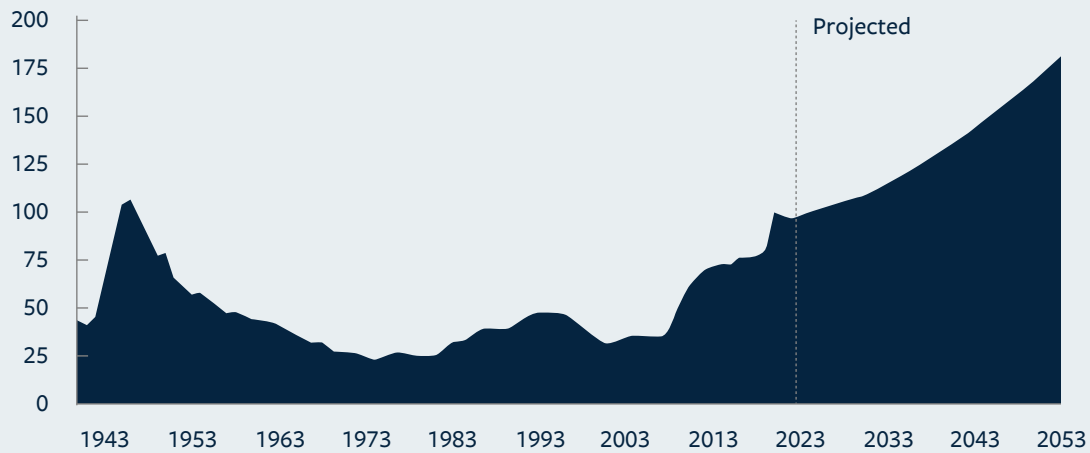
PERSISTENT DEFICITS AND LOOMING DEBT

Of course, the United States could just go deeper into debt. That, too, carries risks. During the Cold-War-era, U.S. military spending to contain and deter the Soviet Union was mostly paid for by current taxes. Large and persistent federal budget deficits were rare, and total public debt as a percentage of GDP averaged 37.6 percent of GDP between 1970 and 1990. In contrast, the average debt-to-GDP since the second quarter of 2008 is 98.3 percent and has hovered at or above 100 percent of GDP since 2012. And the situation has mostly gotten worse in the last few years. In the last three quarters of 2022, for example, the U.S. debt-to-GDP ratio averaged 119.2 percent, and although the first quarter of 2023 saw a decrease to 117.3 percent, the following two quarters saw the increase return with 119.5 percent and 120.0 percent, respectively.²³

U.S. debt levels will soon rival those at the end of World War II and over the longer term will reach unprecedented levels absent increased revenues (see Figure 1). In August 2023, the Congressional Budget Office reported that the federal budget deficit in the first 10 months of the fiscal year was \$1.6 trillion, more than twice the shortfall from the same 10-month-period in the previous year.²⁴

The true scale and significance of the U.S. fiscal imbalance remains hotly contested. Pro-spending economists once pointed to low inflation and low interest rates to refute the claim that debt levels are unsustainable. But inflation worries now dominate public perceptions of the state of the U.S. economy. In a bid to tame rising prices, the Federal Reserve hiked interest rates seven times in 2022 and four times in 2023; the Federal Funds Rate as of this writing is as high as 5.5%, its highest level in 17 years. Inflation has cooled, but after the Kansas City Federal Reserve Bank's annual Economic Policy Symposium in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, in August 2023, Reuters reported, "Most officials do think the economy will slow, as tight policy and stringent credit are more fully felt and pandemic-era savings are spent down."²⁵

Figure 1: Federal Debt Held by the Public (Percentage of GDP)



Source: Congressional Budget Office, <https://www.cbo.gov/system/files/2023-06/59014-LTBO.pdf>

A rising current account deficit, increased protectionism, and a strong dollar could cause a crisis for those developed countries that have borrowed in dollars. The risk is even more serious for Washington if the United States is seen as printing its currency indiscriminately. Such a perception, coupled with the United States' accumulating high debt, might eventually sour investors on the dollar. The decision by the rating agency Fitch to downgrade U.S. debt from AAA to AA+, the first such downgrade since 2011, is a worrisome sign of investors' anxiety.²⁶

The U.S. federal government's deficit spending is enabled, in part, by the willingness of foreign bondholders to buy up this debt. Moreover, a leading purchaser of U.S. debt has been China—the very nation that much of this additional spending is aimed at thwarting. The entity that former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton once called “America’s banker” is unlikely to gladly finance a massive increase in U.S. military spending if relations continue to worsen and the risk of conflict grows more acute. And, indeed, China’s purchases of U.S. debt have fallen dramatically in the past decade.²⁷ A rational strategy would assume that Beijing will not, to paraphrase a famous dictum, help Washington to buy the rope with which it aims to hang China.

THE DECLINING UTILITY OF U.S. MILITARY POWER

Even if U.S. debt remains attractive to foreign buyers, thus allowing for massive increases in Pentagon spending, this strategy assumes that the United States' ability to maintain a decisive military advantage over any and all possible rivals will still attenuate. Attempting to restore this decisive advantage would almost certainly fail.

Meanwhile, most Americans believe in U.S. international engagement, but they prefer that the United States share the responsibilities and burdens of global leadership with other states. A Gallup poll taken in February 2023 found that only one in five Americans wants the United States to “take the leading

role in world affairs,” while 45 percent favor “a major role but not the leading role.” Taken together, the percentage of Americans favoring a leading or major U.S. role has been mostly falling for the last two decades, down from a high of 79 percent in 2003.²⁸ This strategy takes account of these facts, recognizing that there is little public support for attempting to dominate the planet militarily, but there might be support for continued active global engagement. Absent a major and imminent threat to the U.S. homeland, however, Americans simply will not tolerate the levels of spending and taxes necessary for deterring all malign actors in all major regions simultaneously. Yet, that is the assumption upon which most strategies are constructed today.

Technological trends that privilege defense over offense allow U.S. allies and partners to defend themselves without relying on U.S. power.

Another assumption guiding this strategy pertains to the technological trends that privilege defense over offense. These very technologies have made it difficult for a military superpower like the United States to decisively defeat even small and weak adversaries, from Saddam Hussein loyalists in Iraq to the Taliban in Afghanistan. More recently, these technologies have enabled an outmanned and outgunned Ukraine to thwart Russia’s war aims. A strategic environment characterized by advanced sensor networks, robotics, and artificial intelligence (AI), as well as miniaturized explosives, greatly complicate the ability of America’s exquisite military platforms to penetrate and conduct offensive operations. However, many of these same technologies allow U.S. allies and partners to maintain a regional balance in their respective areas without relying on U.S. power-projection capabilities many thousands of miles away from the continental United States.²⁹

Finally, seeing U.S. power only through a static military lens has distorted many analysts’ perceptions of threats. Military tools have failed to protect the United States from a host of dangers. The obsession with jihadist terrorism after 9/11, for example, diverted attention and resources that might have been useful against the COVID-19 pandemic, or to avert the growing damage from climate change. Moreover, adversaries have resorted to asymmetric warfare, such as cyberattacks, against which traditional military tools—from ships and planes to infantry and artillery—are irrelevant.

In short, an overemphasis on great-power military competition could make the United States less protected against all these other threats. The further overmilitarization of U.S. foreign policy, effectively ignoring the lessons from two decades of inconclusive wars, would amount to doubling down on failure.

INTENSE COMPETITION FOR RESOURCES

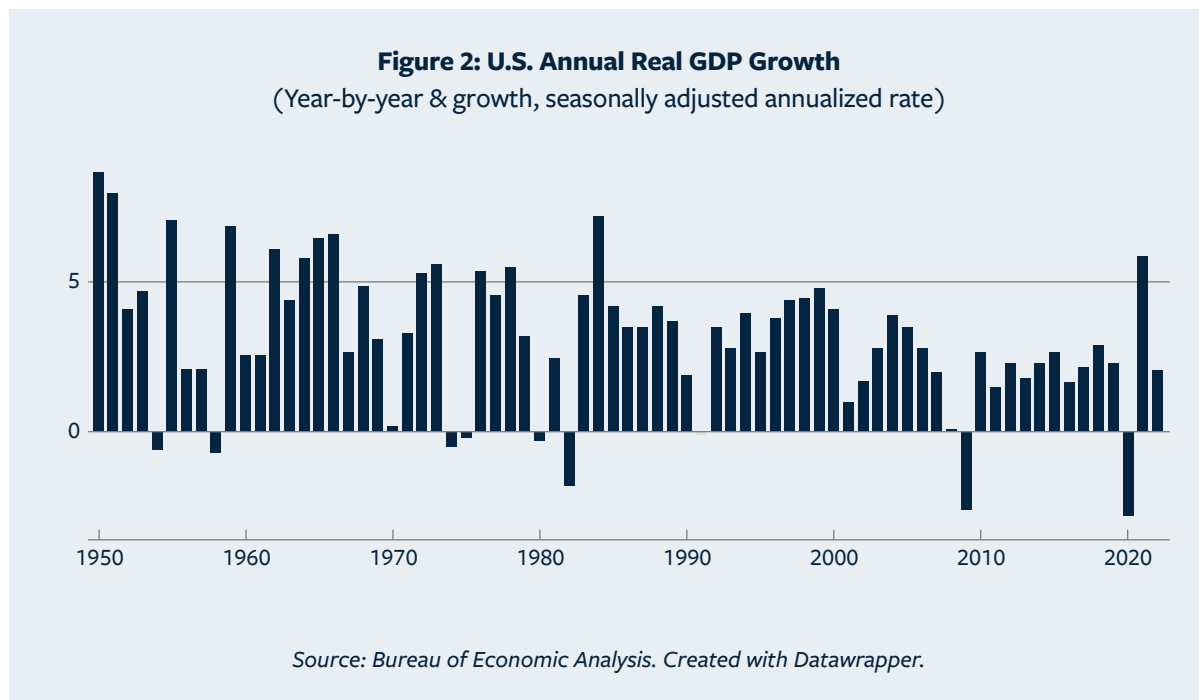
Some claim that public opinion on foreign policy is not a reliable guide to what is possible.³⁰ Nonetheless, grand strategy should take public sentiment into account—and especially the public’s willingness to expend additional sums to sustain the status quo. As political commentator Walter Lippmann famously advised in 1943, “Foreign policy consists in bringing into balance, with a comfortable surplus of power in reserve, the nation’s commitments and the nation’s power.”³¹ When he wrote that, the American people were accustomed to sacrifice and privation. The memory of the Great Depression was still fresh, and the United States was fighting a two-front war against both Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. Millions of American men had been drafted into the military, hundreds of thousands would be killed, and many more would be severely injured. Meanwhile, mobilization at home was upsetting long-established norms.

Rationing and wage-and-price controls had become the norm. Millions of American families planted victory gardens. And the top income tax rate was 94 percent. During World War II, there was broad and deep consensus behind what the United States was doing overseas and a willingness to sacrifice to see those two wars to a successful conclusion.

A grand strategy without a durable domestic foundation risks writing checks that the body politic will not cash.

Today, the situation could not be more different. A tiny fraction of Americans have served in the military. Tax rates are low, and political activity is mostly focused on lobbying for *more* domestic spending, including for countless programs that did not exist in 1943, from Medicare for seniors to student loan forgiveness for the youngest voters. A grand strategy without a durable domestic foundation risks writing checks that the body politic will not cash.

The competition for resources between foreign and domestic priorities is not always so stark. After World War II, living standards for a wide swathe of Americans rose, even as the U.S. military maintained a global presence unlike anything previously attempted. This was possible, in part, because the U.S. economy grew at an average annual rate of 5 percent in the 1960s. In contrast, in the 30 years since the end of the Cold War, growth has averaged barely 3 percent and a meager 2.3 percent since the financial crisis of 2008-2009 (see Figure 2). And although U.S. GDP has more than doubled since 1999, median household income, after adjusting for inflation, has grown by just 6.6 percent.³² The Congressional Budget Office projects that annual U.S. economic growth will average 1.8 percent between 2023 and 2033.³³



To be fair, no one can know for sure how the U.S. economy will perform in 2024, let alone 2034 or 2054. But no prudent foreign policy can be built on an assumption of unlimited resources. The U.S. economy is still the largest in the world by most measures, but growth has slowed, and the already-intense debates over how to allocate scarce taxpayer dollars will only increase. In particular, given urgent domestic priorities, additional resources are unlikely to be made available for much higher military spending. This, too, should be a reason for a cautious U.S. strategy that does not rely primarily on the use of force and coercion. Even if the U.S. economy grows faster than current projections expect it to, increased government revenues from the boosted growth could well end up being reinvested in greater domestic spending, including in a stronger safety net. Medicare and Social Security face bankruptcy in the early 2030s absent an infusion of additional revenues and, for many in Congress on both sides of the aisle, maintaining these programs is as vital as a strong defense.

Either way, intergenerational tension is likely. Retirees or those nearing retirement will clamor to retain the benefits they were promised, even as the relatively less-affluent young and middle-aged populations struggle to adapt to a global economy rushing headlong toward digitalization. Inequality has been and remains a debilitating worry, particularly the broadly held sense by various groups that “the deck is stacked against them.” Studies have shown that where individuals live and their parents’ incomes are more critical to success than their own abilities.³⁴

Americans who lack self-confidence about the future, and for whom the American dream seems out of reach, will not support an ambitious foreign policy that spends vast sums of money half a world away.

A highly skilled workforce is needed more than ever, and American society is becoming stratified according to differing levels of educational achievement. Even more, in the face of rapid technological change, many young people doubt they have the skills to compete. Their parents agree. A survey in March 2023 found that nearly four in five Americans (78 percent) were not confident that life for their children’s generation will be better than their own.³⁵ Americans who lack self-confidence about the future, and for whom the American dream seems out of reach, will not support an ambitious foreign policy that spends vast sums of money half a world away.

Unsurprisingly, given the country’s lackluster economic prospects, Americans’ sense of their own wellbeing has taken a hit. But it is not just about money; people also worry about their lives. Although much of the rest of the world started from a lower baseline, life expectancy has increased elsewhere, but peaked for Americans in 2014. This has occurred despite Americans spending more on healthcare relative to other advanced economies.³⁶

U.S. health challenges and declining life expectancy pre-dated COVID-19. Important research by economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton detailed how “mortality rates from drugs, alcohol, and suicide have been rising” for more than two decades.³⁷ A subsequent study conducted in 2022 confirmed that there has been “a progressive increase in deaths attributable to suicide, drug overdose, and alcohol-related liver disease in the USA in the last two decades.” These deaths “have sent USA life expectancy falling for several years, making it a public health concern.”³⁸ Indeed, one could say it is *national security* concern because such “deaths of despair” now claim far more American lives each year than all U.S. wars since Vietnam. A record number of people—at least 49,499—died by suicide in the United States in 2022.³⁹ Another 109,680 died from drug overdoses, also a record.⁴⁰

FIX THE HOMEFRONT

In short, untangling domestic problems is not a distraction from U.S. objectives abroad: It is a necessary precondition to any credible U.S. grand strategy. It also presents an opportunity. The past few years have been hard on U.S. standing in others' eyes. The publics in key U.S. allied countries no longer believe that the United States is a full democracy. A solid majority of Americans agree; they do not see the U.S. political system as a good model for others to follow.⁴¹

Many Americans are aware of these challenges, though they disagree about their causes. They sense that the country needs a course correction, but they disagree about how to execute one. This strategy paper does not pretend to have the answers, but it does call upon policymakers to dedicate time, attention, and resources—which might otherwise have been directed abroad—to addressing the American people's most urgent concerns here at home.

It is critically important to build an attractive model if others abroad are to be persuaded to follow the United States. Should Americans want others to become democracies, for example, then the United States must become a democracy worth emulating. Doing so will require a concerted effort on the part of the leaders of both major political parties to find common ground and reach compromises on contentious issues—from voting rights, to immigration, to spending and taxes. Of course, forging a new political consensus cannot occur overnight. Regrettably, many policymakers have a limited understanding of the importance of having a vibrant and inclusive democracy for U.S. standing and competitiveness in the world.

The great American strategist George Kennan understood this well. He once said that the United States would triumph over the Soviet Union in the Cold War as long as America was seen as “coping successfully with the problem of its internal life.”⁴² When Kennan wrote that, the American lifestyle was unquestionably aspired to by many around the world. Although that may still be true for some, others are unconvinced. The United States could do more to earn back the world's respect. Doing so begins with demonstrating a capacity for solving problems at home and taking seriously the interests of those abroad.⁴³

To be sure, the United States has many strengths, including the world's largest and most dynamic economy, a vibrant private sector, and a higher education system that remains the envy of the world. But few doubt that we can do better. Tapping into the United States' unique advantages will most likely require thoroughgoing political reforms.

Based on the experience of the last decade, it seems unwise to assume that this political breakthrough is in the offing. The more likely scenarios involve continued relative U.S. decline, which will, in turn, leave the United States progressively less able to obtain what it wants through economic or diplomatic pressure, and with a military instrument that struggles to achieve its objectives. This compels the United States and leading strategists to make difficult choices, work with allies and partners, and be willing to compromise where U.S. vital interests are not at stake.

Rapid Change in the Global Balance of Forces

So far, this strategy paper has mostly focused on how domestic political and economic challenges complicate U.S. global ambitions. But external constraints exist as well. The most important geopolitical development during the last three decades has been the rise of China. In the early post-Cold-War era, the reigning assumption was that China would integrate into a U.S.-led global order, slowly becoming a “responsible stakeholder.” But today, Deng Xiaoping’s guidance to other Chinese leaders to “Keep a low profile and bide our time” is a distant, fading memory. The shift likely began in the late 2000s and has accelerated under Xi Jinping. As the 2008 financial crisis unfolded, Beijing became convinced that the United States was in decline. Rising Chinese nationalism spurred aggressive behavior toward China’s neighbors and a desire to see the Middle Kingdom respected in the world. Few Chinese blame themselves for the deterioration in U.S.-China ties: In their eyes, the United States’ sense of its own decline is the root cause of the growing tensions in the bilateral relationship.⁴⁴

The U.S. and Chinese economies were closely intertwined in the 1990s, but now a potentially mirror effect is operating in the relationship. As the Chinese have grown more insistent that their country be treated as a great power, U.S. foreign policy elites have resisted the suggestion that the United States is in relative decline. In this context, Washington is searching to come up with simple ways to put the “dragon” back in its place, but China is a different animal than the Soviet Union, the last big geopolitical challenger that confronted the United States. For one thing, China, unlike the Soviet Union, is an economic powerhouse with extensive trade relations around the world—including with U.S. partners and allies who are anxious to preserve these mutually beneficial arrangements (see Figures 3 and 4).

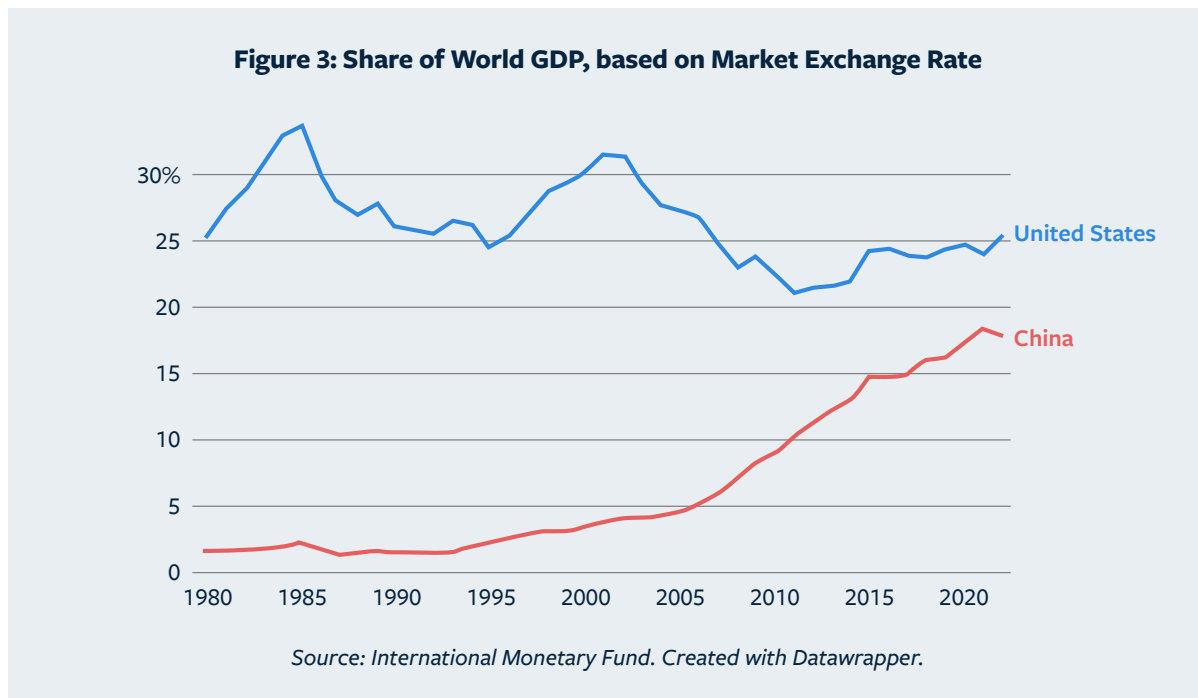
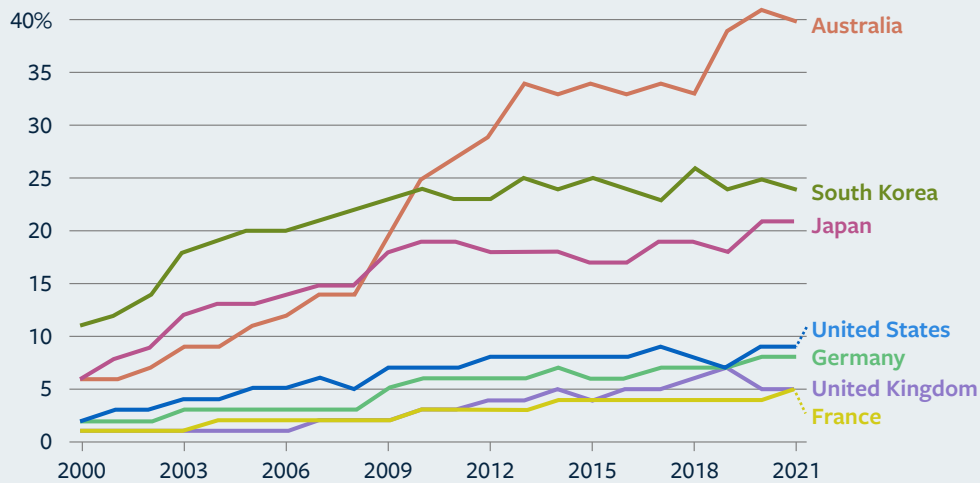


Figure 4: Market Value: Percentage of Exports Bound for China



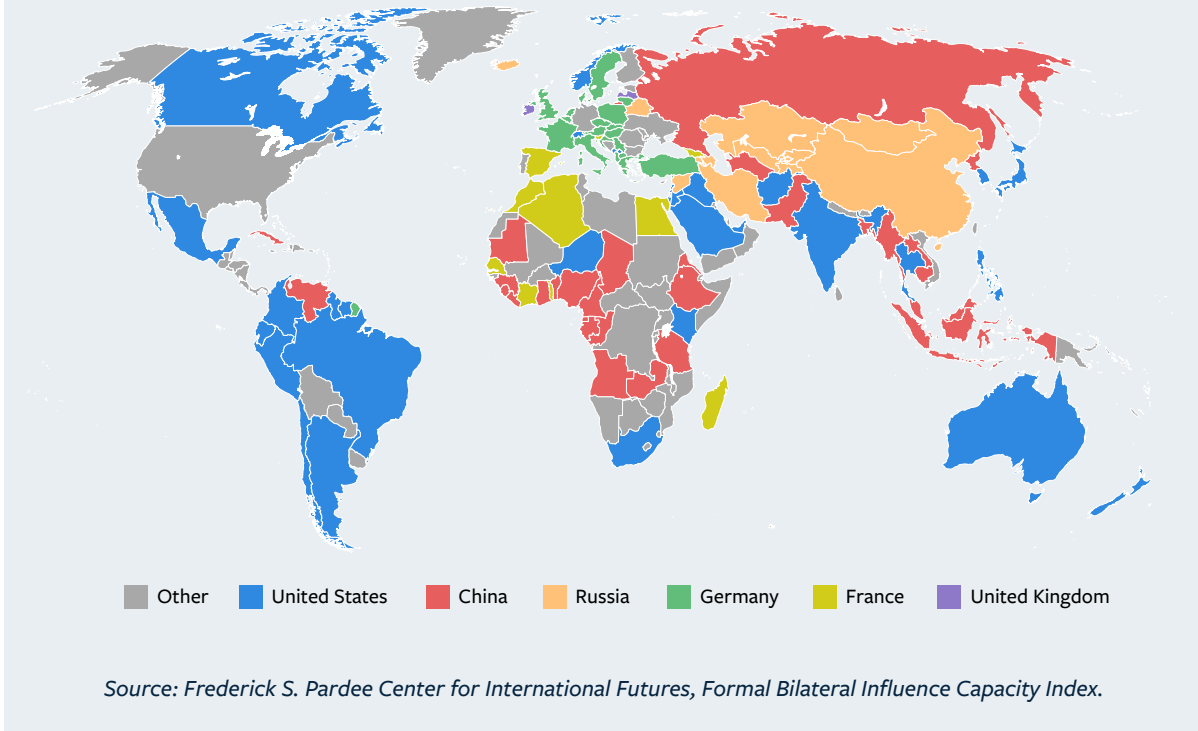
Source: The Observatory of Economic Complexity. Created with Datawrapper.

China faces many challenges, including a looming demographic crisis and the prospect of slowing growth. Its outdated economic model is pushing the country toward the middle-income trap. It did not recover quickly or well from the COVID-19 pandemic; Beijing's Zero-COVID policy was a disaster, and its vaccines are less effective than those used in most Western countries. It is sitting atop a massive real estate bubble that could easily precipitate a financial crisis far more serious than that of 2008-2009. A recent *Wall Street Journal* headline concluded "China's 40-Year Boom Is Over."⁴⁵

China continues to spend on its military, but the International Institute for Strategic Studies noted "growth in real terms . . . has stalled in the last five years."⁴⁶ Despite concerns that China is catching up with the United States militarily, it spends about half as much as a share of GDP, and less than a third in real terms.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, Beijing is using trade, development assistance, and diplomacy to spread China's influence, and the focus is increasingly global, not just in East Asia. China, for example, has displaced France and the United Kingdom as the top influencers in many African countries in just the past decade (see Figure 5).

The dramatic shift in the global balance of power runs deep and wide. In addition to China's growing influence, the number of middle powers has been increasing, and their interests do not perfectly or automatically align with the two largest economic powers; for many, their top priority is maintaining cordial relations with *both* the United States and China. Moreover, the growing economic importance of emerging markets and developing countries ensures that the number of middle powers will increase in the future.

Figure 5: Top Influencer: 2022



It would be a gross miscalculation for Washington to assume that its allies and partners will reflexively follow it in any conflict with China. As the response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has shown, individual countries react differently to global crises, and U.S. pressure to conform in today’s world would be less likely to produce the desired effect than it would have a generation ago. Although China has few formal treaty allies, its trading partners will be highly motivated to avoid courting disfavor with Beijing. These countries are likely to hedge against both Beijing and Washington and seek to maximize their options in the event that the U.S.-China competition turns hot.

History does sometimes repeat or “rhyme” (as Mark Twain said) but no one should wish for another Cold War, which wreaked havoc on much of the world. Trying to “contain” or “decouple” from China would boomerang on U.S. economic prospects. It is unrealistic to expect that variations of the same primacy strategies first implemented decades ago would work in a completely different situation today but will simply require more effort on the part of U.S. leaders. Foreign policy professionals in the United States need to be more creative, developing an original strategy that matches the remedy with the reality.

RUSSIA, UKRAINE, AND THE RETURN OF HISTORY

Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine threatens more than peace in Europe; it has also set back bilateral and multilateral cooperation on many fronts. These are unlikely to be restored as long as Putin rules Russia. But the United States and other countries must prepare for the future; a grand strategy can help the U.S. and its allies and partners to get there. Putin will go away; Russia will not.

Thus, even if constructive relations are difficult or impossible in the near- to medium-term, some measures can and should be taken to ensure continued working-level engagement. The Arctic has become an entirely new arena for military competition and confrontation. The danger of an unintended escalation, or even military action is rising in space and elsewhere. Meanwhile, the increasing range and reduced response time of current and emerging nonnuclear offensive weapons systems and their highly automated command-and-control systems heighten the risks of accidental collisions.

Arms control agreements are becoming harder to maintain; achieving new breakthroughs will be difficult. This is not a recent phenomenon. The George W. Bush administration pulled out of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 2001.⁴⁸ The Trump administration withdrew from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) and Open Skies Treaties, as well as the P5+1 nuclear agreement with Iran. These decisions set a string of bad precedents for stemming arms races and limiting nuclear proliferation.

And the prospects for limiting the growth of nuclear arsenals have only worsened since Putin's invasion of Ukraine. In the ensuing two years, Moscow declared that it would no longer participate in New START. Then, in November 2023, Russia formally withdrew from the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) treaty. The last remaining arms control agreements of the post-Cold War era are effectively null and void.

Absent concerted efforts, nuclear weapons risk being transformed from a stabilizer, as in the Cold War's great-power conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union, to asymmetrical "weapons of the poor" to be used against adversaries' superior conventional forces. This significantly increases the likelihood of their use in local wars. Meanwhile, measures by some established nuclear weapons states, including the United States, to develop low-yield, and thus allegedly more usable weapons, could increase the risk that such weapons will be employed deliberately. President Ronald Reagan's famous dictum that "a nuclear war cannot be won, and must never be fought," which was reaffirmed by the five nuclear weapons states in January 2022, now seems in question.⁴⁹

And strategic stability is threatened by more than just numbers of weapons or their changing character. The United States, Russia, China, and other nuclear weapons states should commit to working together to ensure that AI and disruptive cyber operations are never aimed at adversaries' nuclear arsenals. All parties should recognize their mutual vulnerability to such measures, and that no party would benefit from such attacks.

THE NEED FOR COOPERATION TO TACKLE GLOBAL CHALLENGES

Although the risk of great-power competition spilling over into outright conflict is the leading concern today, that should not crowd out other foci for U.S. foreign policy.⁵⁰ The COVID-19 pandemic was an unwelcome reminder that many things other than war can be a threat to the immediate wellbeing of all. The greatest of these is climate change, which constitutes an existential threat to humanity. Of course, there is no quick fix such as the vaccines that were developed and produced in record time, but ignoring climate change is not an option. The threat is immediate, not in some far-distant future, as many believe.

Prioritizing is an essential part of strategizing. Too often, foreign policy professionals segment the treatment of different threats, often layering one on top of the other, and losing the overall context in the process. U.S. policymakers risk falling into this trap with their increasingly single-minded focus on China. Serious issues connected with China's behavior deserve U.S. and global attention. Allowing Sino-US differences to get out of hand and crowd out other concerns, however, risks exacerbating the existing upward trend toward conflict, and undercutting needed cooperation on the greatest challenges facing humanity.

Setting priorities begins with articulating clear goals. The goals that this strategy aims to achieve are simple and straightforward. The U.S. government's overarching responsibilities to the American people are protecting their security, prosperity, and freedom. Americans expect their government to protect them from threats, both foreign and domestic. Policy should maximize opportunities for people to provide for themselves and their families. How U.S. grand strategy achieves these first two goals relates to the third: freedom. Policy should afford maximum autonomy to the individual and prevent encroachments on people's liberties. The first two objectives are typical of most governments throughout history. But measures that would be tolerated, or even welcomed, in nations that afforded their governments far greater control over their citizens' lives will not work in the United States. Similarly, a national security strategy appropriate to a different country, under different circumstances, will not work for a federal republic of 50 states, spread across a vast swathe of land and seas, but more secure from traditional security threats than most other countries.

Indeed, a tendency to define U.S. national interests too broadly has undermined America's security in recent years, for example, by drawing the United States into conflicts that it cannot win and need not fight. Anger and resentment at America's often heavy-handed and overly militarized approach to global engagement has eroded America's unique advantages as an exemplar of good governance and liberalism and has even generated acts of violence against Americans—including the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Meanwhile, costly and inconclusive wars have sapped Americans' will and drained the U.S. treasury. Money spent on foreign wars, a growing number of Americans now believe, would have been helpful in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, addressing the climate-change crisis, or building out physical or cyber infrastructure here at home.

That point relates to the second core goal of this strategy—maintaining and expanding prosperity for the widest possible number of Americans. That prosperity is contingent upon access to global markets, but the free movement of goods and services cannot depend upon the power of a single state to facilitate it. Precisely because the global commons is used by all trading nations, all nations must play a critical role in keeping those commons open.

Last, as noted above, this strategy aims to advance U.S. security and prosperity, while also maintaining a commitment to individual liberty and political liberalism. Approaches that transgress or otherwise violate the U.S. Constitution's limits on state power, or that are inconsistent with free-market principles, will not command broad public support and are likely to fail.



A National Security Strategy that Sets Priorities—Major Elements

It has been evident for some time that U.S. foreign policy has been out of sync with two major trends: the growing disconnect between the American people and policy elites over the cost, and the changing international context of emerging multipolarity. Primacy is no longer attainable and efforts to achieve it are either apt to fail, or else undercut the very basis for a renewed U.S. role on the world stage.

As outlined in the previous section, reformulating U.S. foreign policy should begin with closing the gap with the American people who have shouldered the burden of a particular type of U.S. engagement in the world.⁵¹ After years of stagnant incomes in the face of increasing costs for healthcare, education, and other items associated with a middle-class standard of living, strengthening the home front should be the first element of a credible grand strategy.

Second, the United States cannot have a successful foreign policy without making choices. Believing it can return to the halcyon days of the 1990s—when the United States was near the peak of its economic power and facing no competitors—can only lead to attempting to do too much with too little. Even during the Cold War, U.S. policy was not successful in every instance, and officials learned over time to husband the nation’s resources and seek cooperation, not just confrontation, with Soviet Communism.

Finally, U.S. policymakers must understand that so-called “soft power” may be the country’s best and most effective source of influence. Military force is not suited to solving most of the world’s problems. Much of the history written today about the Cold War emphasizes that the United States prevailed due to the appeal of the Western model of individual freedoms and affluence, which the Soviets—with their overreliance on fear and military might—could not equal over time.

This section sketches out the major elements of a much-needed reinvention of U.S. foreign policy.

Make Choices

U.S. National Security Strategies often read like laundry lists of goals without much prioritization. That needs to change. The combination of domestic and international constraints necessitates a clear articulation of U.S. strategic priorities. Even superpowers need to balance ends, ways, and means. Retaining global dominance is not necessary to secure vital U.S. interests, nor is it viable in a multipolar world. Being globally engaged is vital for national interests, and the United States has many instruments—not just its military power—to ensure that it achieves its core national security objectives.

The focused strategy advocated here would first set priorities around vital U.S. interests and, second, identify different ways of achieving those effects at less cost in view of the limited public support for an ambitious foreign policy that draws resources away from domestic needs.

WHAT AND HOW TO PRIORITIZE

Although Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has forestalled dialogue with Moscow, *avoiding major-power conflict* remains an overarching U.S. interest. Better relations with China should help. China is a major competitor, but not an existential threat to U.S. national security. Despite the growing tensions of the present era, China does not have a track record of conquest. It should not become such a focus as the Soviet Union was for the United States in the Cold War, crowding out all other interests.

Trying to stabilize the relationship with China through more open communications should be a priority for lessening the risk of escalation and open conflict. Examining the United States' own behavior to avoid provocation is imperative. For example, Taiwan is an emotional, almost existential issue, for mainland China; U.S. policymakers need to keep this in mind as they craft policies to preserve the status quo.⁵²

Putin's aggression against Ukraine is a reminder of his malign intentions, but Russia's abysmal performance in the war reveals its weakness. Future Russian leaders will be anxious to avoid repeating Putin's mistakes. For the United States, a deepening militarized competition with either China or Russia threatens prosperity at home, making it harder, if not impossible, to undertake domestic renewal. Although promoting core democratic values has been an important goal of U.S. policy, such idealism needs to be coupled with realism. Putting democracy promotion, for example, at the core of foreign policy runs the risk of undermining Washington's ability to find areas of cooperation with other countries that do not share U.S. values.

The combination of domestic and international constraints necessitates a clear articulation of U.S. strategic priorities. Even superpowers need to balance ends, ways, and means.

Like their counterparts in the private sector, U.S. national security strategists should *think in terms of enhancing resilience, rather than maintaining dominance*. There has been a tendency in U.S. foreign policy to resort to the black-and-white mentality intrinsic to military conflict. In war, there are winners and losers—though often even the victors suffer grievous harm. Increasingly, however, the leading global challenges have the characteristics of “wicked problems”—challenges that do not have obvious, permanent solutions. At best, such problems can only be managed, or the world must adapt to them. In short, a different sort of problem than a physical enemy to be deterred or defeated requires a different array of tools and tactics.

A new approach to U.S. strategy also requires a change in process: Policymakers need to think much farther ahead than simply waiting until a problem turns into a raging crisis—at which point force may be the only option. Strategists have to learn to constantly go back and re-evaluate the “success” or “failure” of previous policies, enabling them to recalibrate current policies to suit evolving circumstances. The needed cultural and attitudinal changes pertaining to how to deal with problems is a first but necessary step toward implementing such a strategy.

Another critical part of such a new strategy is to ***remove the dividing line between domestic and international priorities***. More so than in other countries, Americans are used to seeing themselves as separate from the rest of the world, due no doubt to the geography of two wide ocean bodies on either side that has traditionally kept the United States safe from others. Nonetheless, even as the scales have dropped from many eyes in this regard, there is disagreement over the right path forward. In 2020, the Chicago Council on Global Affairs divided Americans between “nationalists” and “internationalists”—with most Republicans associated with the former, and Democrats the latter.⁵³ This framing, however, is itself an error. The creative burden should be to demonstrate how to advance U.S. national interests through a purposeful internationalism that sets priorities and shares burdens with others. But very few Americans would support a foreign policy that does not put U.S. interests first.

Many Americans believe that elites too easily ignore the impacts of U.S. foreign policy on others, including the sons and daughters from the heartland who fight America’s wars.

The perception that the United States has not done so might explain why the public’s distrust of the Washington establishment has become so deeply entrenched. Many Americans believe that elites too easily ignore the impacts of U.S. foreign policy on others, including the sons and daughters from the heartland who fight America’s wars. Restoring public trust needs to be a crucial part of any U.S. grand strategy and merits a special set of policies all its own. Above all, the United States must ***be more discriminating with respect to the use of force***. Doing so would take account of the burdens of service for those who choose a military career, and the families that support them. After all, as Colin Powell once observed, “American GIs [are] not toy soldiers to be moved around on some global game board.”⁵⁴

The Powell Doctrine established key criteria for when to intervene militarily, informed by the prospects for success or the risks of failure, and with a clear exit strategy, and always with an eye to the durability of public support.⁵⁵ The 20-year-long War on Terror failed to meet any of Powell’s benchmarks. When the United States pursued a strategy that hinged on remaking broken societies, the effort was both ineffective and enormously costly. More targeted actions, both to counter terrorist groups but also encourage social change, is now the preferred option. But the United States cannot do this alone. Empowering others to assume responsibility in their respective regions is essential.

Meanwhile, the United States has other ways to spread its influence. Many Americans view ***work to combat climate change*** as a critically urgent priority. Some see it as a once-in-a-generation opportunity to demonstrate the United States’ broader concern for the planet. But Republicans and Democrats are sharply divided on this issue. When asked to identify “the three greatest threats America faces today,” 62 percent of Democrats chose “natural disasters resulting from climate change”; only 19 percent of Republicans agreed.⁵⁶

As in the COVID-19 pandemic, which featured breakthroughs in vaccines by U.S. and Western pharmaceuticals, the struggle against climate change can help showcase U.S. technologies critical for the transition to green energy. The discovery and development at scale of new green technologies could boost the U.S. economy, the way new information technologies contributed to a U.S. economic boom in the mid-1990s.

In all of these efforts, U.S. policymakers must patiently and deftly ***understand issues from the perspective of the United States’ international partners***. For example, many in Europe and Asia are reluctant to isolate China economically. Key U.S. allies and partners would suffer greatly from such a strategy, which explains the push for “de-risking”—selective decoupling in key industries and sectors—instead.⁵⁷ There

is even less support for decoupling from China in the Global South. Nor is it in Americans' economic or social interests to decouple from China. Any attempt to do so would harm the U.S. economy, putting U.S. businesses at risk and threatening the wellbeing of individual American workers and consumers.⁵⁸

More broadly, U.S. allies do not want to be put in the position of having to choose between the United States and China. But, without allies, the United States risks being left on its own. U.S. policymakers must listen to others' interests and legitimate concerns and be willing to adjust their approach accordingly.

All of these recommendations entail narrowing the scope of U.S. foreign policy and employing the right tools to achieve Washington's most urgent priority goals. In contrast, continuing to pursue a maximalist strategy that fails to prioritize, and overly relies on a \$1 trillion military and the threat to use force, is likely to fail, and risks accelerating America's turn inward. In particular, a near-single-minded focus on confronting China risks neglecting other domestic and foreign policy goals. Long-term U.S. interests would be better served by finding ways to lower tension and cooperate with Beijing despite deep differences. Such an approach would free up resources; pave the way for addressing climate change, poverty, disease, and other global challenges; and demonstrate the importance of a new form of U.S. leadership.

Rebalance the Foreign Policy Toolbox

In the past two decades, the U.S. government has neglected the nonmilitary tools that are essential for allowing the United States to achieve its top priority objectives. This strategy calls for elevating diplomacy, including with better training for U.S. diplomats, and better outreach through public diplomacy, expanding global trade, and increasing intercultural exchange, including by adopting a more welcoming attitude toward the world's talent.

INVEST IN DIPLOMACY, INCLUDING PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

Pentagon officials have been among the first to recognize the need to enhance U.S. diplomacy. State has been chronically underfunded, unlike the Department of Defense, which saw huge gains during the War on Terror. The Trump administration pushed through still more increases for DOD, a trend continued under the Biden administration, such that U.S. military spending in inflation-adjusted dollars remains well above the post-World-War-II average, though not as high as during the peak of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.⁵⁹ The scope of needed funding at State is paltry relative to the sums spent on the acquisition of new weapons. But without reinvesting and broadening the concept of the foreign service for the 21st century, U.S. foreign policy will remain overmilitarized.

Besides expanding the number of State Department professionals, leaders should prioritize better professional training. This has always been a hallmark of military service, and one that has paid great dividends. A more diverse State Department workforce is needed, including men and women who are experts not just in country and regional affairs around the world, but also well versed on a growing set of transnational threats and opportunities facing the United States, from biotech and health to cyber, transnational crime, authoritarianism, corruption, and terrorism.⁶⁰ The State Department's international expertise could be an asset in a long list of functional areas. State already works on most of these issues,

but with too few personnel spread too widely, it has not been able to play a strong role in the interagency decision-making process.

The State Department should also work to optimize how it positions its experts to address the most pressing diplomatic priorities. The department has lacked the agility necessary to be the face of U.S. foreign policy in regions and issue areas that are considered most important, which has led to the military and intelligence agencies assuming a leading role in setting policy and responding to developments overseas. This has created a vicious cycle wherein the State Department is not in a position to be a main provider of on-the-ground information and has played a smaller role in the foreign policy decision-making process, which in turn makes State less likely to be put in a position of gathering pertinent information in critical areas. The State Department should work with Congress to implement a diplomatic posture review process to ensure the department's limited resources are being best used and its personnel are being placed in the most important regions and are addressing high-priority issue areas.⁶¹

Finally, absent more outreach to the public, U.S. foreign policy will remain a “black box” to most Americans. The State Department has rarely seen its mission as encompassing a strong domestic component. In this era of low public trust, however, it needs to step up its engagement with Americans from all walks of life to explain the challenges facing the United States abroad and how and why the U.S. government has chosen to respond the way it has. Without consistent and reliable two-way communication between State and the public, there will be no chance of establishing a broad and durable consensus on foreign affairs.

Public and Cultural Diplomacy

The United States also needs a better approach to connecting with others beyond U.S. shores. Since 1999, the United States has lacked a central clearinghouse to coordinate messages across all government agencies, a role formerly filled by the U.S. Information Agency (USIA). Each agency is now responsible for its own effort to educate the world about U.S. policy. Notwithstanding the inevitable redundancy and inconsistencies across agencies in their messaging, numerous opportunities have been missed because individual agencies are too consumed by other business to engage in much outreach.

Disinformation is another growing problem that undermines the United States from the inside while also making diplomacy more difficult. The United States is regularly the victim of social media's ability to spread misperceptions and lies, fueling skepticism about U.S. intentions abroad and sowing discord domestically. If existing U.S. programs such as the Open Technology Fund and the Global Engagement Center were better coordinated and new digital media strategies were developed, the United States would be less susceptible to falling behind false narratives that form rapidly and become entrenched.⁶²

Person-to-person and cultural exchanges—which have dwindled following the closure of the USIA in 1999—offer two advantages. Although U.S. politics and policies are not always popular, U.S. science and culture usually are, engaging foreigners otherwise unlikely to get to know America. Moreover, bringing scientists, artists of all kinds, and performers from abroad helps Americans to get to know others from diverse backgrounds.⁶³

When USIA was disbanded at the height of U.S. power following the end of the Cold War, many within the U.S. government believed that people living in other countries automatically wanted their country

to be like America, thus there was no need to make the case for U.S. actions or beliefs. Since then, a multiplicity of views have proliferated about the United States, not always favorable. Even the United States' closest allies have concerns. As in the Cold War, the United States should explain itself and persuade others about U.S. policies in order to build strong alliances and coalitions. Having a USIA-like institution that can accurately convey U.S. government policies and perspectives—without sugarcoating nor denying others' right to disagree—could start the process of building trust with the rest of the world.

FINE-TUNE U.S. ECONOMIC POWER FOR GREATER INFLUENCE

Historically, U.S. influence spread through trade and investment, such as the opening with Japan in the mid-nineteenth century, or encouragement of an Open-Door policy in early twentieth century China, both of which became a basis for long-term U.S. power in Asia. Similarly, and related, the United States derives what former French President Charles De Gaulle once described as “exorbitant privileges” because the dollar is the world’s reserve currency. Wielding that leverage risks blowback and, most recently, efforts by China, Russia, the EU, and Iran to conceal sanctioned economic activities and avoid the penalties of noncompliance. Trump administration threats following the United States’ unilateral withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action succeeded in inhibiting European companies from doing business with Iran, but at a cost. The U.S. decision to leave the Iran nuclear agreement showed the inequity of the United States’ use of its exorbitant privilege, even against several of its closest allies.

That was not an isolated incident. In recent years, the United States has imposed sanctions on thousands of individuals, companies, or nations. Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control counted a total of 9,421 sanctions designations in 2021, up from 912 in 2000.⁶⁴ But nothing compares to the response to Putin’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, when the United States and most European states imposed sweeping economic measures on Russia, including currency restrictions, asset freezes, and export controls. The United States added nearly three times as many persons to its main sanctions list in 2022 as it had in the previous year; three quarters of those new names were tied to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.⁶⁵

The use of sanctions has accelerated, even as the desired changes in behavior that sanctions aim to extract from targeted actors have rarely occurred. And there are risks.⁶⁶ For sanctions to work as intended, studies have shown that they should be combined with incentives. They need to be used flexibly such that any “sticks” are removed once the target complies, and a “carrot” is provided to countries that change their behavior. The U.S. Congress, however, rarely lifts sanctions. Indeed, even when targeted countries comply with U.S. demands, the United States often refuses to restore economic relations as a reward, finding still other reasons for leaving punitive trade restrictions in place.⁶⁷

This situation cries out for a re-evaluation of the use of all instruments of U.S. economic statecraft, comparing those examples of when economic coercion worked with many other cases in which they have had only limited utility, or have been self-defeating. Over time, U.S. sanctions have become further devalued as the Chinese renminbi has grown in weight and a larger proportion of international transactions use it as the medium of exchange. The development of more effective workarounds that avoid U.S. detection and punitive actions could be right around the corner. Sanctions should remain as part of the U.S. policy arsenal, but trends are likely to reduce their effectiveness. Overuse or misuse of sanctions may reveal U.S. impotence, rather than Washington’s reach.⁶⁸

Pressuring U.S. allies risks hurting relationships with them. And attempts to reduce U.S. reliance on imports from China could have the perverse effect of increasing Chinese trade with others, including many U.S. allies. A recent report documented the many ways in which U.S. “de-risking”—attempting to remove Chinese-made goods from global supply chains—has actually deepened China’s economic integration into the world economy. “The countries that have made [the] most inroads into the American market are those with the closest industrial links to China,” *The Economist* explained, “Supply chains have become more complex, and trade has become more expensive. But China’s dominance is undiminished.”⁶⁹

Revive Regional Trade Deals

The Biden administration has failed to develop a credible trade policy. Regional trade deals such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership were missed opportunities for the United States to open markets, and establish standards for developing areas such as e-commerce. For the United States to retain its role as a leader in the digital economy, there is an urgent need to define rules and regulations on data services to ensure interoperability, preventing the growth of hidden sources of protectionism and averting economic and trade fragmentation. Overall, however, the United States has been withdrawing from the global economy for the past two decades, lowering its competitive edge.⁷⁰

In contrast, in Asia, the absence of a trade instrument is enhancing China’s position: Beijing was able to establish a free-trade area (FTA)—the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)—that accounts for 32 percent of global exports and 28 percent of global GDP. Seven of the RCEP’s 16 member states are also members of Japan’s Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP)—the effort to save the TPP after the United States exited. The CPTPP agreement is a slightly less ambitious replica of TPP, but the overlap between CPTPP and RCEP increases the chances of an eventual merger between the two. This would allow for the formation of a larger FTA for the Asia-Pacific (FTAAP), currently being studied by the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum.⁷¹ The lack of a strong role for the United States in achieving this long-term goal risks undermining the U.S. position in Asia.

At the same time, U.S. policymakers should take domestic concerns about trade into account. Some trade agreements have been blamed for the loss of well-paying manufacturing jobs that enabled a middle-class lifestyle for many.⁷² But the alternative, “managed competition” using tariffs and quotas, could have the same effect. And, in general, a move away from trade liberalization threatens to reduce global growth and productivity over time. This is particularly true in the new areas for trade, including e-commerce and digital services. Currently, the three key global actors—China, the EU, and the United States—appear to be evolving into separate and not entirely compatible digital regimes, a potential harbinger of a global economy fragmenting into competing blocs. China, Russia, and some other countries claim a doctrine of “internet sovereignty.” Meanwhile, a number of emerging economies—for example, Brazil, India, Indonesia, and Vietnam—appear to be adopting or considering restrictive digital policies. Although there is a legitimate spectrum of varying approaches to privacy, the notion of governments controlling the flow of scientific and commercial data could lead to Balkanization that imperils the future of digital commerce, and hence, the future of global prosperity. The challenge is to find some minimal interoperable baseline standards and norms, which will require focus and discipline on the part of U.S. officials and a willingness to compromise in the interest of finding common ground.

BECOME A MAGNET FOR THE WORLD'S TALENT

The United States has long benefited from the fact that the best and brightest want to come here. For decades, the world's talent has sought to be educated and find employment in the United States. As a result, the United States has often had the pick of the most highly trained and highly skilled men and women in the world. The fact that U.S. universities can attract the world's top students means that they can support advanced research programs that might otherwise never get off the ground.

But the United States cannot take these favorable circumstances for granted. Many Chinese students, for example, no longer feel welcomed here, and they are not alone; international students at U.S. institutions of higher learning are increasingly considering other options. During the Trump administration, the proportion of international students coming to the United States began to dip because of the perception that most Americans were hostile toward immigrants and foreign-born persons. Citing a 2021 survey by the American Physical Society, Cornell's Jessica Chen Weiss notes that "43 percent of international physics graduate students and early career scientists in the United States considered the country unwelcoming; around half of international early career scientists in the United States thought the government's approach to research security made them less likely to stay there over the long term."⁷³ The Biden administration has left in place a Trump-era order that denies entry to some graduate students with ties to certain universities in China.⁷⁴

If this trend continues, U.S. innovation will suffer; a majority of new startups are begun by immigrants, many of whom are first drawn to the United States by the promise of a high-quality education. Moreover, cutting-edge research and innovation has been enabled by collaboration among international teams. The formation of those teams usually starts at universities. Professors get to know the best students, and after the students graduate, often work with them as colleagues in developing new patents. One study estimated that "every 1,000 Ph.D. students blocked in a year from U.S. universities [would cost] an estimated \$210 billion in the expected value of patents produced at universities over 10 years and nearly \$1 billion in lost tuition over a decade."⁷⁵

Competition between countries for the most talented individuals will continue. In the future, more options will be available for the most promising students who stay at home, or choose to study elsewhere, but not in the United States. Universities in Asia, for example, are moving up the global rankings.⁷⁶ And some students are attracted by the affordability of schools closer to home, as compared to those in the United States. The advocacy organization Boundless explained, "A survey of U.S. officials found that the top reasons for the decline [in enrollment] were visa delays and denials, competition from colleges in other countries, and restrictive immigration policies under the former Trump administration."⁷⁷

More broadly, immigration is a thorny issue, but it bears on how the United States is seen in the world and is a source of influence now and in the future. Comprehensive immigration reform has not been undertaken since the 1990s. A broad, bipartisan effort would ensure that different viewpoints—including from those worried about new immigrants competing for jobs and undermining security at the border—would be factored into any reform. Achieving consensus on a way forward is important to ensuring the United States' continued demographic health, which is critical for economic vibrancy and growth.



Conclusion

U.S. foreign policy elites often point to the failure to stop Adolf Hitler and fascism in the 1930s to argue the case for continued U.S. primacy on all fronts. They fail to appreciate how much the world has changed. Today, others have accepted more responsibility—from the EU negotiating an array of deals to show that free trade is still afloat, to Japan keeping the flame burning on the U.S. idea for a TTP after Trump withdrew and Biden refused to rejoin.

Some U.S. and allied critics of a change in U.S. strategy away from primacy and toward restraint warn that, if the United States pulls back, China, Russia, and other bad actors will fill the vacuum in a way that threatens U.S. and allied interests. The strategy being proposed here, however, calls for the United States to be more engaged using diplomacy and trade, with less reliance on military tools. It shies away from trying to convert others to American values, which led to the costly failures in Iraq and Afghanistan. Above all, it takes account of the U.S. domestic mood, and recognizes that most Americans are disinclined to support huge increases in U.S. military spending, particularly at the expense of investments at home, in order to sustain a strategy that discourages other countries from defending themselves.

No strategy can succeed without strong public support. Finding a middle path can help to close the gap between the internationalists and nationalists, solidifying a consensus on protecting vital U.S. interests, while encouraging allies and partners to shoulder the burdens in their own neighborhoods, where they have the most at stake. Moreover, this strategy does not call for U.S. disengagement. Rather, it recommends exerting U.S. influence more effectively, through instruments that have served U.S. interests in the past, and can do so again.

The strategist who attempts to defend everything defends nothing, while stressing available resources beyond the breaking point. A failure to set priorities, therefore, risks inviting catastrophe—a decisive and irreparable turn away from global engagement at home and an increased likelihood of major conflict abroad. The strategy outlined here has the same nominal objectives of the primacy strategy pursued since the end of the Cold War: ensuring U.S. security, prosperity, and freedom. But it differs on how to achieve those goals. The United States can do more, and more effectively, by rebalancing and setting clear priorities. Choice is the essence of strategy. And now is the time for choosing.

Endnotes

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