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Elevate Diplomacy in the Foreign Policy Toolkit

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TOPLINE

Of all the elements of U.S. power, the diplomatic tool can offer the best return on investment. Past dependency on the military tool and economic coercion has not left the United States better off. In its return to the White House, the Trump administration has an opportunity to rebuild a culture of diplomacy. The wars in Ukraine and the Middle East and the challenges posed by Iran, North Korea, and China all offer opportunities for the United States to constructively engage with a goal of stability, leaving it to rely on the military for its original and intended purpose – as a last resort. The administration should use diplomacy first, working with Congress to develop an efficient and effective diplomatic corps.

THE PROBLEM

U.S. diplomacy has atrophied, making it more difficult for the United States to take advantage of opportunities to advance its interests abroad. The problem is driven by interlocking issues: The United States has not adjusted its diplomatic approach to align with changes in the global balance of power, it has not appropriately funded its diplomatic corps, and it continues to take a destabilizing military-first approach to foreign policy that undermines earnest attempts to engage in diplomacy.

And yet, concerted U.S. diplomacy is desperately required in this moment. Wars in Ukraine, the Middle East, Africa, and elsewhere pose security risks to the United States and threaten global economic growth. Simultaneously, tensions between the major powers are mounting, increasing the chances of great-power war, which has not been seen in more than a quarter of a century. If the trend of increasing conflict is to be

reversed, the United States needs an emboldened approach to diplomacy that empowers American diplomats to end ongoing conflicts, prevent new ones, and advance U.S. interests through new agreements.

ESSENTIAL CONTEXT

Since the end of the Cold War, U.S. leaders have neglected diplomacy within the foreign policy toolkit. The military has received not just the vast majority of funding but also been afforded a major role in policy formulation. Likewise, the intelligence community has carved out a larger and larger position within the executive branch, giving it greater sway in shaping policy imperatives for the president. At the same time, the State Department's role has shrunk from that of the primary influencer of U.S. foreign policy to that of an implementer of an increasingly small section of the executive branch's foreign policy portfolio. As a result, diplomacy is not seen as the tool of first resort, and opportunities for the United States to prevent conflict, improve ties, and negotiate beneficial deals are missed. Instead, the military and intelligence community dominate the foreign policy process, leading to an overly securitized approach.

The post-Cold War strategic approach has been anchored in the belief that the United States is the global hegemon. This assumption allowed for a smaller diplomatic corps as countries were expected to go along with the United States with little compromise and negotiation required. American hegemony was the guiding principle for forming wartime coalitions for the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya; the United States directs the positions other countries should take and expects partners to follow. While American diplomats would be quick to highlight the compromises required to reach agreements like the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action nuclear deal or the New START treaty, over the past two decades, the United States has failed to secure major lasting agreements that advance U.S. interests. Instead, it has been persistently bogged down by costly wars, steadily losing its ability to influence other countries.

Rather than forcing hard choices and reform, U.S. foreign policy failures have fed a cycle of lower funding for diplomacy and more funding for the military. This doubling down on an unbalanced foreign policy toolkit has ballooned the deficit while ceding ground to adversaries. The State Department's budget has not outpaced inflation over the last decade, and the most recent budget makes cuts across the Department. These reductions have left the United States at a disadvantage in key areas, especially as it tries to compete with China. According to the Lowy Institute's 2024 Global Diplomacy Index, China now has a larger diplomatic footprint than the United States in Africa, East Asia, Pacific Island countries, and Central Asia.

The Biden administration failed to utilize diplomacy effectively, relying instead on massive security assistance. This led to tens of billions of dollars in new military aid to

Ukraine and countries in the Middle East and Africa, without providing sufficient leverage to end the conflicts and promote stability. The administration also failed to reach any large multilateral trade agreements. Meanwhile, under the Biden administration, nuclear proliferation problems with North Korea and Iran expanded, and there was increased collaboration on alternatives to U.S.-led organizations. While the United States retains significant diplomatic power through the State Department as an institution and the ability to back its words with money and military might, the U.S. position of diplomatic leadership has been squandered. The unwillingness of the United States to commit to substantial international projects and U.S. reliance on the destabilizing use of force and economic coercion have left its diplomatic tool weakened.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The war in Ukraine, conflict in the Middle East, and a stagnation of U.S.-led multilateral trade agreements all pose opportunities for major U.S. diplomacy. U.S. leadership in these areas could create a virtuous cycle, both domestically and internationally. But to capitalize on those opportunities, the incoming administration will need to pivot away from the current approach and make longer-term changes to how it incorporates diplomacy into its foreign policy toolkit.

Empower the Secretary of State. The secretary of state is a critical member of every cabinet, but the role — and influence — the position takes on has varied significantly from administration to administration. The incoming secretary of state should be empowered to be America’s chief diplomat, utilized by the president to negotiate with China, Russia, and other key states. The next secretary of state needs to be trusted by the president to put forward smart, creative policies to advance U.S. interests through diplomacy. This will reduce the securitization of foreign policy — which fixates on perceived threats and cannot address many of 21st century challenges — while shifting focus toward opportunities to engage in conflict resolution and prevention, cooperation on shared interests, and improving economic and cultural ties with partners. An empowered secretary of state could cut red tape and help turn State Department officials into policy entrepreneurs rather than limiting them to policy implementation. A stronger State Department can act as a balance against the recommendations from the Department of Defense and intelligence agencies, providing the president with a better array of options for how to use limited resources.

Narrow the National Security Strategy. Past National Security Strategies (NSS) have been bloated with so-called priorities, which has led to an unclear agenda for U.S. diplomacy. Given the limited resources available, the incoming administration should clearly prioritize national security challenges in its NSS and specifically highlight how diplomacy can be used to address them. Regardless of the issues that are prioritized,

diplomacy will have a significant role to play, whether it is managing China's rise, ending the war in Ukraine, or securing American supply chains. But for U.S. diplomacy to successfully tackle the most pressing challenges, there needs to be clear communication from Congress as to how appropriate funds and limited personnel should be utilized. The scattershot approach of past National Security Strategies has led to incoherent funding of competing priorities within the State Department and offices working on issues with tenuous connections to overarching administration strategy. Resourcing is fundamental to strategy, and strategies that fail to weigh and rank – instead making everything a priority – cannot be appropriately funded with limited resources.

Work with Congress to implement a diplomatic posture review. To best connect the work of U.S. diplomats with the NSS, the administration should partner with Congress to implement a diplomatic posture review. This process would facilitate the training of personnel for areas of strategic importance and would provide Congress with a useful oversight tool to ensure that the State Department is responsibly utilizing appropriated funds to advance the diplomatic prerogatives of the administration. A successful review process will point to the aspects of the State Department that need to be changed, such as areas with overlap between offices or technical areas that require more expertise.

Continue the modernization process. The previous administration made significant changes to the State Department through the first phase of its modernization agenda. Many of these reforms were desperately needed and have helped make the institution more capable for the 21st century. However, far more must be done to guarantee that reforms take root. The IT acquisition process requires additional improvements to provide America's diplomats with the tools they need to do their jobs, and the platforms that have already been acquired as part of the modernization process should be reviewed to ensure they are improving operations. Public diplomacy would benefit from additional focus, bolstering efforts to communicate with foreign audiences. There is also a need to better publicize the diplomacy done abroad to domestic audiences, thereby developing a constituency for diplomacy. Efforts to expand the diplomatic corps with a more robust training float, which is essential to improving the career development opportunities for personnel, are also critical.