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REPORT

Strategy & Security

Reimagining US Grand Strategy Program

New Visions for Grand Strategy

Edited by Emma Ashford and Nevada Joan Lee

Michael Beckley, Michael Brenes, Zack Cooper, Julia Gledhill, Jennifer Lind, Sumantra Maitra, Michael Poznansky, Jeremy Shapiro, Mohammed Soliman, Ali Wyne

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About the Stimson Center

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In this project, we sought to engage scholars and practitioners across the ideological and political spectrum, reflecting our core belief that America's complex global challenges require open and active debate. We are grateful to all our authors for engaging with this debate – and each other – in good faith, and are especially grateful to Michael J. Zak, without whose generous support this project would not have been possible.

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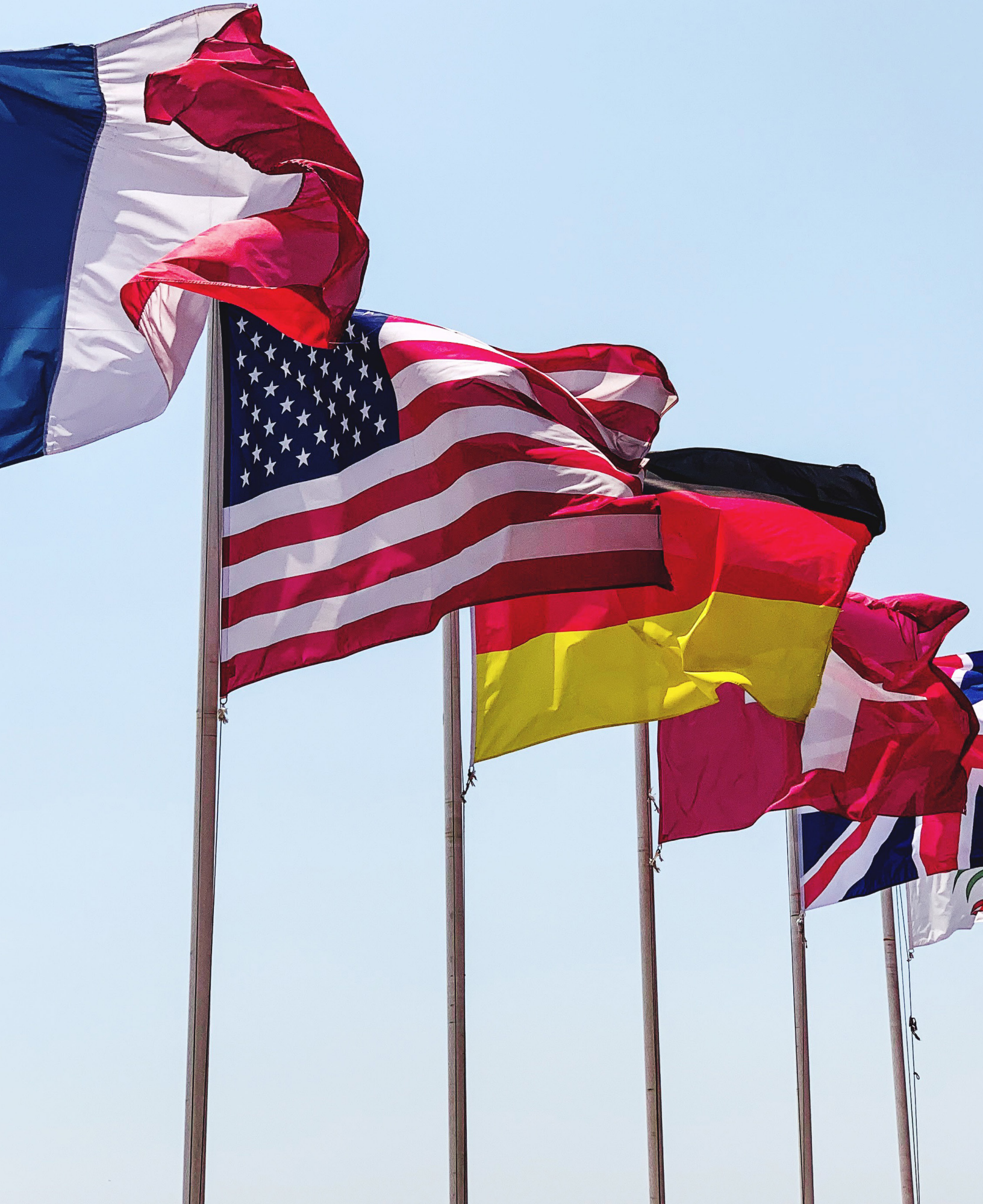

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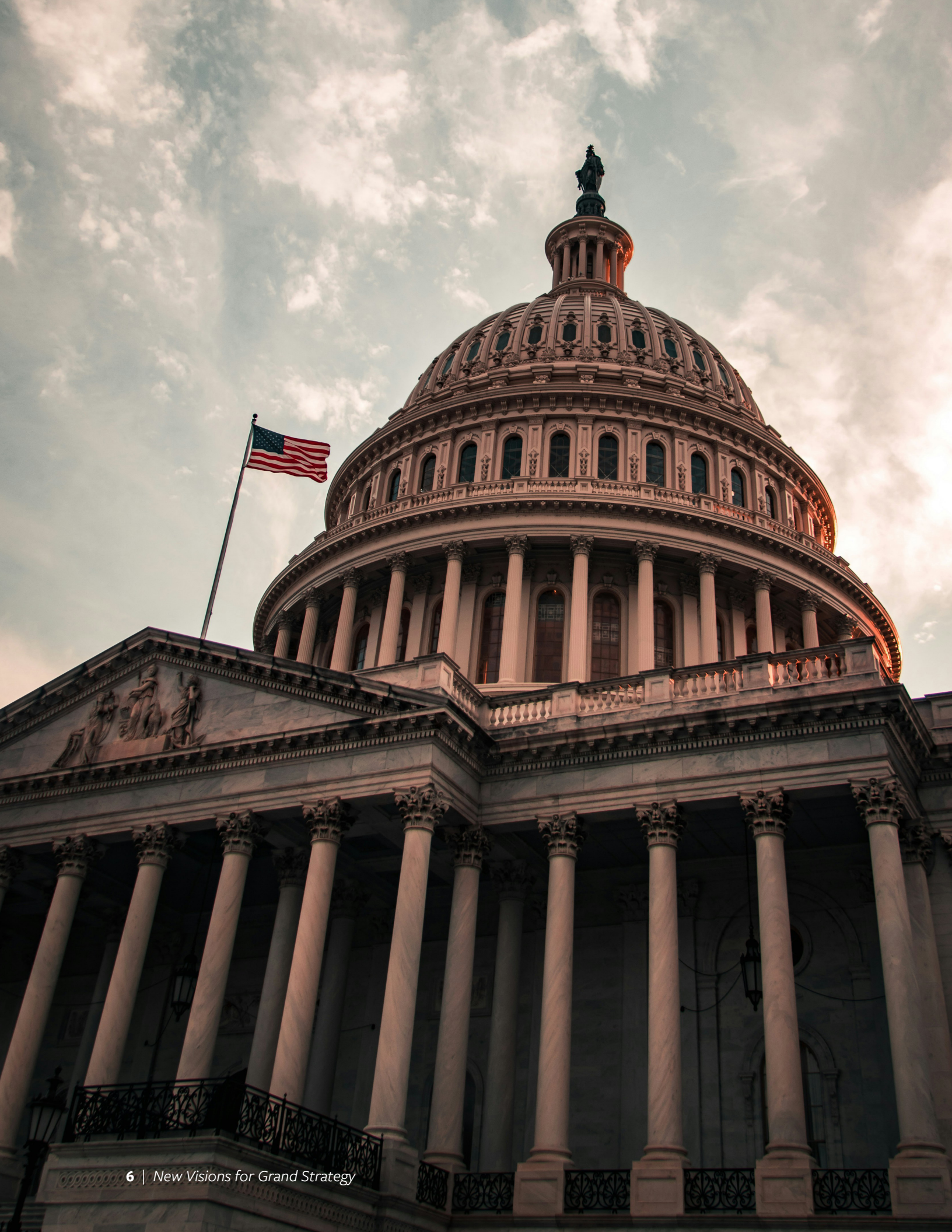

Foreword

Emma Ashford

This is an era of upheaval in Washington, where the doors of foreign policy debate have been flung open in ways that would have seemed extraordinary just a few short years ago.

There are good reasons for this. The unipolar moment — the post-Cold War period of American global predominance — is ending. Trend lines in military capabilities, industrial strength, economic and technological innovation, and even cultural power suggest that American power is in relative decline. China is rising, transforming its economic heft into military might as it does so. Meanwhile, globalization is allowing economic and technological power to diffuse to a much wider variety of states.

America's foreign policy community must also contend with a period of unprecedented soul-searching created by the perceived failures of the unipolar moment — from Iraq to Afghanistan and democracy promotion to globalization. They must cope with the increasing rejection of a global, liberal project by the American electorate, embodied in the unorthodox presidency of Donald Trump.

As we enter this new era, the most important question for U.S. policymakers is, "How can America adapt its foreign policy to address the challenges of the 21st century?"

The Debate

In the foreign policy community today, a messy debate rages among those who seek retrenchment from the war on terror, those who seek to pivot the United States to confront China, those who want to build a new liberal order around democracy, those who want a nationalist retrenchment, and many others. Most engaged in this discussion believe that the United States made mistakes during the unipolar moment, but they differ wildly in their assessment of the problem as well as the solutions they offer.

The various camps competing to direct the future of U.S. foreign policy are not *just* divided along partisan lines. They differ in how they understand and prioritize U.S. interests, in their assessments of threats to the United States, and in their approaches to global involvement. None are isolationist in the conventional sense; even the staunchest advocates of "America First" nationalism argue that the United States should use military force when needed, and even the most dovish analysts aim to stay connected with the world through aid, trade, and diplomacy.

Nevertheless, although they may agree with the necessity of some U.S. global engagement, current thinkers differ widely over how expansive that engagement should be. Does the United States need to transform the world, or should it just achieve a narrow set of security-based interests? Should America aim to be a champion for democracy everywhere? Which tools should the United States prioritize: military force, diplomacy, or economic engagement? Is the United States stronger with allies, or simply tied down by them?

These are some key strains of thought emerging from this debate:

The **nationalists**, best represented by policymakers in the Trump administration, are more focused on domestic issues than foreign ones, but they are willing to use military force or economic coercion when necessary. This group has a strong emphasis on American sovereignty and unilateralism.[15]

The **liberal internationalists**, many of whose beliefs align with past proponents of this approach, emphasize global supranational organizations and international law. They advocate for democracy promotion to some extent, but they tend to eschew the most extreme nation-building transgressions of the war on terror. This group was well-represented in the Biden administration, with its characteristic regard for alliances as "sacred commitments."

Other camps are less consolidated. Some of the **left-wing progressives** in the Democratic Party are beginning to construct a strategy that focuses on using U.S. power to build a better world through nonmilitary tools. This runs the gamut from peaceful engagement with China to combating kleptocracy and autocracy around the world. Though highly ambitious, their strategies — and the means they intend to use to achieve them — remain poorly defined.

The **realists** (sometimes described as "prioritizers" or "restrainers") emphasize American security and the costs and risks of an overly adventurous foreign policy. This group transcends party lines and can, at times, include some progressive thinkers as well. Realists — this author included — tend to favor some level of U.S. military retrenchment, along with prioritization among regions, and a narrowing of U.S. interests to form a more modest or reasoned approach to foreign policy.

Each of these perspectives is important. America's complex global challenges require open and active debate that seeks to move discussions beyond conventional wisdom.

The Essays

This volume contributes to this debate by bringing together some of these disparate foreign policy viewpoints. To do so, we commissioned essays from ten notable, out-of-the box thinkers. The writers come from across the ideological and political spectrum; from both academia and the policy community; and from all four of the groups described above. The resulting essays cover a wide range of views and provide a variety of insights into the different visions currently being offered for U.S. foreign policy. Our authors also joined us to discuss their essays in a podcast and video series entitled "The Strategy Sessions." This series is available at Stimson.org and via all major podcast services.

The essays are organized around five big questions, but all the contributions address multiple issues. In the first section, Mike Beckley, a professor at Tufts University, and Mike Poznansky, a professor at the Naval War College, explore what America's role in the world should be. The former offers a hard-edged, coercive and unilateralist vision of America unchained. The latter suggests a return to a more modest, but still liberal, international order akin to that of the Cold War.

The second section addresses the question of how the United States should view its allies – and how it should treat alliances moving forward. Sumantra Maitra, a senior writer at the American Conservative magazine, explores an inherent contradiction that realists face: in advocating burden-shifting to Europe, they cannot risk empowering a European hegemon. American Enterprise Institute scholar Zack Cooper, meanwhile, explores the difficulties of coalition-building in the Indo-Pacific under multipolarity.

Still focusing on the Indo-Pacific, the third section of this volume addresses China, America's biggest potential rival, the Pentagon's "pacing threat," and the focus of much of today's debate in Washington. Both writers here — Ali Wyne of the International Crisis Group and Mike Brenes of Yale University — take a contrarian view, arguing that competition with China should not be an end of U.S. foreign policy and that cohabitation, even cooperation, might be possible with Beijing.

The fourth set of essays delves into the techno-economic issues surrounding U.S. grand strategy — and the big question of whether the United States remains competitive in a rapidly changing, technological world. The Middle East Institute's Mohammed Soliman makes the case for a grand strategy grounded in techno-industrial partnerships that enable the United States to compete with China on its own terms. Stimson's own Julia Gledhill, meanwhile, turns her attention inward to America's sclerotic defense-industrial base, suggesting that radical solutions might be needed to fix American defense contracting.

The final set of essays discusses the Democratic Party. Though Republicans under the Trump administration are beginning to coalesce around a new, nationalist vision, Democrats remain divided and unsure. Jennifer Lind, a professor at Dartmouth College, takes a deep dive into progressives' attempts to build a new grand strategy and assesses the gaps that remain to be filled in this approach. Jeremy Shapiro of the European Council on Foreign Relations looks more broadly at how a new Democratic foreign policy might fit into a candidate's overall messaging.

Each of the following essays are thoughtful commentaries that tackle the fundamental questions facing American policymakers and thinkers alike. I hope you enjoy reading them as much as I have.

A Free World That Works

Michael Beckley

The American-led liberal order is breaking down — its core institutions gridlocked, its logic obsolete, and its benefits increasingly captured by adversaries and free-riders. Yet, despite this unraveling, the United States remains an extraordinarily powerful nation. Its geography, demography, economy, and innovation base still provide a structural edge over any rival. What it lacks is not strength, but a coherent strategy and the ability to mobilize its immense resources in service of that strategy.

This essay lays out a new strategic framework for the current era. It rejects both nostalgia for the old liberal order, as well as fatalism about America's decline. Instead, it argues that the United States should consolidate a tighter and more strategically aligned coalition to contain China and Russia, the two main threats to U.S. security and prosperity. The goal is not to universalize American values or manage global stability as an end in itself but to contain powerful, revisionist regimes and reinforce key partners.

Rather than divide the world into spheres or try to prop up a dysfunctional universal order, the United States should use its military, economic, and technological advantages to build a free world that works for U.S. interests: a resilient geopolitical bloc anchored in North American industrial scale, reinforced by layered and conditional defense partnerships in Europe and the First Island Chain in East Asia, and integrated through reciprocal trade and joint control of critical supply chains and advanced technologies. That effort will require budget cuts as well as investments — ending obsolete commitments, holding allies accountable, and making clear that U.S. protection is earned, not owed.

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The result is a strategy that is realist but not isolationist, internationalist but not globalist. It draws on lessons from America's past — especially the Cold War effort to contain the Soviet Union through selective strength and alliance discipline — while adapting to the unique dynamics of today's rivalries with China and Russia. America cannot remake the world — but it can contain the most dangerous threats it faces: authoritarian great powers bent on redrawing the map of Eurasia through force.[1]

The Liberal Order's Strategic Deficiencies

The American-led liberal order succeeded in triumphing over its original threats, but now it has outlived its strategic purpose.[2] Designed to rebuild war-ravaged allies and contain the spread of communism, the system Washington built after World War II was tailored for a world that no longer exists. During the early Cold War years, the Soviet Union controlled nearly half of Eurasia and wielded more military power than all of Western Europe combined. Communist parties won up to 40% of the vote in democratic elections and controlled one-third of global industrial output. Under those conditions, defending a U.S.-led capitalist order was prudent despite its enormous costs.

And that strategy worked. The Western alliance became rich and democratic. The Soviet bloc collapsed. But success created new challenges the old order was never designed to handle.

Many of the allies the United States once protected have since become dependents. Sheltered by American power, countries across Western Europe — as well as Canada and Japan — have cut defense spending, expanded welfare states, and deepened economic ties with adversaries. Some now struggle to patrol their own neighborhoods, let alone contribute meaningfully to global stability. Yet when crises erupt — from Chinese coercion in the South China Sea to Houthi attacks in the Red Sea — U.S. allies still look to Washington to act. What were once anchors of U.S. power have become liabilities — drawing resources away from vital priorities and undermining the very burden-sharing that was supposed to strengthen the system.

Worse, the openness of the liberal order empowered America's most capable challengers. By integrating Russia and China into global markets and institutions, the United States gave its adversaries access to capital, technology, and strategic breathing room. With U.S. alliances pacifying their historic rivals in Europe and Asia—especially Germany and Japan—Moscow and Beijing turned outward. Russia invaded Georgia and Ukraine. China militarized islands,[3] threatened Taiwan, and clashed with India. Both exploited their access to Western systems to grow stronger and more aggressive.

China protects its own markets while flooding others with subsidized exports, spending 10 times the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average on industrial policy. It now dominates strategic manufacturing sectors — from drones to pharmaceuticals — and is weaponizing that dominance to coerce rivals. It censors foreign ideas at home while using the open Internet abroad to steal data, plant malware, and spread propaganda. It joins international institutions not to uphold liberal norms, but to subvert them from within. Openness, once a pillar of American power, has become a Trojan horse.

Meanwhile, the globalist reorientation of the order has made governing increasingly difficult. In the wake of World War II, the United States supported decolonization in many regions and encouraged the integration of newly sovereign states into international markets and institutions. The goal was to stabilize the international system, prevent the return of imperial conquest, and channel national aspirations into peaceful development. And, for a time, the strategy worked: European and Japanese empires dissolved, the number of sovereign states tripled after 1945, and wars of conquest became exceedingly rare.

But over time, this success created fragmentation. Washington modernized the global system and now finds it nearly ungovernable. Institutions that once amplified U.S. influence — such as the United Nations (U.N.), the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization (WTO) — have become paralyzed by procedural gridlock, ideological fragmentation, or outright anti-American obstructionism. The very openness that fueled globalization and the so-called "rise of the rest" also massively expanded the number of veto-wielding governments. Each new participant brought unique grievances, interests, and agendas — diluting consensus and multiplying veto points. What were once tight clubs aligned with U.S. priorities have become sprawling forums with competing blocs and no clear direction.[4]

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At the same time, the order's demographic and economic successes have generated new pressures. Sustained peace and prosperity have unleashed population booms in parts of the developing world, even as advanced economies have begun to shrink due to the demographic transition. These divergent trajectories have produced waves of migration, fueling political backlash and instability in receiving states—Europe absorbed more than 1 million Syrian refugees, for example, and now far-right parties are ascendant across the continent. Fragile governments in parts of Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia struggle to absorb surging youth populations, while declining birth rates in Europe and East Asia drive labor shortages, aging electorates, and rising social stress. The resulting migration crises, terrorist threats, and political fractures have overwhelmed the institutional machinery designed for a more static era.

Many Americans want to wall themselves off from these dysfunctions. What began as a project of purposeful global engagement now looks to many like an open-ended commitment to an unmanageable world.

At home, the order's consequences have been equally destabilizing. Globalization has boosted growth, but its rewards have been unevenly distributed. Between 2000 and 2020, one-third of U.S. factory jobs disappeared. Industrial output outside semiconductors declined nearly 10%. Most new jobs emerged in the wealthiest zip codes, while large swaths of the country slid into economic and social decay. Disability claims have soared. Drug overdoses have spiked. Prime-age workers have exited the labor force in numbers not seen since the Great Depression.

In sum, what began as a prudent capitalist alliance has morphed into a globalized mess that has hollowed out parts of the U.S. economy, enfeebled allies, empowered adversaries, and paralyzed international institutions. The basic strategic impulse to forge coalitions that work for U.S. interests and contain U.S. adversaries remains prudent. Nonetheless, what's needed now is not nostalgia, but a fundamental restructuring. The United States needs to recenter its grand strategy around a tighter, more strategically aligned coalition — one that reflects today's realities. The next section suggests one way that such a system could be structured.

A Free World That Works

If containment of rapidly militarizing, autocratic great powers remains necessary, but the current liberal order is no longer fit for purpose, the answer is not to withdraw from the world or divide it with adversaries. It is to rebuild a leaner, more selective, and strategically coherent coalition to defend U.S. interests. The goal is not a universalist order, but a consolidated "free world" alliance — one that reflects hard constraints, maximizes U.S. leverage, and imposes costs on tyrannical regimes that want to redraw the map of Eurasia by force.[5]

That project should begin at home. North America already forms the world's largest free-trade zone, encompassing 500 million people, abundant energy, and a broad industrial base. Canada, Mexico, and the United States together offer a massive market, free trade area, and industrial platform that few rivals can match. Deepening this core — with shared infrastructure, harmonized regulation, secure supply chains, and labor mobility — would give the United States the productive scale to compete globally while reducing dependence on adversaries. A reinvigorated North American economy would not only generate durable growth but would serve as the foundation of a revitalized strategic order.

> ***Many of the allies protected under the old order — particularly in Western Europe and East Asia — have slashed defense budgets, increased dependence on China or Russia, and neglected even basic regional responsibilities. That era must end. U.S. protection should no longer be a birthright but a privilege — earned through strategic contribution, not historical nostalgia.***

Abroad, the United States should anchor a layered defense architecture aimed at containing the axis of autocracies: China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea. Frontline democracies — including Poland, South Korea, Taiwan, and Ukraine — should be armed with abundant short-range missile networks, mobile air defenses, loitering drones, and smart mines, enabling them to impose localized costs on any attempted invasion. Behind them, core U.S. allies such as Australia, France, Germany, Japan, and the United Kingdom would supply longer-range strike capabilities and mobile ground, air, and naval forces. The United States would act as the ultimate strategic enabler, providing intelligence, logistics, nuclear deterrence, and precision long-range fires delivered by carriers, stealth bombers, and submarines.

This security structure needs to be underpinned by a strategic economic bloc. The United States should offer preferential market access only to countries that meet binding conditions: a commitment to boost defense spending; decouple from China and Russia in critical sectors such as semiconductors, rare earths, and advanced manufacturing; and reciprocally open their markets to U.S. goods and investment. These agreements would include common rules on export controls, investment screening, subsidies, and coproduction of technologies essential for military and economic competitiveness. The objective is not to revive the old liberal order but to build a coalition, through a mix of persuasion and coercion, that is capable of defending itself, resisting external coercion, and wielding collective bargaining power in a more fragmented global economy.

But building this free world also requires ruthless pruning. The United States must stop subsidizing countries that drain its power. Many of the allies protected under the old order — particularly in Western Europe and East Asia — have slashed defense budgets, increased dependence on China or Russia, and

neglected even basic regional responsibilities. That era must end. U.S. protection should no longer be a birthright but a privilege — earned through strategic contribution, not historical nostalgia. Nations that fail to meet defense-spending targets, that deny U.S. base access, or that continue to invite adversaries into their infrastructure or markets should face consequences: fewer subsidies, more tariffs, reduced security cooperation, or even withdrawal of guarantees.

Multilateral institutions also need to be triaged. Many of the organizations that once amplified U.S. power — such as the U.N., WTO, and World Health Organization — are now paralyzed by gridlock or have been co-opted by autocracies. Rather than endlessly propping up these forums, the United States should pursue strategic selectivity: working through coalitions of the capable, bypassing paralyzed institutions, and weakening those that empower adversaries. The test for any international body should be simple: Does it help to advance American security, prosperity, and leverage? If not, it should be sidelined or repurposed.

The same realist logic should apply to foreign aid, development policy, and democracy promotion. These tools should serve strategic ends, not moral vanity. The United States should not pour resources into weak states unless they sit in vital theaters or offer returns. It should not bankroll countries that hedge against American leadership or refuse to support U.S. positions on key issues. And it should promote democracy primarily where doing so advances U.S. interests — by weakening rivals, stabilizing key partners, or legitimizing U.S. leadership. Strategic restraint — not missionary idealism — should guide the allocation of American effort and resources.

In the economic realm, the United States should be prepared to drive hard bargains, even with close allies. Trade deals must deliver clear returns to the U.S. economy. Market access should be conditional on partners strengthening labor and environmental standards, respecting intellectual property, and decoupling from adversaries. The United States should increasingly use tools such as export controls, investment taxes, and sanctions to extract concessions and enforce discipline — leveraging its control over financial networks, energy supplies, and critical technologies. The aim is not autarky or broad protectionism but fair trade and coercive integration: securing access for U.S. firms while denying strategic benefits to rivals.

This approach carries risks. Some partners might balk. Others might defect. But the United States holds enormous structural advantages. It has the world's largest consumer market, dominates finance and innovation, and remains one of the least trade-dependent economies. Most nations need access to U.S. markets, capital, and protection far more than the United States needs access to theirs. That asymmetry provides the leverage to set terms — if Washington is willing to use it.

Ultimately, this is not a strategy of disengagement. It is a strategy of reengagement — on better terms. If the liberal order was built on moral idealism and institutional sprawl, the new free world must be forged through selective engagement and disciplined ambition. That means fewer entanglements and tougher terms. A world shaped not by fuzzy appeals to global order, but by the hard realities of coalition-building against great power rivals. The goal is not a rules-based order that pleases everyone. It is a free world that works for the United States and for those willing and able to support it.

The Risks of Spheres

Some contend that the United States could preserve peace by stepping back from Ukraine, Taiwan, or both — even if that means risking the expansion of authoritarian spheres of influence. In this view, China might expand in East Asia, and Russia might solidify control over parts of Ukraine and regain leverage in Eastern Europe, yet the United States could still remain secure in its own hemisphere. Proponents often invoke the Cold War as precedent, arguing that Washington's acceptance of Soviet dominance in Eastern Europe helped prevent direct conflict between nuclear-armed superpowers.[6]

But the analogy is dangerously inapt. Although the race for Berlin and subsequent crises revealed Soviet revisionist ambitions, the former Soviet Union also had incentives to maintain the status quo, because it was defending borders of victory, vast territories gained in World War II.[7] With direct control over Eastern Europe and Central Asia as well as satellite regimes across the Warsaw Pact, Moscow had a massive stake in the existing order and was at times willing to strike deals to consolidate its grip on it. The Helsinki Accords, for example, traded Western recognition of Soviet frontiers in exchange for a toothless human rights clause the Kremlin never intended to honor.

Russia and China are animated by the opposite impulse: not to defend borders of victory, but to erase borders of defeat — those imposed after the collapse of the Soviet Union and China's so-called Century of Humiliation. As leaders of shrunken empires, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping are not trying to preserve the status quo — they are trying to reverse their nations' historical defeats. Ukraine and Taiwan aren't end points on this journey; they're starting lines.

Putin has declared his aim to rebuild a "Russian World" encompassing Ukraine, Belarus, parts of the Baltics, the Caucasus, and northern Kazakhstan. Xi has explicitly claimed Taiwan, nearly the entire South China Sea, expansive zones of the East China Sea including the Senkaku Islands, and an Indian province — Arunachal Pradesh — roughly the size of Austria. He has also invoked historical ties to Japan's Ryukyu Islands and promoted narratives questioning their sovereignty, while Chinese military officials and propagandists have floated threats to U.S. territories like Guam and even Hawaii, portraying them as relics of Western imperialism.

Granting China or Russia small parts of these spheres might not satisfy them but rather empower them to expand further. Control of Taiwan would expand China's ability to project military power into the Western Pacific.[8] From the island's eastern ports and airfields, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) could deploy submarines, aircraft, and surveillance assets that would threaten U.S. and allied surface forces in the East and South China Seas. Beijing could also install hydrophone arrays and other sensors along Taiwan's coastline, creating a critical link in its maritime "kill chain" and forcing the United States to either escalate into space-based warfare or retreat from the region altogether. Politically, Taiwan's fall would eliminate a prominent democratic countermodel to Chinese authoritarianism. And if the conquest were uncontested by the United States, it could undermine the credibility of U.S. alliances — especially with Japan and the Philippines — destroying the deterrent power of those commitments in Beijing's eyes. That, in turn, could pave the way for further Chinese encroachments — such as on Japanese territory like the Ryukyus or deeper into Philippine territorial waters and exclusive economic zone claims in the South China Sea.

Similarly, if Russia succeeds in consolidating control over large parts of Ukraine — either through battlefield victory or Western abandonment — the long-term consequences may not be confined to Ukrainian territory.[9] Although Russia's military is bloodied and bogged down in Ukraine, that weakness

might be short-lived if the war ends with Russia in control of significant Ukrainian territory and the rest of Ukraine unprotected by Western security guarantees. Despite heavy losses, Russia's population size, natural resource endowment, and state-controlled economy give it the ability to rebuild over time — especially if the front stabilizes and military expenditures are prioritized. Moreover, Russian forces have demonstrated a capacity to learn and adapt on the battlefield, incorporating new tactics such as widespread drone use, advanced electronic warfare, and layered defenses.

If Russia dismembers Ukraine, Moscow could consolidate control over key terrain in eastern and southern Ukraine — including the land bridge from Donbas through Zaporizhzhia and Kherson to Crimea, as well as positions along the Dnipro River. This would create a hardened defensive line deep inside Ukrainian territory, shield the Crimean Peninsula from counterattack, and enable the deployment of long-range missile systems, air defenses, and forward-based ground forces perilously close to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO's) eastern flank. Russian forces stationed in occupied southern Ukraine could threaten Moldova and reinforce Moscow's influence in Transnistria, while forces positioned in the northeast could project pressure toward Kharkiv and even the northeastern borders of NATO members like Poland or the Baltics.

Such territorial control would also provide staging areas and logistical depth for future offensives, especially if the West reduces support to Ukraine or fractures politically. Historically, Russia has used territorial footholds as springboards for renewed aggression — launching its 2022 invasion from Crimea and the Donbas, just as it used South Ossetia and Abkhazia after the 2008 war with Georgia. A forward Russian posture inside Ukraine would place NATO in a more reactive, vulnerable position, and the threat of renewed conflict — whether overt or through sabotage and gray-zone tactics — would become a persistent feature of Eastern European security.

> ***Oceans and abundance permit strategic neglect, but American values and democratic political institutions lead to demands for involvement in global entanglements. As a result, the United States often oscillates between apathy and overreaction — signaling weakness until aggression erupts, then plunging into costly conflicts to restore order.***

The idea that China or Russia would peacefully administer static spheres of influence, and not seek greater territorial expansion or encroach on U.S. interests in the Western Hemisphere, is highly questionable given the history of the past two centuries, including the history of U.S. expansion across the North American continent. As John Mearsheimer, the leading proponent of offensive realism, argues, great powers rarely stop expanding unless they are blocked by geographic obstacles or enemy forces. The United States expanded across North America through checkbook diplomacy when it could, and through war and genocide when it could not. Germany and Japan had to be crushed in World War II to end their imperial drives. Britain and France were also devastated by that war, yet they clung to their empires until anti-colonial uprisings and mounting costs forced them to let go. The former Soviet Union likewise sought to extend its reach — arming insurgencies from Asia to Africa to Latin America, sending tanks to suppress liberalization movements in Eastern Europe, and deploying nuclear-tipped missiles in Cuba. Only massive and sustained Western resistance kept the Kremlin in check.

There is no reason to expect Putin or Xi to behave differently. Wherever their forces have advanced, repression and violence have followed. In Ukraine, Russian troops have bombed maternity wards, tortured civilians, abducted tens of thousands of children, and looted or destroyed countless cultural sites. In Georgia, Chechnya, and Syria, the Kremlin flattened cities and supported brutal regimes. Meanwhile, China has crushed dissent in Hong Kong, imposed martial law in Tibet, built concentration camps in Xinjiang, and militarized the South China Sea with artificial island bases and swarms of maritime militia. These are not promising signs of what larger Russian and Chinese spheres would look like.

Another set of risks stems from potential reactions of third parties. If China and Russia's neighbors do not knuckle under and accept greater Russian and Chinese threats and influence over their nations, then the outcome of U.S. retrenchment might not be an immaculate transition to peaceful Russian and Chinese spheres of influence, but violent chaos. A fully militarized Germany and Japan; a nuclear breakout by Berlin, Seoul, Taipei, and Tokyo; and an emboldened North Korea are only the most obvious risks. Less obvious are the knock-on effects: the collapse of Eurasian supply chains and U.S. alliances, which might not survive the shock of seeing the United States create security vacuums for Beijing and Moscow to fill.

The United States might hope to ride out a period of Eurasian turmoil from the safety of the Western Hemisphere. But history offers little comfort. Time and again, America has tried to stay aloof from Eurasian crises — only to be dragged in at far greater cost. In the interwar years, the United States voiced support for peace but failed to prepare for war, relying on paper guarantees such as the Kellogg-Briand Pact.[10] The United States withdrew troops from Europe and demanded debt repayments from allies, who passed the financial burden onto Germany, fueling the Nazis' rise to power. In Asia, the United States failed to build regional defenses even as it sanctioned Japan, projecting hostility without deterrence and inviting the attack on Pearl Harbor.

After World War II, Washington repeated the pattern. It excluded the Korean peninsula from its declared defense perimeter and withdrew U.S. forces — only to reverse course after North Korea invaded, triggering a Chinese intervention and massive escalation. The shock of the war intensified Cold War fears of communist expansion and entrenched the domino theory: the belief that if one country fell to communism, others would soon follow. That idea, in turn, helped propel the United States into its quagmire in Vietnam. Similarly, in 1990, the United States made little effort to deter Iraq's invasion of Kuwait but intervened forcefully after the fact, launching the Gulf War. That conflict ushered in a prolonged U.S. military presence in the Middle East, which helped fuel the rise of jihadist groups like al-Qaeda — culminating in the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

These failures stem from the structure of American power itself: Oceans and abundance permit strategic neglect, but American values and democratic political institutions lead to demands for involvement in global entanglements.[11] As a result, the United States often oscillates between apathy and overreaction — signaling weakness until aggression erupts, then plunging into costly conflicts to restore order.

Today, abandoning Taiwan or Ukraine risks repeating that cycle. The United States faces authoritarian powers that are not only using force to redraw borders but have openly claimed vast territories in the industrial cores of Europe and Asia. Retrenching in the face of such aggression and declared ambitions might empower Beijing and Moscow to move on other territories they claim, forcing Washington to return later to a posture of containment under far worse conditions. At a minimum, the United States

would need to undertake a rapid military buildup to counter the rise of autocratic blocs encroaching on key strategic regions — the industrial and political heart of Europe, as well as the East and South China Seas, which serve as the world's busiest trade corridors and a vital buffer for U.S. allies like Japan, the Philippines, and South Korea. It would reenter the struggle against expansionist adversaries — but this time with fewer allies, more exposed supply lines, and weakened credibility. Reestablishing deterrence in that environment could demand levels of domestic mobilization that strain the U.S. economy and test the resilience of its democracy.

Even setting aside the security risks, the argument for retrenchment and spheres can be questioned on economic grounds. The United States might weather a fractured world better than most — its continent is rich, its geography secure — but it would be far poorer in absolute terms. Outsized national wealth has never come from inward-looking economies. It comes from presiding over open, maritime commercial orders that enable sustained, compounding growth. In the 17th century, the Dutch commanded less than 0.5% of global population but captured nearly 3% of global gross domestic product (GDP) through expansive trade. In the 19th century, Britain — home to just 2% of the world's people — dominated shipping and finance, securing 5-6% of global wealth. Today, the United States holds just over 4% of global population yet commands 26% of global GDP. That extraordinary gap is not the product of self-sufficiency — it stems from anchoring a flourishing trade system. If the United States retreats into continentalism while China and Russia expand their economic blocs — Moscow's Eurasian Economic Union and Beijing's Dual Circulation strategy provide early indications of what such blocs would entail — it might still remain safer and wealthier than most countries. But it would be markedly poorer than it could be, and potentially more likely to face conflict in the future.

The goal is not to crush U.S. rivals but to contain their ambitions — blocking expansion until the internal contradictions of authoritarian overreach impose limits of their own, potentially leading to a strategic reorientation.

Accommodating expanding Chinese and Russian spheres of influence might seem prudent if the only alternative were a catastrophic hot war. But there is a more promising alternative — one rooted in strategic patience and historical precedent. As during the Cold War, the United States does not need to confront its rivals in a battle to the death. The goal is not to crush U.S. rivals but to contain their ambitions — blocking expansion until the internal contradictions of authoritarian overreach impose limits of their own, potentially leading to a strategic reorientation.

Mounting evidence indicates that the limits of authoritarian expansion are approaching. China's economy has been shrinking relative to America's throughout the 2020s in dollar terms — the best measure of a country's international purchasing power — with no end in sight. The decline reflects deep structural challenges: stagnant productivity, mounting debt, a shrinking and aging workforce, capital flight, soaring youth unemployment, and an overcentralized, brittle political system. Meanwhile, Xi Jinping's assertive foreign policy has alienated neighbors, triggered military buildups across the Indo-Pacific, and prompted defensive decoupling by the world's wealthiest democracies. His flagship Belt-and-Road Initiative is faltering, with many of its loans maturing by 2030 and an increasing number of borrowers in or near default. The long-heralded Chinese century is running into hard economic limits and intensifying geopolitical blowback.

Russia, for its part, is bleeding itself dry. Its war against Ukraine has produced more than a million Russian military casualties, depleted key stockpiles, and exposed systemic weaknesses within its armed forces. The regime remains aggressive, but its long-term viability is eroding: It faces a shrinking population, an economy locked in low-tech extractive sectors, growing dependence on China and North Korea, and a political system sustained by repression rather than renewal. Vladimir Putin dreams of imperial restoration, but his war has hastened the decay of the very capabilities — economic, institutional, and human — that enduring great powers require.

Finally, Xi and Putin are both in their seventies; their regimes will not last forever. Yet, ironically, their bleak long-term prospects that make them especially dangerous in the near term. Confronted with narrowing windows of opportunity, both leaders — like many declining autocrats before them — might view military aggression as their best, or only, chance to secure lasting gains before their power fades.[12]

The United States does not need to contain China and Russia indefinitely — only long enough for these destabilizing leaders' ambitions to run their course. If current trends persist, Xi's goal of regional dominance will become increasingly unattainable, and his successors may be forced to turn inward, embracing moderation and reform. The same could happen in Russia: A failed war, deepening isolation, and mounting internal decay could ultimately compel Moscow to adopt a more restrained strategic posture.

This is the logic of containment: not immediate triumph, but strategic endurance. If the United States and its liberal democratic allies can weather this dangerous period, they may not only avert catastrophe, but lay the groundwork for their long-term security and prosperity. The task is not to resurrect the global rules-based order of the past, but to forge a more resilient alliance of free societies for the future.

References

[1] On the distinction between revisionist and status-quo powers, see, for example, Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), esp. ch. 6; Charles L. Glaser, "Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-Help," *International Security* 19, no. 3 (Winter 1994/95): 50–90.

[2] This section draws from Michael Beckley, "The Age of American Unilateralism: How a Rogue Superpower Will Remake the Global Order," *Foreign Affairs*, April 16, 2025, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/age-american-unilateralism.

[3] China has built at least seven artificial islands in the South China Sea, including three with 3,000-meter runways capable of supporting H-6 bombers, deep-water ports for naval vessels, and fortified defenses with anti-aircraft guns, close-in weapon systems, and missile launchers.

[4] Kyle M. Lascurettes, *Orders of Exclusion: Great Powers and the Strategic Sources of International Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020). Lascurettes argues that the United States created two distinct postwar orders: a broad but shallow global system anchored in the U.N., and a narrower, more robust liberal order built around the West—centered on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Bretton Woods institutions (the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank), and a network of alliances among like-minded states. This selective approach was not a flaw but a feature: it allowed Washington to consolidate influence and exclude potential spoilers. In "Enemies of My Enemy," *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2023), I build on this insight to argue that reviving this more exclusive Western order — rather than clinging to the increasingly incoherent post–Cold War global liberal project — is the most viable way to counter authoritarian aggression and sustain a functional rules-based system.

[5] Beckley, "Enemies of My Enemy," *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2023).

[6] Graham Allison, "The New Spheres of Influence: Sharing the Globe with Other Great Powers," *Foreign Affairs* 99, no. 2 (March/April 2020): 30–40. On the potential appeal of spheres to the Trump administration, see Stacie E. Goddard, "The Rise and Fall of Great-Power Competition: Trump's New Spheres of Influence," *Foreign Affairs*[104], no. 3 (May/June 2025): 8–23.

[7] I am indebted to Stephen Kotkin for this distinction.

[8] See Brendan Rittenhouse Green and Caitlin Talmadge, "Then What? Assessing the Military Implications of Chinese Control of Taiwan," *International Security* 47, no. 1 (Summer 2022): 7–45, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00437; Andrew S. Erickson, Gabriel B. Collins, and Matt Pottinger, "The Taiwan Catastrophe: What America—and the World—Would Lose If China Took the Island," *Foreign Affairs*, February 16, 2024, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/taiwan-catastrophe. For arguments that Taiwan's strategic importance is overstated, see Jonathan D. Caverley, "So What? Reassessing the Military Implications of Chinese Control of Taiwan," *Texas National Security Review* 8, no. 3 (2025): 28–53, https://tnsr.org/2025/volume-8-issue-3/so-what/.

[9] Max Bergmann, Michael Kimmage, Jeffrey Mankoff, and Maria Snegovaya, "America's New Twilight Struggle With Russia: To Prevail, Washington Must Revive Containment," *Foreign Affairs*, March 6, 2024, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russian-federation/americas-new-twilight-struggle-russia; Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Michael Kofman, "Putin's Point of No Return: How an Unchecked Russia Will Challenge the West," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2024, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russia/putins-point-no-return; Martin Wolf, "The Ukraine War Will Shape the World," *Financial Times*, July 19, 2025, https://www.ft.com/content/b9d7c64f-c979-4857-b5c5-24e0ac8e8ee9; Daniel Fried and Alina Polyakova, "What If America Abandons Ukraine? The Biggest Risk Might Be to the Rest of Europe," *Foreign Affairs*, April 25, 2025, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/what-if-america-abandons-ukraine.

[10] The Kellog-Briand Pact is a 1928 international agreement on peace in which signatory states promise not to engage in war to resolve "disputes or conflicts...which may arise among them." The pact was signed by France, Germany, and the United States on August 27, 1928 and by most other states soon after.

[11] I elaborate on this "hollow internationalism" in Michael Beckley, "The Strange Triumph of a Broken America," *Foreign Affairs,* January/February 2025.

[12] On the dangers posed by declining powers, see Michael Beckley, "The Peril of Peaking Powers," *International Security* 45, no. 4 (Spring 2021): 7–43; Hal Brands and Michael Beckley, *Danger Zone: The Coming Conflict with China* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2022); Dale C. Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), which argues that rising powers are most likely to launch preventive wars when they anticipate decline; and Michael Beckley, "Xi, Putin and the Danger of Aging Dictators," *New York Times*, February 10, 2023, which contends that autocrats nearing the end of their political and biological lives often pursue reckless gambles in hopes of securing their legacies.

Back to the Future: The Case for Strengthening the Rules-Based Order

Michael Poznansky

For all the profound differences between former President Joe Biden and President Donald Trump, the two agree on one major thing: Great power competition is back, and the People's Republic of China is America's chief competitor.[1] The waning of the unipolar era combined with the outbreak of overlapping global crises has accelerated fierce debates about the future of U.S. grand strategy. Many proposals call for major changes. Some want to turn the page on the postwar rules-based, or liberal international order (LIO). That would be a mistake.

Rather than replacing the LIO, the United States should recommit to its core principles, rules, and norms — things like the rule of law, multilateralism, openness, respect for sovereignty, and most importantly, strategic restraint. This does not preclude making much-needed changes in a host of areas. But the postwar order itself has good bones. It should not be abandoned wholesale. The goal of this essay is less to specify granular reforms and instead to explain why the LIO is well-suited to a renewed era of great power competition, dispel prominent myths about it, and chart a path forward.

One popular misconception is that the way American foreign policy manifested during unipolarity was fully emblematic of the LIO. Some of it was, but U.S. behavior was also frequently at odds with the liberal international order, despite the ostensibly liberal goals at the heart of key policies. One of the driving forces behind the United States' decision to ignore core rules of the liberal order in this period, particularly those governing the use of force, was the absence of a peer competitor. With renewed competition here to stay, policymakers need to relearn lessons from the architects of the postwar order about the value of self-restraint, while avoiding the excesses of that period.

A primary benefit of this approach is its positive impact on America's alliances. The United States is far more likely to outcompete rivals by working closely with Washington's allies and partners than by acting on its own. But these critical relationships are not guaranteed. Beyond military protection, allies want to be assured that the United States will wield its immense power in ways that are predictable, restrained, and responsive to their concerns. The unabashed unilateralism of the post-Cold War period strained this trust. Recommitting to the fundamentals of the rules-based order offers a pathway to restoring confidence. Abiding by the agreed-upon rules and norms of the LIO is neither a sign of weakness nor a slippery slope to transformative and controversial endeavors. Rather, it is a recipe for winning great power competition by ensuring that America remains an attractive partner relative to rivals.

Why the US Needs Allies

One of America's greatest strengths in geopolitical competition is its extensive network of alliances. America's chief rival, China, lacks a comparable network. Although Beijing has aligned with Moscow in Russia's war against Ukraine, with the two countries promising close cooperation, and has supported Iran in various ways, China's only formal alliance is with North Korea.[2] It is also evident that America's competitors view the U.S. alliance network as an asset. As Mireya Solís, the director of the Center for Asia Policy Studies at the Brookings Institution notes, "Testament to the clout of American alliances is how much U.S. rivals chafe at them and seek their erosion."[3]

It is easy to forget sometimes precisely how and why allies matter for great power competition. In a testament to this, Emma Ashford, a senior fellow at the Stimson Center, points out that many proponents of liberal internationalism "regard alliances as 'sacred commitments' and view them as an end, rather than a means in U.S. foreign policy."[4] This approach to thinking about allies is clearly insufficient. That said, Washington reaps at least three major benefits from its extensive alliance network.[5]

First, allies provide significant economic benefits. In a head-to-head competition across a range of sectors and industries, China poses a major challenge to the United States. At a high level, America's nominal gross domestic product (GDP) is larger than China's, but the ranking flips if purchasing power parity is measured.[6] The picture changes significantly once U.S. allies and partners are included. According to Kurt Campbell, the former U.S. deputy secretary of state, and Rush Doshi, the director of the China Strategy Initiative at the Council on Foreign Relations, "Australia, Canada, India, Japan, Korea, Mexico, New Zealand, the United States, and the European Union have a combined economy of $60 trillion to China's $18 trillion."[7] With respect to trade, existing research shows that Washington gets better deals as a result of the security guarantees it provides to allies.[8] The economic benefits of alliances extend beyond the positive returns to the United States. A large part of the reason that U.S.-led economic sanctions against other countries greatly impact target nations is that they are imposed in conjunction with support from allies who, by joining the U.S. sanctions, significantly ratchet up the pain.[9]

A second benefit that allies provide is geopolitical. Any potential conflict in the Indo-Pacific, for example, would include a need for what is known as access, basing, and overflight (ABO), from key allies in the region including Japan and the Philippines. More broadly, ABO acts as a force multiplier. Writing about Europe's importance, Celeste Wallander argues that the 30-plus American bases across the continent enables the United States "not only to defend Europe but also to support American interests across the globe."[10] A similar story could be told in Asia and the Middle East. ABO, of course, is not a given during conflicts.[11] But all else being equal, it is far more likely that Washington can leverage this critical resource from allies with whom it has shared interests and strong bonds. America's security partnerships also contribute to deterrence by increasing the perceived likelihood that any military moves or coercion against its allies could bring the United States in.

A third benefit allies offer relates to the defense industrial base. In testimony before Congress, the commander of Indo-Pacific Command, Admiral Samuel Paparo, argued that China was "build[ing] combatants at the rate of 6-to-1.8 [relative] to the United States."[12] According to a report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), China already has the largest navy.[13] The Chinese Navy was on track to exceed 400 ships in 2025, compared to 295 in the U.S. Navy.[14] Again, the picture changes

when allies are included. For example, despite America's ailing shipbuilding industry, it can work with South Korea and Japan, two close allies with immense shipbuilding capacity, for maintenance, repair, and possibly production.[15] Other powerful allies offer unique capabilities that bolster U.S. power to include production of critical munitions and other assets.

That said, the current alliance system is imperfect. Many areas require improvement and creative thinking. Some analysts argue that the United States needs to work with allies to "generat[e] shared capacity across all critical domains."[16] Others believe that the United States needs to empower Europe to take on greater responsibility for dealing with Russia so America can focus the lion's share of attention on China.[17] One of the most ambitious proposals calls for forming multilateral security relationships in Asia through the creation of a new Pacific Defense Pact.[18] Although these approaches differ in important ways, all acknowledge the value of alliances. To be sure, alliances do entail risks — the most dangerous of which is the threat of entrapment wherein a junior partner drags the United States into an unwanted conflict or war. But there is no escaping the fact that when it comes to competition with China and others, U.S. allies enable the United States to function as a superpower.

How to Win Allies and Influence Partners

If allies offer so many benefits to the United States, what do they want in return? First and foremost, military protection in the form of security guarantees is critical.[19] In Europe, this need is addressed through NATO and its collective security provisions. In Asia, bilateral security arrangements with countries like Japan, the Philippines, and South Korea similarly provide defense guarantees. These security commitments are especially valuable for countries lacking nuclear weapons because U.S. protection doubles as a nuclear umbrella.

Security pacts alone, however, will not engender the kind of deep cooperation necessary for the United States and its allies and partners to out-compete China, Russia, and other would-be competitors. There are at least two additional considerations. First, allies want to know that Washington uses resources wisely such that it can continue to deliver on its many global commitments, particularly as urgent crises and threats emerge. Even though U.S. defense spending is greater than that of every other nation by a significant margin, resources are not infinite. As the war in Ukraine has shown, the West faces real constraints in terms of maintaining stockpiles of critical munitions and weapons platforms. These are not new considerations. During the Vietnam War, policymakers worried that core U.S. allies "could become seriously concerned if we get ourselves involved in a major conflict that degraded our ability to defend Europe and produced anything less than an early and completely satisfactory outcome."[20] Acting as a good steward of precious limited assets is a boon to the alliance network.

The second, and arguably most important, factor for engendering deeper cooperation with allies is confidence that the United States is fundamentally trustworthy and will wield its enormous power in ways that are predictable, restrained, and responsive to allies' concerns. This is no easy feat. Fortunately, there is a blueprint for how to do this: adhering to the rules-based, liberal international order. The liberal order, as originally conceived in the postwar period, was built for this moment. The way it often manifested in the unipolar period was not. Policymakers should therefore internalize key lessons from the architects of the postwar order from the early Cold War while avoiding some of its major pitfalls.

The authors of the liberal international order established a dense array of institutions, rules, and norms to guide state behavior after World War II. Strategic restraint was at its core. In essence, this meant that the United States was "acknowledging that there will be limits on the way in which it can exercise its power"[21] by committing to rules and norms of behavior. Handcuffing itself in this way was not merely an act of benevolence. Rather, policymakers believed it was in the long-term interests of the United States to exercise strategic restraint and build legitimacy in the process as a tool for uniting allies, courting potential partners, and drawing a sharp contrast with the Soviet Union. In practice, the United States' relationship to the liberal world order was complex.

During the Cold War, policymakers were highly sensitive to the risks of undermining confidence in America's commitment to the LIO, especially by using force in ways that would be seen as arbitrary and unconstrained. As a result, they were hyper-concerned with optics. As the author of this paper shows in a new book, *Great Power, Great Responsibility*, leaders went out of their way to showcase compliance when they had the liberal order's rules on their side. When they did not, they relegated violations to the covert sphere to minimize reputational damage even when it severely impeded effectiveness. Deliberations regarding the prospect of intervention in Guatemala in the early 1950s are illustrative. As one State Department memo argued, "Nothing would harm [the] overall interests of the United States in Guatemala more than the premature employment of overly ag[g]ressive measures with respect to Guatemalan internal matters. The communists would be furnished with a valuable weapon throughout Latin America and would be able to do great harm to the inter-American system through a revival of mistrust in the United States and fears of a return to the days of unilateral intervention and 'big-stick' diplomacy."[22] In the end, policymakers turned to secrecy and covert action. The Vietnam War is a major exception. Fears about domino theory and communist expansion in Southeast Asia ultimately overrode all other considerations. Even here, however, policymakers tried for years to quietly stabilize the situation, owing in part to concerns regarding the LIO.[23]

Once the Soviet Union collapsed, the United States embarked on a wide range of new goals well beyond the containment of and opposition to communism. Many of these initiatives, including the promotion of democracy and human rights, were rooted in liberal values. At the same time, when push came to shove, policymakers were increasingly comfortable brazenly ignoring the agreed-upon rules and norms governing the use of force in pursuit of these goals. The concern with optics from the Cold War dissipated. Why the change? In a word, unipolarity. Without the need to compete with another superpower for primacy in the international order, leaders were far less concerned about how allies and nonaligned states would perceive U.S. power and were therefore more willing to openly ignore rules. While other states might complain about what looked like U.S. foreign policy run amok, exit options were limited. In short, it was not just that the United States failed to reform the United Nations or build new institutions during the period of unipolarity, as experts like Max Bergmann, the director of the Europe, Russia, and Eurasia Program at CSIS, argue.[24] It is that policymakers openly disregarded the original tenets at the heart of the postwar order.

Why the change? In a word, unipolarity. Without the need to compete with another superpower for primacy in the international order, leaders were far less concerned about how allies and nonaligned states would perceive U.S. power and were therefore more willing to openly ignore rules.

Things are different now. The unipolar approach toward the liberal international order is ill-suited to today's world. The return of great power competition means the United States is once again locked in a battle over the future of the international order. Allies, partners, and nonaligned powers are watching. Flagrantly violating the core tenets of the liberal order and acting without strategic restraint — whether in pursuit of well-intentioned liberal goals like advancing democracy and human rights, or hard-headed realist objectives like containing Chinese expansion — will come at a cost policymakers have been unaccustomed to worrying about for the last several decades.

What Critics Get Wrong about the Postwar Order

There is no shortage of criticism when it comes to the question of whether the United States should continue to uphold and invest in the liberal order, even in pursuit of nurturing key allies in the service of strategic competition. Many of these critiques, however, are rooted in misunderstandings about the LIO and its inner workings. One of the most common refrains, frequently touted by proponents of a restrained grand strategy,[25] is that the liberal order was the primary source of decades of disastrous U.S. foreign policy. Its list of supposed sins includes costly interventionism, attempts at nation-building, and forever wars. But using the excesses of the unipolar moment to argue that the entire liberal international order should be abandoned is throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

As mentioned, many U.S. foreign policy initiatives of the last 30 years — especially forcible interventions — were a *departure* from core tenets of the LIO as conceived in the rubble of World War II.[26] Although the brazenness with which policymakers ignored the LIO render these cases distinct from Cold War-era covert operations that quietly broke rules, they were violations all the same. Why, then, are these cases not held up as examples of how policymakers strayed from the liberal international order and used to support a refocusing on strategic restraint?

One possible reason is that many of the policies that the United States pursued in the unipolar period were "liberal" in a real sense. They responded to humanitarian crises (e.g., Kosovo) and targeted brutal dictators (e.g., Iraq). In contrast, most interventions during the Cold War were driven by the struggle with the former Soviet Union and realpolitik considerations. Because of this, many analysts probably assume that most post-Cold War interventions are part and parcel of the liberal international order. Indeed, for some restrainers, these unipolar policies are merely the liberal order fully realized.[27] This is understandable to some degree. It is also a misreading of the liberal international order.

Consider the Iraq War. Even though the U.S. military deposed a tyrant and attempted to install democracy, it was an abrogation of the LIO. Why? Because the liberal international order is, at its core, rules-based. When the LIO's rules, such as those governing the use of force, conflict with liberal values, there is an implied hierarchy: The former predominates. This ordering is baked into the foundations of the liberal order. The United Nations (U.N.) Charter's general prohibition on the threat or use of force, for example, is explicitly described as upholding the principles of self-determination and human rights. Many supporters of the U.S.-led order have effectively arrived at this conclusion without necessarily realizing it. The uptick in the usage of the phrase "rules-based international order" versus the "liberal international order" is telling.

This is also germane to debates about the Responsibility to Protect, or R2P. In 2005, the U.N. General Assembly pronounced that countries have an obligation to protect their populations "from genocide,

war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity." This was a deeply liberal idea that redefined the concept of sovereignty in profound ways. At the same time, it also stated that the international community must be "prepared to take collective action...*through the Security Council*, *in accordance with the Charter*...should peaceful means be inadequate and [if] national authorities" fail in their obligations.[28] Thus, intervening to stop crimes against humanity is consistent with the LIO so long as it is not done unilaterally outside the auspices of U.N. rules.

Another common critique of the liberal order, most closely associated with America First, is that it puts the world's interests ahead of U.S. interests. Secretary of State Marco Rubio summarized this point at his confirmation hearing. "While America far too often continued to prioritize the 'global order' above our core national interests," he argued, "other nations continued to act the way countries always have and always will, in what they perceive to be in their best interest." Thus, Rubio posited, the only way the United States can "create a free world out of chaos once again" is for there to be "a strong and confident America that engages the world, putting our core national interests above all else once again."[29]

There is no doubt that abiding by the rules of the liberal international order meant that policymakers were not free to make any decision they wanted in all times and places. Indeed, that was the point. By agreeing to exercise power within certain constraints, the United States built an order that helped it out-compete the Soviet Union. Honey, not vinegar, was key to this enterprise.

The problem with this characterization is that it takes too narrow a view of America's national interests. Much rests, however, on what the crux of the issue is. If the chief concern is that the United States has sometimes been pressed by allies to intervene in countries against its preferences and with suboptimal results, that would be one thing.[30] But if the argument is that the LIO's constraints are the real issue, that is a different matter. There is no doubt that abiding by the rules of the liberal international order meant that policymakers were not free to make any decision they wanted in all times and places. Indeed, that was the point. By agreeing to exercise power within certain constraints, the United States built an order that helped it out-compete the Soviet Union. Honey, not vinegar, was key to this enterprise. Although the United States was freer to loosen the constraints after the Cold War, unabashed unilateralism serves America poorly in an era when it faces a powerful competitor vying for control over the global order.

Renovation, Not Rejection

In an essay in *Foreign Affairs* in 2019, Jennifer Lind and William Wohlforth argued that the liberal order's survival required a healthy dose of conservatism.[31] The core thesis of their article, and other articles like it, call for U.S. policymakers to shift to much more of a status quo mindset. Recommendations in this vein include such matters as avoiding taking on new allies, eschewing state-driven democracy promotion, and so forth.

This author's perspective shares many affinities with this view. As argued in this essay, maximizing the benefits the United States gets from allies does not just require security guarantees and using Washington's vast but finite resources wisely. It also demands that leaders take a page out of the playbook of the postwar architects and ensure they are seen as wielding power responsibly by making strategic

restraint and adherence to agreed-upon rules and norms a lodestar. This would undoubtedly make U.S. policy more "small-c" conservative in meaningful ways. Controversial democracy promotion or nation-building efforts, for example, would be unlikely to garner the needed support such that they could be pursued without running afoul of U.S. obligations under the liberal international order.

Following this template does not mean, of course, that the United States must abandon commitments to democracy, human rights, and freedom abroad. But it does mean the way that America exercises power in pursuit of these values should more closely reflect postwar constraints centered on strategic restraint and place less emphasis on its post-Cold War impulses, which were far more unilateral.

Following this template does not mean, of course, that the United States must abandon commitments to democracy, human rights, and freedom abroad. But it does mean the way that America exercises power in pursuit of these values should more closely reflect postwar constraints centered on strategic restraint and place less emphasis on its post-Cold War impulses, which were far more unilateral.

It also requires policymakers to plan for how best to achieve pressing national interests when they conflict with the agreed-upon rules and norms of the liberal international order. The unapologetic and overt unilateralism of the post-Cold War period is exceedingly risky. At the same time, using covert action to square this circle, particularly as practiced throughout much of the Cold War, comes with distinct risks. The possibility of exposure, particularly for controversial pursuits like regime change, entails meaningful costs for the United States, including a loss of trust.

Thus, policymakers would be well served by seeking international authorization where possible and building large, multilateral coalitions for important undertakings. Indeed, exercising power prudently should increase the likelihood that leaders can achieve this kind of support in the first place. Although increasing hostility with China and Russia may take U.N. Security Council (UNSC) action off the table given the two countries' veto power, there is plenty of maneuver space. Most straightforwardly, the United States can seek backing from regional entities. UNSC authorization is the gold standard under the LIO, but formalized regional support is still an attractive second-best option. More creatively, Washington could pursue uniting-for-peace resolutions, which allow the U.N. General Assembly to authorize action to address threats to international peace and stability when the Security Council is deadlocked. Covert action could be an option when solutions like this are infeasible. But policymakers need to be prepared to defend such operations if — and often, when — they are exposed.

Calling for the United States to recommit itself to the liberal international order is not inherently at odds with a range of other suggestions for improving U.S. grand strategy. Proposals for U.S. allies to spend more on defense in the service of more equitable burden sharing, revising rules that have disproportionately benefited China or that have become too rigid, and prioritizing the Indo-Pacific are perfectly compatible with the approach called for here — with caveats.[32] In brief, these measures would all have to be undertaken multilaterally through cooperation and consultation. Attempting to strong-arm allies into adopting new rules or spending more on defense might achieve short-term victories, but such an approach could realign incentives in ways that undermine U.S. interests over the long run.

Finally, it is crucial to address the million-dollar question: Can the genie really be put back in the bottle? That is, can the United States credibly commit to strategic restraint after decades of sidelining such

concerns? Although difficult to achieve, it is possible. A little more than a year after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Pew conducted a survey of global views of the United States. Although 82% of those surveyed "believe the U.S. interferes in the affairs of other countries," almost two-thirds "believe the U.S. contributes to peace and stability around the world." As Pew notes, "in many nations, the share of the public that thinks the U.S. listens to countries like theirs has been on the rise, and in 12 countries, it is at the highest point we've seen in any of our surveys."[33] Although circumstantial, this suggests that the Biden administration's efforts to unite allies in defense of Ukraine and make the rules-based order a centerpiece of its foreign policy had an effect. There is obviously more work to be done, but clearly, there is an appetite for principled, responsible U.S. leadership.

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Europe, the Rationale of Burden Shifting, and the Promise of Germany

Sumantra Maitra

"Our transatlantic alliance has endured for decades. And we fully expect that it will be sustained for generations to come. But this won't just happen." This is what Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth said in a speech in Brussels in February 2025, adding, "It will require our European allies to step into the arena and take ownership of conventional security on the continent."[1] He was echoed by Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Elbridge Colby: "Germany is Europe's largest economy, with a history of major contributions to [the North Atlantic Treaty Organization] NATO collective defense during the Cold War. It is vital and justified that Germany step up and lead in Europe's conventional defense...This includes accelerating the buildup of European conventional forces, capabilities, and industries to enable Europe to assume primary responsibility for its own conventional defense."[2]

Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that shifting the burden of conventional defense to Europe is currently the officially stated policy of the United States government.[3] According to both the secretary and undersecretary of defense, Europe needs to shoulder the burden of conventional security. Their message is a good initial guideline for Europeans to understand how the new administration is redirecting American grand strategy in Europe: that a complete shift in certain domains — namely in logistics, infantry, armor, intel, and anything that falls within conventional power — is required. Security is a shared burden between the continent of Europe and the United States. U.S. policymakers prefer to keep the nuclear power and escalation threshold firmly in American hands in order to keep any nuclear proliferation in check. Nevertheless, Washington is pushing Europe to shoulder conventional deterrence on the continent.

This is a sound realist strategy, one that satiates populists on both sides of the Atlantic and keeps the United States formally tied to Europe. With this approach, American interests in Europe are minimal but intact. This short essay argues that American right-wing realism — a return to a statecraft that attempts to relitigate the last quarter century of ideological warfare — itself faces a key challenge: Burden shifting is necessary to match American ends to means but risks nuclear proliferation. A compromise posture is therefore needed. This essay attempts to explain the causal logic of burden shifting in certain domains while keeping nuclear deterrence on the European continent in American hands. This approach is in line with an America First concept of U.S. grand strategy in Europe and historic American predilections. Moreover, it is well suited for the structural trends in world politics, in particular the declining power of the United States relative to others, that are occurring today.

Theoretical Contradictions of American Hegemony in Europe

Any conservative-realist grand strategy in Europe should start with a theoretical framework highlighting American interests in Europe, such as that elaborated by American political scientist Hans Morgenthau in 1950: "We have conceived the two wars which we fought essentially as two holy crusades, engaged in by a good people against an evil one. It so happened, that what was really at stake in those crusades was not at all the extirpation of evil of its own sake, but the restoration of the balance of power in Europe," Morgenthau wrote.[4] Translating that goal into policy provides a clear set of principles.

As a maritime great power, America's perpetual interest is in opposing a continental hegemon in Europe. A European hegemon — an entity controlling most of the European continental landmass under one flag and one army — is a risky proposition for the United States for several reasons. First, a single, united entity would have an enormous amount of land depth as an imperial power, making military conquest difficult in times of extreme crisis. Second, it would have a massive trade surplus, production capacity, and manpower to challenge, or even dwarf the United States, *in extremis*. Third, a European hegemon would have trading power to bypass and challenge American prosperity, thus destabilizing America's relative power. Fourth, it could, if it chose to do so, side with peer adversaries of the United States, isolating Washington. Fifth, it could corrode the preeminent role of the dollar in the global economy, as well as the power of sanctions — a core tool of U.S. foreign policy. Finally, if American economic power is dwarfed by a continental European empire, second-order effects would be felt on U.S. security in the Western Hemisphere.

Historically, as Morgenthau outlined, the United States opposed any of these scenarios. In the early days of the republic, U.S. leaders pursued this goal through hard-edged realism and protectionism. After World War II, the United States discarded this model of offshore balancing in Europe and instead institutionalized peace on the continent. After the end of the Cold War, institutionalism resulted in the expansion of NATO and the European Union (EU), along with the steady atrophy of European military power.

Washington's predilections are simultaneously not to overspend in pursuit of hegemony over Europe, while berating the Europeans to do more but opposing attempts for the Europeans to build their own military-industrial complex.

Moreover, the United States was not designed to be an empire. The country lacks an imperial elite and stands as an egalitarian, aspirational, and meritocratic republic. It is a democracy. Classic empires are also often prone to overstretch and practice needless imperial cruelty and exploitation abroad. But given their elite governing structure, they were also often able to avoid the volatility of public passions. American policymakers cannot follow this pattern — a fact that often produces incoherent policy and public discontent about foreign policy.

Nowhere is that incoherence more visible than in American policies toward Europe. American grand strategy in Europe faces historical contradictions. Washington's predilections are simultaneously not to overspend in pursuit of hegemony over Europe, while berating the Europeans to do more but opposing attempts for the Europeans to build their own military-industrial complex. This incoherence arises from elite fears of a consolidated European empire, which would be an anathema to the United States.

A Disunited Europe

Fortunately, the chance of a European hegemon forming is minimal. As for the threat of external hegemony imposed upon Europe, the only contenders are Russia and China. Although China's influence in Europe is growing, Chinese trade and military hegemony over Europe is unlikely, unless of course, Europe were to consolidate under one supranational entity and side with China against the United States. Russia, meanwhile, has neither the will nor the capability to occupy and pacify all of Europe; it currently struggles to maintain control over one-fifth of Ukraine. Europe's collective gross domestic product (GDP) and the size of its collective workforce dwarf that of Russia.

Recent trends also support the idea that Europe itself cannot unify as a hegemon. A decade ago, the European economy and technology market were at parity with that of the United States; today, the dominance of American companies overseas and U.S. tech supremacy are nearly insurmountable. Europe is internally divided over its strategic orientation and its regulatory powers. Various centrifugal forces, from far-right nationalism to social conservatism, are rising in opposition to a more consolidated Europe ruled from Brussels. European peace itself is in many ways an artificial construct — the result of American predominance in Europe — which could logically be undermined by even a partial U.S. retrenchment. The chances of a European split are higher than the chances of European consolidation.

Despite tensions, the fundamentals of the Euro-American relationship remain stable. Vice President J. D. Vance's February 2025 speech in Munich, Germany, may have sounded unnecessarily belligerent to the Europeans, but the satisfactory end to the trade war between the United States and the EU suggests ongoing shared interests.[5] The question for U.S. leaders, therefore, is how to achieve policy compromise. For decades, instead of a British-style imperial "divide-and-rule" approach toward a stable European balance of power, the United States tried to institutionalize peace on the continent after World War II.[6] This was a shift away from a grand strategy that had worked for centuries, from aiding the smaller of two warring sides to balance any hegemonic threat to incorporating every potential belligerent under one security umbrella and the rubric of a "rules-based order."

Of course, this resulted in an asymmetry of interest. The expansion of both NATO and the EU — and the idea of an ever-growing Europe whole and free — resulted in a lack of equilibrium where the Western European powers, absent any direct strategic threat to their homelands, started to free ride on the United States. As the frontiers of NATO moved steadily east, for example, German muscle atrophied from around 12 divisions of fielded army (with 36 brigades and around 7,000 tanks and antipersonnel carriers) in 1989 to today's status quo, where Berlin faces problems in equipping a single brigade in the Baltics.[7] In short, the apparent preference of Western European countries, especially Britain and France, is that they do not genuinely fear a Russian hegemony, nor are they willing to replace the United States in Europe.

Eastern European states, in contrast, have an entirely different grand strategy. These states do not trust their bigger and more powerful western neighbors to protect them and have legitimate fears of a revanchist imperial Russia to their east. Eastern Europe, especially the Baltic states, are therefore heavily dependent on the United States. Every strategic document of the Baltic states includes two core principles: a fundamental interest in a growing NATO and EU, and keeping the United States tied to the security of Europe.[8] The strategic logic is simple: Increasing the size of NATO will democratize the alliance even further, resulting in the loss of relative power of the US hegemon. Expanding an alliance such as NATO consolidates the already entrenched liberal-internationalist orthodoxy within it; creates a

self-sustaining bureaucracy; and makes it difficult for any nation-state, even the hegemon, to act in their narrow and restrained national interest. Put simply, the greater the Russo-American friction, the greater the benefit for Eastern European states.

The Four-Stage Strategy

Expanding an alliance such as NATO consolidates the already entrenched liberal-internationalist orthodoxy within it; creates a self-sustaining bureaucracy; and makes it difficult for any nation-state, even the hegemon, to act in their narrow and restrained national interest.

All of this has resulted in Washington acting as glue for an arrangement that is increasingly unsustainable for the United States to maintain, thanks to structural pressures. The American public has grown wary of European free riding, as well as liberal interventionism, nation-building and wars of choice. The rise of China, on a scale that is unprecedented in American history, has united the American strategic community. China's naval buildup, dollar-proofing of its economy, nuclear buildup, storage of food grains, and buying gold and medicines portend to at least a potential limited bid for hegemony in Asia, one that might change the international order in the Indo-Pacific. [9]

The decline in relative power of the United States and the growing support for retrenchment among the electorate was reflected in the reelection of Donald Trump, who, in the words of former National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, is "one of those figures in history who appears from time to time to mark the end of an era and to force it to give up its pretenses."[10]

The most logical way for him to do so is burden shifting.

To reverse its current posture, the United States should reverse its support for "institutionalism" in Europe, which it has promoted for half a century. This approach — a US-imposed European order — has run its course as a strategy and is ill suited for today's world. Instead, any new security architecture in Europe should start with strategic sidelining of the EU as an entity and instead should entail bilateral grand bargains between the United States and the powerful states of Western Europe.

Second, the United States should return to a posture of offshore balancer in Europe, shifting all conventional burdens — whether artillery, armor, intelligence, logistics, or infantry — to the rich and powerful states of Western Europe, especially Germany. U.S. retrenchment is legally uncomplicated; total withdrawal from NATO is not allowable under U.S. law without a congressional amendment to the treaty, but this is neither needed nor advisable in the current moment. Troop deployments are a presidential prerogative; the president can bypass Congress in this matter.

Third, the United States should encourage strategic independence by individual European nations, with respect to procurement, research and development, tech transfer, weapons acquisition, interoperability, and coordination. Washington should also encourage mini-ententes and the formation of various bilateral relationships — i.e., Franco-Turkic, Greco-British, British-Polish, and German-Lithuanian.

Finally, the United States should encourage diplomacy between Russia and the European states (especially Poland, the Baltics, and other states wary of Russian power) to defuse tensions. This would

require satiating some of Russia's natural interests in its near abroad, along with allaying the fears of the Eastern European states. Washington should block and veto any further enlargement of NATO, signaling good faith to Moscow. But a strong U.S. naval presence in the form of the 2nd fleet, as well as the U.S. strategic command and nuclear weapons present in Germany, will continue to provide a firm guarantee that, at a minimum, the American extended nuclear umbrella is there to stay. [11]

For the near and foreseeable future, the United States should maintain extended deterrence in Europe, discouraging nuclear proliferation, and keeping the threshold of nuclear escalation in American hands. Some operational changes in posture should be made, such as reducing the number of warheads. The United States can also encourage both Britain and France to transition some nuclear assets to a more unified European command, providing a second-tier deterrence. Moreover, Washington can rely on patrolling subsurface deterrents, instead of static deterrents, such as deploying warheads in Europe.

Outside of the nuclear question, however, Europe needs to decide how to divide the burden of defense among its own states, either through NATO, or via *mini-ententes* facilitated by Washington. Two countries are particularly important to the United States as it retrenches and pushes Europe to build a "minimum credible deterrence": Turkey and Germany. Turkey is the second-largest force within NATO and is a natural historic balancer of Russia in the Black Sea, Aegean, and Mediterranean. American bases in Turkey are a foothold from which the United States can provide deterrence over the Mediterranean and North Africa.

> ***American hegemony now rests on unstable ground in a strategic landscape shaped as much by production as by the projection of hard power.***

Germany, however, is the most important country in Europe for the United States. German policymakers have recently approved a historic debt break, hinted at creating the largest conventional force in Europe, suggested restarting the draft, and have supported the American call to allocate 5% of GDP for defense spending.[12] Existing U.S. bases and capabilities in Germany are centrally located and are positioned to cover and provide extended nuclear deterrence for the entire European continent — even as the United States retrenches from other countries in Europe (Greece, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, etc.).

In short, as long as the United States maintains its bases in Germany and Turkey, and as long as a broad consensus exists between Berlin and Washington about the direction of the continent, America does not need to micromanage whatever other tactical alignments develop in Europe. A template for a rapid drawdown of American troops already exists; it occurred between 1993 and 1996. A similarly rapid drawdown this time would incentivize Western European states to rapidly rearm and return to their pre-1990 force postures.

These changes are also likely to improve the US-Russia relationship, signaling to Russia that attempts toward a genuine detente are at play. Simultaneously, the United States should push for further strategic nuclear limitation talks with Russia, continuing the Trump administration's preference for a balance of diplomacy and deterrence.

The Promise of Germany

Germany is the most special country in Europe for the United States for purely realist reasons. Hans Morgenthau argued that "by virtue of that natural endowment of Germany, whichever nation is able to gain control of all Germany... has gained such an advantage in the struggle for power that it may well have become invincible in a shooting war." As he notes, the simple logic of the Cold War in Europe was based on this reality of German power, increasing "our strength in the struggle with the Soviet Union" and denying that "the Russians the addition of German strength."[13] That reality is still present. Germany remains at the center of European power, economy, and industry.

Most Germans are fond of the United States, despite occasional rifts. Both countries would do well not to lecture each other on shared values or culture and instead to focus on their strategic partnership. J. D. Vance's February 2025 speech in Munich, although harsh, was in many ways a wakeup call for Germany to assume its position as the natural leader of Europe.[14] This administration is clear that the United States intends to employ significant burden shifting to Europe in the coming years, and Germany will need to take the lead in this effort. Luckily, judging from the noises coming out of Berlin, the penny has finally dropped.

Going forward, the United States should no longer aspire to maintain full-spectrum primacy in the European theater and should promote European rearmament and tactical independence. Washington would reap an enormous benefit from this approach: A strong European component, led by a rearmed Germany, would exist within NATO. Moreover, a strong, independent Germany shouldering much of the conventional security burden of Europe is not something that Washington should be wary of, rather, it should embrace such a move.

In 1945, another Morgenthau argued that managing Germany is the core problem for the United States. Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau Jr. called for "war factories to be dismantled or converted to peacetime production," noting that "the United States has demonstrated with what speed these factories can be converted back again and how much basic production is the same for peace or war."[15] This time, Germany provides great opportunities for the United States to achieve its foreign policy goals. German industry offers promise for Europe, and frees the United States to focus on its peer rival, China, in the Asia-Pacific.

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An American Strategy for a Multipolar World

Zack Cooper

U.S. grand strategy has been remarkably consistent over the last century. But the American people and their elected representatives no longer appear willing to dedicate the resources required to uphold some key elements of longstanding U.S. foreign policy. Gone are the days when President John F. Kennedy could promise that the United States would "bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and success of liberty."[1] In its place is a narrower definition of American interests and a fundamental rethinking of the United States' place in the world. This essay argues that bringing American ends and means back into balance requires U.S. leaders to not only acknowledge the emergence of multipolarity, but to fully embrace it.

Shifting American Views

President Donald Trump is often credited with crystallizing and capitalizing on shifts in American public opinion about international engagement. Yet, a combination of structural explanations provides a more convincing explanation for the American public's reconsideration of U.S. grand strategy.

First, the United States is no longer a rising power — instead, America appears to have reached its apex and is on the downslope of Pax Americana. Trump's "make-America-great-again" motto acknowledges a degree of decline, even if it simultaneously holds out hope that this trend can be reversed. Secretary of State Marco Rubio has argued, "It's not normal for the world to simply have a unipolar power… that was an anomaly. It was a product of the end of the Cold War, but eventually you were going to reach back to a point where you had a multipolar world, multi-great powers in different parts of the planet. We face that now."[2] As I chronicle in *Tides of Fortune*, the perception of relative decline changes countries' national objectives by making them more defensive and shrinking their geographic focus.[3] Not surprisingly, many Americans are doing exactly this today.

Second, many young people question America's ability to bring about positive outcomes in the world. The generations of Americans that experienced World War I, World War II, or even the Cold War are passing from the scene. In their place is a generation that grew up with American failures in Afghanistan and Iraq, among other locales. They question the U.S. government's ability to positively influence global security and international development, particularly with foreign assistance. These factors are driving a rethinking about spending on both military and nonmilitary instruments because

many are deeply skeptical of arguments that without U.S. engagement, the world will become a more dangerous place.

Third, U.S. resources are stretched at exactly the moment when new threats are rising. In 2024, RAND's Commission on the National Defense Strategy suggested that "the severity of the threats… will require spending that puts defense and other components of national security on a glide path to support efforts commensurate with the U.S. national effort seen during the Cold War."[4] Yet, U.S. defense spending as a percentage of gross domestic product remains lower than it has been for most of the last century, and the American people (via the U.S. Congress) have proven unwilling to dedicate more resources to defense.[5] America's rising debt burden and the public's growing skepticism of international engagement are creating a "Lippmann Gap."[6] American ends and means no longer appear to be balanced.[7]

Although many in the national security community hope to reverse these trends and convince the American people of the wisdom of international engagement, these constraints are likely to continue for the foreseeable future. Indeed, there is reason to believe that these dynamics could intensify as U.S. debt increases and the memory of effective U.S. international interventions fades in the minds of the American people. As U.S. circumstances have changed, many members of the American public have become frustrated — they perceive that experts in Washington are out of touch with the views held by many people in the rest of the country. Therefore, it is no longer sufficient for the national security community in Washington to make the case for renewed support for international engagement. U.S. policymakers need to adapt American grand strategy to the missions and burdens that the American people are willing to accept today.

> ***But the reality is that those who believe deeply in international engagement and the need for additional defense outlays have been unable to convince many of the American people of the wisdom of our approaches. Therefore, Americans would be wise to heed advice often attributed to Winston Churchill: "We have run out of money; now we have to think."***

Addressing Strategic Insolvency

How might U.S. leaders bring American ends and means back into alignment? One possibility is that an American president who can trumpet the value of international engagement could take the helm. President Ronald Reagan is perhaps the best example of a leader who was able to win public support for major increases in spending on national security priorities without a precipitating crisis.[8] But as noted above, today's circumstances are quite different from those over four decades ago; the current global situation could constrain even the most gifted orators. Moreover, a long-term change in U.S. international engagement would require sustained investment over many years, which is probably beyond the capability of any single leader, no matter how effective.

A more dire possibility is that a conflict could erupt that convinces the American people that they need to devote more time, attention, and resources to national security. The United States has been lulled into a sense of false security repeatedly in its history, only to be jolted awake by an attack from

overseas. This was the case with the attack on Pearl Harbor, the invasion of South Korea, and the September 11 attacks. A stunning surprise attack of this sort could force Americans to rethink their approach to national security and increase the resources that they are willing to dedicate to overseas missions. Yet, American leaders should not hope for or plan around such a dire scenario.

In short, Washington cannot assume that an atypical leader or an external event will resolve U.S. strategic insolvency. American officials should instead adjust their desired outcomes to meet the means appropriated by Congress. Acknowledging this reality will frustrate critics who will claim that the national security community should set objectives and then win the support necessary to achieve them, rather than the other way around. In an ideal world, this is true. But the reality is that those who believe deeply in international engagement and the need for additional defense outlays have been unable to convince many of the American people of the wisdom of our approaches. Therefore, Americans would be wise to heed advice often attributed to Winston Churchill: "We have run out of money; now we have to think."

Thinking about a new American strategy should begin by doing a fresh assessment of the world that exists today. Two components are critical: 1) understanding shifts in the international system and 2) understanding shifts in U.S. domestic willingness to address these challenges. The first component is best accomplished with a top-down review of changes in international politics, while the second requires a bottom-up rethinking of American attitudes toward international engagement. Each is addressed separately below.

A Fragmented Multipolar World

International relations experts and political leaders are fond of saying that the world is at an inflection point. The question, however, is not whether the world is changing, but how. The central changes in the world today derive from one factor: the emergence of multipolarity. This, in turn, causes a series of other shifts in international politics that are reshaping dynamics in the economic, military, and technological arenas.

The central driver of multipolarity is the rapid rise of a number of new powers, including China, India, Indonesia, Brazil, and others.[9] As the economic prospects of these populous countries have risen, they are catapulting past many of the world's more established economies. By 2050, one analysis suggests that emerging markets will grow twice as fast as the advanced economies of the G-7.[10] Meanwhile, many of the world's advanced industrial economies (as well as China) are aging rapidly, with a political economist, Nick Eberstadt, noting that "[the] overwhelming majority of the world's [gross domestic product] GDP today is generated by countries that will find themselves in depopulation a generation from now."[11] In purchasing power parity terms, some experts project that China and India will surpass the United States in gross national product, while Brazil, Indonesia and Mexico surpass Germany, Japan, and the United Kingdom. Simultaneously, another group of rising powers — led by Nigeria, the Philippines, and Vietnam — is expected to vault into the world's top 20 economies. Advances in artificial intelligence and other technologies could slow down these changes, or accelerate them, depending on where innovation occurs and how AI is proliferated and exploited around the world.

Ironically, the United States' own actions are accelerating this shift toward multipolarity. The era of American global primacy was not going to last forever, but its downfall has been accelerated by leaders in Washington. As John Ikenberry has long argued, U.S. policies in the aftermath of World War II were designed to sacrifice some of America's short-term power in order to lock in long-term U.S. influence.[12] Washington built international institutions — the United Nations and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) alliance in Europe, as well as bilateral alliances in Asia, the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and other institutions — that would lock in American power long after the United States started to decline. Although practiced imperfectly, this strategy decreased balancing behavior among many of the world's great powers and incentivized countries to continue to cooperate with the United States.

Today, however, the United States has not only overlooked the value of these institutions but actively sought to undermine some of them. In so doing, it has accelerated balancing behavior by many of its traditional allies. Although staving off multipolarity would probably have been impossible, its advent could have been slowed if U.S. leaders had convinced their foreign counterparts that Pax Americana remained beneficial to them. Many recent U.S. administrations have tested the confidence of international partners, including everything from George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq to Democrats' unwillingness to embrace new trade deals. But the Trump administration's focus on "America First" and allied burden sharing has dramatically accelerated the willingness and ability of traditional U.S. allies to develop independent capabilities and become separate poles in the international system.[13] In the short term, this may be beneficial to the United States by more equitably distributing the responsibilities of international leaders. Yet, in the long term, this will effectively undermine U.S. power and influence, leading to a more complex and less orderly international system.

A multipolar world is now unavoidable, with legacy powers increasingly accompanied by a number of rising powers, but this multipolarity is also highly uneven. Some regions and subregions are clearly multipolar, while others continue to look unipolar or bipolar, such as North America and Northeast Asia, respectively. Similarly, leadership on functional issues is diverging, with different countries leading in different sectors. The Netherlands, for example, is a vital player on advanced semiconductors, while several Gulf states are investing heavily in infrastructure for AI and quantum computing. Leadership in these and other technologies is more diversified than ever. As a result, this is a much more complex system than the multipolar dynamic that existed in Europe after the Congress of Vienna (1814-1815). Today's multipolar system is highly fragmented along regional and functional lines. America remains the strongest of the legacy powers, and China is the strongest of the rising powers, but this belies incredible complexity throughout the system that is emerging.

An Inward-Looking United States

The American people have been willing to accept the burden of international leadership for roughly 80 years, but today attitudes are shifting. Polling shows that 52% of Americans now say the United States "should pay less attention to problems overseas and concentrate on problems here at home."[14] This includes 67% of Republicans and 58% of those under the age of 50. Meanwhile, 52% of Americans report that U.S. influence in the world has been "getting weaker" in recent years. This is a dire set of assessments about the United States' willingness to engage in the world.

And yet, two-thirds of Americans report that they still want the United States to take a "leading" or "major" role in the world.[15] This is not an isolationist America, but rather a public calling for more attention to domestic over international issues. The public seems to want the United States to continue its international leadership, but to do so at a lower cost. There are growing partisan differences, however, regarding which areas should be of greatest concern to Washington. Republicans identify China as their top threat, by a significant margin.[16] Democrats are more divided, with Russia currently listed a bit higher than China in their order of concerns. The two parties also increasingly have different views on the importance of everything from climate to support for Israel.

These polls suggest that going forward, the logic of American engagement should rest on several principles. First, U.S. resourcing for international engagement — both military and nonmilitary — is unlikely to increase, barring a crisis. Second, Washington should ask its allies and partners to do more because the U.S. public is questioning whether the burden of global leadership is worth the cost. Third, U.S. leaders will need to focus on managing threats from China, and to a lesser degree Russia, because those are consistently listed as the top international concerns for most Americans.

Embracing Multipolarity

Pessimists rightly note that the combination of a more inward-looking United States and a more contested international environment creates the conditions for a more contested world. Senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations Rebecca Lissner and Mira Rapp-Hooper, a partner at The Asia Group, have therefore expressed concern that the United States is absent at the creation of a new world order.[17] Proactively embracing multipolarity could allow the United States to continue to play a major role in the world, while shifting some of the burden of international leadership to other countries. The question is how to best execute this shift in strategy.

The United States will need to decide where it must expend resources and where it can accept risk. This requires setting priorities because the United States is seriously resource-constrained for the first time in decades.[18] Leaders in Washington should scale back U.S. goals in some areas, lest the mismatch between objectives and capabilities worsen. But they should also have a clear strategy for devolving power and leadership in the areas that the United States vacates, in order to minimize the damage done to U.S. interests by any power vacuums created as a result of partial U.S. disengagement.

One approach for devolving regional influence is to empower a regional state. The Vice President for Research and Studies at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments Evan Montgomery has demonstrated that this strategy can be successful, particularly when a global power's interests align with those of one or more regional powers.[19] Another option is for the United States to maintain its leadership role but narrow the conditions of its engagement. This could include building issue-specific coalitions to pursue manageable objectives. A coalition on critical mineral processing and production outside of China, such as the Minerals Security Partnership, would be particularly

The United States will need to decide where it must expend resources and where it can accept risk. This requires setting priorities because the United States is seriously resource-constrained for the first time in decades.

advantageous at this time. Maintaining regional primacy or dominance is unlikely to be successful, but these types of more limited ends might be achievable. These strategies suggest that outright disengagement may be less advantageous than thoughtful rebalancing of resources that maintains some influence in key regions and countries.

Regional Tradeoffs

Which regions are most critical to U.S. security and prosperity, and which regions are of secondary or tertiary concern? Throughout the last century, the answer to this question revolved around the idea that the most critical regions of the world were those that could provide a jumping-off point for another great power to attack the U.S. homeland. To that end, U.S. strategy sought to prevent the rise of a hostile hegemon on the Eurasian landmass.

Today there is only one potential threat of this sort on the horizon: China. Russia is a serious threat, but it is struggling to conquer a portion of Ukraine, so it cannot pose an existential threat to the U.S. homeland. Iran, North Korea, and other smaller players are more spoilers than existential concerns. This does not imply that the United States should withdraw from Europe, the Middle East, or the Korean Peninsula. But it does suggest that Washington would be wise to rely more on its partners in those areas in order to refocus some attention and resources on the challenge from China. To that end, an honest reassessment of Washington's regional strategies should rest upon five principles.

First, the United States should shift more attention and resources to Asia. As the most populous region of the world, and a rapidly growing economic and innovation hub, security in Asia remains vital to U.S. prosperity. America's allies and partners in Asia are not large enough to balance China on their own, so U.S. engagement is vital to regional security. Owing to the basic disparities in power, Asia is the only place in the world where U.S. allies and partners are not capable of managing regional security without U.S. involvement. Therefore, the United States truly is the indispensable nation in Asia, since any disengagement by Washington would permit Beijing to assert hegemony across much of the region. Nonetheless, the United States does not need to do everything in Asia. It can help organize key allies and partners — Australia, India, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan — that are willing to push back against problematic Chinese behavior in different areas.

Second, shifting some additional resources to Asia does not require that the United States abandon its allies and partners in the rest of the world, particularly in Europe.[20] The trans-Atlantic relationship is a triumph of a century of U.S. foreign policy, and it should continue to be nurtured. European countries combined have an economy an order of magnitude larger than that of Russia, but rapid or unilateral changes would undermine regional security and embolden Russia. This can be avoided if NATO conducts a strategic reassessment of national roles, missions, and capabilities, informed by changes in American and European resourcing and capabilities. As Europe steps up, Washington should work with its NATO allies to jointly adjust allied force posture and capabilities on the continent. This would shift the allies' focus from how much each country spends on defense to what they specifically bring to the table and how they can reinforce one another's efforts.

Third, the United States should deprioritize, but not abandon, the Middle East. For nearly a century, the Middle East has been regarded as one of three priority theaters for American security, alongside

Europe and Asia. This decision was driven in large part by the demand for oil to fuel the global economy and the American military, and later by concerns about terrorism. Yet, the American public's concern about terrorism has ebbed, and the boom in U.S. energy production has altered the strategic importance of the Middle East.[21] In fact, the U.S. military presence in the Middle East now protects energy supplies that flow in large part to China. The United States cannot be everywhere at once, so an adjustment in U.S. military force posture in the region is warranted. U.S. leaders should instead seek to keep a small residual force in the region in order to maintain cooperation with key partners and enable any future required deployments in the region.

Fourth, prior to the current Trump administration, U.S. engagement in Africa, Latin America, and South Asia was episodic at best.[22] But the elimination of the U.S. Agency for International Development and the closure of many U.S. missions around the world have undercut U.S. engagement even further. It will be difficult, if not impossible, for any future U.S. administration to resurrect these institutions and relationships. Rather than struggling to do so across the board, leaders in Washington should prioritize a handful of strategic relationships in each region. The Director of the American Statecraft Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Chris Chivvis has thoughtfully examined the important roles of pivotal states like Brazil, India, and South Africa in their neighborhoods. U.S. policymakers should endeavor to deepen this cooperation strategically, while also continuing to encourage U.S. companies to remain active in seeking opportunities in places that might be overlooked by U.S. foreign policy.

Finally, the United States should pay more attention to the U.S. homeland, but this need not be a top mission for the U.S. military. Many Americans want border security to be a higher priority in order to address challenges pertaining to illegal immigration and drug trafficking. Leaders in Washington need to be responsive to these demands. Yet, U.S. policymakers should be clear that these are not U.S. military missions. The Department of Defense should remain focused on operating outside of U.S. borders, where its "lethality" mantra is more applicable.[23] Other agencies are better tailored to manage homeland security inside the United States and along its borders.

Conclusion

The United States took a leading role in reenvisioning the world order 80 years ago. Today, it should do so again. This time, the United States is not ascendant after victory in a world war, but rather on a slow path of relative decline after decades as the world's unchallenged leader. A more fragmented world with many competing regional and global powers awaits. The emerging multipolar system will require U.S. leaders to think more about building flexible coalitions than fixed alliances, which will increase the complexity of the task ahead.

> ***Multipolarity need not be a death sentence for America***

American policies today cannot resemble those of the 20th century for a second reason: The U.S. public is growing more skeptical of expending resources on international engagement. Memories of U.S. successes abroad are being replaced by frustration with a variety of failed endeavors overseas. Meanwhile, the U.S. debt is rising alongside calls for additional social spending, constraining expenditures on national security. Barring an inspirational leader or catastrophic conflict, these trends are unlikely to be reversed.

Multipolarity need not be a death sentence for America. If approached strategically, multipolarity could actually amplify some U.S. strengths and offset key weaknesses and vulnerabilities. This will require a series of tough discussions about resources and priorities, but that is unavoidable. The time is ripe, therefore, for the United States to proactively embrace multipolarity.

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China Resurgent: A New Mindset for Strategic Competition

Ali Wyne

A rapidly growing corpus of writing considers how the United States might "outcompete" China or perhaps even "win" the contest between the two countries. According to many observers, this competition will go a long way toward shaping the 21st century's international order. This essay does not aim to contribute to that genre. Instead, it suggests that Washington must recalibrate its mindset if, as seems likely, it will have to cohabitate with a comprehensively powerful Beijing indefinitely. China's principal competitive challenge to the United States is not military, economic, or diplomatic, but psychological.

It is difficult enough for policymakers to process that Washington faces its most potent challenger so soon after its triumph in the Cold War — and yet more vexing to accept that that challenger promulgates a model of domestic governance and an approach to international relations that are antithetical to those that the United States champions.[1] Among the most consequential questions for U.S. grand strategy, then, is how the United States will address a resurgent China: Will it proceed with composure, appreciating the likelihood that the two countries will have to coexist over the long term, or succumb to defensiveness, concluding that it can and must achieve a victory that will position it to inaugurate the next "American century"? If, between the collapse of the Soviet Union and the onset of the global financial crisis, the United States erred on the side of underestimating China's competitive potential, it must now avoid overcorrecting in the direction of aggrandizement.

> ***China's principal competitive challenge to the United States is not military, economic, or diplomatic, but psychological.***

Mistaken Expectations

In 1999, the then-director of studies at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, Gerald Segal, wrote an influential essay that balked at the notion of a consequential China: "Only when we finally understand how little China matters will we be able to craft a sensible policy toward it."[2] Although his intervention was provocative — then-Senator Max Baucus (D-MT) rejoined that the United States would have to "adjust to, and deal with, China's imminent emergence as a major regional and global power" — it seemed tenable, especially in view of America's global preeminence.[3]

American observers were not mistaken, of course, to characterize post-Cold War China as a poor and isolated backwater. Where many of them erred was in hoping, and in some cases assuming, that China could not adapt — its political system would prove to be a developmental straightjacket — or that it would adapt in a direction that the United States would welcome — China would incrementally liberalize as its economy grew more interconnected with the rest of the global economy.

Some distinguished analysts did venture that China could achieve significant growth without democratizing, though it is unclear how much success they had in making considerations of its potential pathways more nuanced. Nearly two decades ago, for example, a team of scholars at the Center for Strategic and International Studies presciently argued that "Washington will need to be prepared psychologically for the impact China's rise may have on the United States' relative power and influence in East Asia and beyond." But they also cautioned against "the pessimism and alarmism that too often cloud the public's perspective," stressing that a dispassionate, holistic appraisal of China's trajectory could "help Americans transcend love-it-or-fear-it simplicities that…[undercut] a clear-eyed response to the China challenge."[4] The latter sentiment presently prevails, with many policymakers and observers assuming that US-China relations will be unalterably competitive, if not adversarial.

After undertaking a cursory net assessment four years ago, the Brookings Institution's Ryan Hass and I argued that "Beijing is neither on the precipice of disintegration nor on a path to hegemony; it is an enduring yet constrained competitor."[5] Despite the intervening turbulence — encompassing Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the outbreak of successive conflicts in the Middle East beginning with the Israel-Hamas war in October 2023, and Donald Trump's return to the U.S. presidency — a juxtaposition of China's competitive liabilities and assets suggests that that conclusion still holds.

At home, China confronts slowing growth, population aging, and the structural problem of transitioning from an infrastructure- and export-driven economic model to one that relies on consumption and cutting-edge innovation.[6] Political economist Yuen Yuen Ang observes that it will be difficult to implement that shift because "the old and the new economies are deeply intertwined; if the old economy falters too quickly, it will inevitably hinder the rise of the new."[7] Meanwhile, continued purges within the top echelons of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) suggest that — despite Chinese leader Xi Jinping's reported demand that it be ready to execute an invasion of Taiwan by 2027 — the PLA is struggling to root out corruption and enhance combat readiness. Abroad, even as the Trump administration's foreign policy is straining U.S. alliances and partnerships, China confronts mounting pushback from the United States and major powers across Asia and Europe.

At the same time, despite — or perhaps in part because of — U.S. sanctions, tariffs, and especially export controls, China is now at the forefront of technological progress, imbued with a national determination to accelerate its effort to achieve self-sufficiency.[8] The PLA has the largest naval fleet of any military in the world, is rapidly expanding its nuclear arsenal, and, in the case of an armed conflict between the United States and China, would be able to inflict devastating damage on U.S. military personnel and bases in the Western Pacific. China is also deepening its influence across the developing world through the Belt and Road Initiative and gaining traction for an emerging conception of order that is anchored in its development, security, and civilization initiatives.[9]

Even if one were to stipulate the most expansive interpretation of China's strategic objectives — that Beijing aims to supplant Washington as the world's leading power and establish a Sinocentric order — it is unclear whether China could achieve such goals.[10] But speculation that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) will soon collapse — or, less dramatically, that China's comprehensive national power (CNP)[11] will soon plateau — appears erroneous as well.[12] In brief, neither consternation nor complacence is warranted on America's part.

Unfortunately, though, U.S. commentary on China increasingly exhibits analytical whiplash, which inhibits prudent policy: Some observers express anxiety because they conclude that it is staring down decline, while others do so because they assess that it is marching toward dominance.

Those who emphasize China's competitive liabilities are principally concerned with a short-term possibility: that within the next ten years, if not by the end of this decade, Beijing will decide to make a move on Taipei — either because Chinese leaders discern a closing window of opportunity or because they seek to distract from mounting public discontent over China's economic challenges — precipitating a great-power war that would exact an unfathomable human, economic, and military toll. If the United States can deter Chinese aggression, the thinking goes, it will be well positioned to prevail over China, whose systemic decline will be far more apparent and entrenched after this period of maximum danger passes.

> ***Oddly absent from these conclusions is an appreciation of China's history and agency. Although U.S. observers often describe China as a rising power, it is better understood as a resurgent or returning one, especially in the economic arena.***

Those who emphasize China's competitive assets worry not only about the possibility of a great-power war, but also about the prospect that a more confident and capable China could reconfigure today's order in ways that would further weaken U.S. influence in Asia, legitimize autocratic governance, and drive wedges between the United States and its longstanding allies and partners. If the United States can reinvigorate its defense industrial base, regain its lead in developing critical and emerging technologies, and galvanize its diplomatic network for this century's twilight struggle, the thinking goes, it will be able to prevail over China in the long run.

For proponents of both hypotheses, though, the motivating sentiment is distress, and the non-negotiable imperative is to win — whether the contest is one whose intensity will climax soon and then dissipate, or one that will be, with occasional reprieves, significantly testing for the United States over several decades, if not longer. In brief, the hope is that a policy of containment, or one approximating it, will eventually end the competitive challenge from China. One reason that policymakers often characterize US-China relations as "a new Cold War" is that the prospect of a decisive resolution in Washington's favor is more comforting to contemplate than a tense cohabitation that does not culminate, but simply persists.[13]

A specific fear about China has dogged U.S. commentary since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949: that the United States has consistently gotten China "wrong." In this view, Mao Zedong's communist forces prevailed in 1949 because the United States did not do enough to support Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang forces. China has emerged as America's fiercest strategic competitor because the United States did not do enough to thwart — and indeed enabled — its postwar resuscitation. And China is becoming a center of global innovation because the United States is not doing enough to

detach it from the advanced industrial democracies that furnish Beijing with world-class technological inputs and know-how.

Oddly absent from these conclusions is an appreciation of China's history and agency. Although U.S. observers often describe China as a rising power, it is better understood as a resurgent or returning one, especially in the economic arena.[14] That its internal and external challenges are mounting in number and severity is indisputable; that it has endured centuries of dynastic collapses, internal strife, and external predation, though, provides a sense of its resilience.

A Basis For Recalibration

Against that backdrop, the United States should consider three propositions, discussed below, in order to recalibrate its approach to China. Doing so could reduce the likelihood of an armed confrontation and enhance the prospect of a competitive coevolution between the world's two foremost powers.

#1: It is strategically risky to treat competition as an end unto itself.

Washington would be unwise to compete as ubiquitously as it did in the Cold War, when it often contested Moscow even where vital U.S. national interests were not implicated. China is a far more capable competitor than the Soviet Union ever was, and America's relative strength is far less pronounced than it was at the turn of the century. These realities need not be cause for alarm. Indeed, the chief obstacle to developing a more sustainable U.S. foreign policy is not clear-eyed acceptance but nostalgic hope: Washington cannot restore the margin of preeminence that it briefly enjoyed after the Cold War.

> ***The charge for U.S. strategy is not to assume that each problematic Chinese action warrants the same degree of concern, but to differentiate between them — and make duly informed policy choices.***

As such, policymakers need to articulate a better understanding of what the United States is competing for — and over — vis-à-vis China, lest competition become a self-evident imperative that does not require a strategic justification. Any given Chinese action, after all, can undercut, benefit, or have no impact on U.S. national interests. Chinese actions within the first category, moreover, are not uniformly harmful; they run the gamut from mild irritant to serious danger. The charge for U.S. strategy is not to assume that each problematic Chinese action warrants the same degree of concern, but to differentiate between them — and make duly informed policy choices.

Although the US-China relationship may seem inexorably antagonistic at present, policymakers should bear in mind the oscillations that it has undergone since the founding of the PRC — a history that cautions against treating current tensions as immutable. Xi's successor could recalibrate China's paths at home and abroad, even if such shifts may be decades away.[15] Deterministic thinking shrinks the capacity, if not the willingness, to consider how creative diplomacy could expand cooperative space.

#2: Efforts to slow China's technological progress and organize a counterbalancing coalition will likely prove less effective over time.

The claim that China can only innovate by stealing other countries' intellectual property ceased to be defensible long ago; as economists David Autor and Gordon Hanson observe, "China Shock 2.0 will last for as long as China has the resources, patience, and discipline to compete fiercely. And if you doubt China's capability or determination, the evidence is not on your side."[16]

As for the linchpin of America's present effort — preventing China from developing high-end semiconductors — it will probably, in the best-case scenario, do little more than slow Beijing down, while depleting U.S. economic leverage over time.[17] Indeed, many observers believe that Washington will end up accelerating Beijing's quest.[18] It is true, of course, that China had been pursuing greater technological self-reliance long before the United States implemented any de-risking[19] measures; witness, for example, the National Medium- and Long-Term Plan for the Development of Science and Technology (introduced in 2006), a 15-year strategy for enhancing China's leadership in global innovation, and Made in China 2025 (introduced in 2015), a blueprint for making China more self-sufficient in ten industries that are driving the transformation of the global economy. The duration of such initiatives suggests that China would probably have continued that effort even if the United States had not embarked on a de-risking campaign.

But Washington's pressure has changed the rationales for Beijing's effort. China had long pursued greater technological self-reliance gradually, principally for economic reasons, while believing that it was prudent to maintain a baseline of interdependence with the United States. Today, however, it is doing so urgently, increasingly for security reasons, for fear that the United States will leverage the two countries' remaining interdependence to contain China. Given the CCP's hope that technological progress can at least partially offset the impact of structural challenges on the country's growth, any external impediment to the former could weaken a pillar of the Party's legitimacy: its ability to deliver sustained improvements to the welfare of China's middle class.[20] There has been extensive reporting about China's efforts to smuggle proscribed chips. Of greater note, though, is that the government is pouring money into research on chip design and production and aiming to develop an indigenous semiconductor supply chain that incorporates both established players such as Huawei and emerging ones such as ChangXin Memory Technologies.[21]

The common rejoinder — that the United States can, in fact, prevent China from producing leading-edge chips if only it enforces "smarter" restrictions — seems plausible but is ultimately unsatisfactory: "Industrial secrets are impossible to keep for long," columnist Howard Chua-Eoan observes, "as the Chinese themselves know from millennia of what we would now call intellectual property lost by way of trade, theft, and war."[22] In addition, China's response to the Trump administration's "Liberation-Day" tariffs has clarified the asymmetry of the two countries' interdependence: It will most likely be easier for China to innovate around U.S. restrictions on chipmaking technology in the near term than it will be for the United States to diversify away from China as a source of rare earths.[23]

Turning from technology to diplomacy, U.S. allies and partners will most likely have an even lower baseline of trust in the United States on January 20, 2029 than they did on January 20, 2025: Trump's imposition of steep tariffs, threats of territorial annexation, and attacks on multilateral institutions, among other manifestations of a more aggressive "America-First" foreign policy, are compelling them to partner with one another more systematically to circumvent its influence.[24] Even if an internationalist

were to become U.S. president in 2029, America's friends would be unlikely to pursue an ambitious cooperative agenda with Washington, lest a Trumpian successor capriciously and thoroughly reverse it four years later. In turn, the next president will likely have a considerably diminished capacity to organize America's diplomatic network against China. Such mobilization efforts will probably have even less effect across the developing world, where many countries have dark memories of the first Cold War and no desire to be entrapped in a second or forced to pick a side. As the incumbent power, the United States will always view China as no other country does — as a threat to its preeminence — thereby capping its ability to forge a countervailing coalition.

Counterbalancing against China is occurring, of course, and will continue to happen. In Asia, Beijing has engendered distrust with its intensifying pressure on Taiwan, its expansive claims across the South China Sea, and its territorial dispute with India. In Europe, it has done so by deepening its relationship with Russia, dismissing concerns that its exports could exacerbate deindustrialization across the continent, and translating its economic influence into coercive power.

There is good reason to believe that, even as it learns and adapts, China will continue to sow resistance to its foreign policy, with its coronavirus pandemic-era "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy[25] serving as the paradigmatic example.[26] As the second-most powerful country in the world, it would probably elicit a certain degree of discomfort abroad by sheer dint of its scale, even if its leader were content for China to focus principally on domestic challenges and disavow any aim of revising the international order. Xi, of course, wants China to be a (not necessarily *the*) global leader, and he has not hesitated to be confrontational toward U.S. allies and partners, even when, as now, Washington's diplomatic missteps furnish Beijing with opportunities to pursue conciliation.

As political scientist Susan Shirk argues, the United States should allow China's overreach to play out rather than overreacting.[27] More broadly, it should transition from a foreign policy that projects reactive defensiveness and aims for victory to one that exhibits quiet confidence and strives for coexistence. Concretely, rather than enjoining allies and partners to be instruments of strategic competition between the United States and China, the latter policy would enlist them in an effort to fashion a more resilient order that facilitates greater cooperation on transnational challenges. In addition, such a policy would focus less on trying to dissuade third — especially developing — countries from cultivating ties with China and more on convincing them to deepen ties with the United States because Washington can help them address their most pressing socioeconomic concerns.

> ***Despite widespread agreement, moreover, that China is America's most formidable competitor, there is not, contrary to a pervasive narrative, a "consensus" on how best to approach Beijing.***

#3: The China challenge can only go so far in orienting America's foreign policy and mitigating its internal dysfunction.

Some U.S. observers rue the dissolution of the Soviet Union because they believe that U.S. foreign policy cannot be disciplined — and U.S. cohesion cannot be sustained — without an external challenger. Thus far, though, a resurgent China has delivered little on either score.[28]

Even as the desire to rebalance U.S. foreign policy toward Asia has motivated both Republican and Democratic administrations over the past 25 years, chaos across the Middle East has continued to distract Washington, and with the Russia-Ukraine War demonstrating no sign of abating as it approaches its four-year mark, instability across Europe will also limit policymakers' bandwidth to maneuver.

Despite widespread agreement, moreover, that China is America's most formidable competitor, there is not, contrary to a pervasive narrative, a "consensus" on how best to approach Beijing. Consider, for example, the difference between former President Joe Biden's view of alliances and partnerships — that they are strategic assets — and Trump's — that they are economic burdens that constrain America's geopolitical freedom. Even more telling is the discrepancy between Trump's own views and those of some of his top advisors, past and present; while he has long believed that Beijing enjoys an unfair trading relationship with Washington, he does not see strategic competition as especially ideological, let alone Manichean. Trump is virtually alone in Washington, moreover, in expressing fondness for Xi and in believing that a tête-à-tête between the two leaders could stabilize US-China ties, and he is among the very few leaders across the ideological spectrum who think that there is considerable room for bilateral cooperation.[29]

As for the impact of China's resurgence on America's internal health, anxiety can have some propulsive utility; one could argue that it helped secure congressional passage of the Inflation Reduction Act and the CHIPS and Science Act. But such achievements are vulnerable to domestic politics; the Trump administration is already unwinding many of them with its "One Big Beautiful Bill," with especially self-defeating ramifications for America's capacity to undertake a clean energy transition.

In the main, America's response to China has proven corrosive to the United States' domestic life.[30] Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans are increasingly stigmatized, undercutting America's soft power as well as its technological prowess. Elected officials and prospective lawmakers accuse their opponents of being "weak" or "soft" on China, creating a political environment in which advocacy for diplomatic engagement is often condemned as a demonstration of strategic naivete.[31] And policymakers and observers frequently argue that those who spotlight America's domestic challenges are legitimizing CCP propaganda. Finally, the hope that China might help Americans overcome their political divisions seems increasingly quixotic, whether one considers the growing number of threats against elected officials, the deepening animus that Americans of different ideologies exhibit toward one another, or the intensifying debate among Democrats over how to best offer an alternative to Trump's vision of America.[32]

Unanswered Questions

It should be apparent that U.S. policymakers are far from settling on the United States' approach to China. If Washington is to coexist with Beijing, they will need to answer the following questions — questions that, in some cases, are only beginning to surface in policy debates:

- The pandemic and Russian aggression against Ukraine have trained policymakers' focus on the security risks of "weaponized interdependence" between the United States and China.[33] How can Washington mitigate those risks while slowing the emergence of those that might arise as it loses economic leverage over Beijing?[34]

- Some observers worry that China may soon initiate a blockade of Taiwan. What policies would be likeliest to bolster "dual deterrence" in the service of avoiding an armed conflict between Washington and Beijing over the island?[35]

- The United States often enumerates those exercises of power on China's part that it considers illegitimate. Which exercises does it consider permissible?

- How can the United States and China achieve an equilibrium in Asia — a balance of military power that allows both countries to feel sufficiently assured that their respective core interests are secure?

- There are no ready answers to such questions. There is, accordingly, an imperative and an opportunity for established and emerging voices alike to inject creative thinking into the discourse on China policy.

In the interim, the three aforementioned propositions suggest a modest starting point for that conversation: Washington and Beijing seem fated to coexist as major powers indefinitely. As dramatic as the discourse on the US-China relationship can be, portraying a titanic, indeed existential, struggle, the key insight is comparatively underwhelming: Each has significant competitive strengths that the other cannot readily replicate. Although historical resilience does not guarantee future stability, each country has a compelling record of defying declinist prognostications. Each is sufficiently strong to resist the imposition of the other's dictates, yet insufficiently strong to impose its own. And the efforts of each to achieve greater self-reliance underscore not only the interdependence of their economies, but also the extent to which transnational challenges such as climate change, pandemic disease, and macroeconomic instability entangle their societies.

The question, of course, is how the United States and China can conceptualize, achieve, and sustain a balance between them whereby competitive dynamics neither yield armed confrontation nor preclude cooperative undertakings.

Avoiding war — the foundational prerequisite for long-term coexistence — will require a nimble balance of diplomacy and deterrence.[36] When Trump and Xi meet, probably later this year, they could try to rebuild trust by striking a limited, mainly economic, deal. Specifically, Trump might consider asking Xi to increase China's imports of U.S. energy and agricultural products and urging China to crack down more vigorously on the export of fentanyl precursors. In return, he could reiterate his openness to increased Chinese investment in the United States, provided that Chinese companies share some of their technological know-how with U.S. companies. A successful conversation could pave the way for the two leaders to discuss how the United States and China can bolster existing military-to-military channels and establish a balance of power in Asia that both countries find acceptable.

But it would be unwise to entrust the future of US-China relations to the leader-level channel; shock absorbers are needed in case a rupture emerges between Trump and Xi, as occurred during the pandemic in the former's first term. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent, Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick, and Trade Representative Jamieson Greer appear to have developed productive relationships with their Chinese counterparts, and one hopes that Secretary of State Marco Rubio and China's top foreign policy official, Wang Yi, can cultivate a channel comparable to that which former National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and Wang developed during the Biden administration.

Deterrence will be crucial as well. Even as Trump works to assure Xi that he welcomes a reinvigoration of bilateral talks, he should impress upon Xi that top advisors who have been affirming the integrity of U.S. defense treaties in Asia speak for him, lest Chinese officials believe that those figures are circumventing Trump to convey such reassurances. He should also make clear that the United States would not trade away Taiwan's security to achieve some "grand bargain" with China.

If the United States and China manage to avert a catastrophe, as they can and must, they will need to undertake the longer-term project of cohabitation. As good a starting point as any for doing so is the counsel of John Fairbank, who is widely regarded as the founder of modern China studies; in a July 1967 address at a seminar of the National Committee on US-China Relations, he argued that although the two countries might not be able to reconcile their respective conceptions of exceptionalism, they could find a way to coexist on the basis of strategic empathy:

> Obviously the path of reason is to try to understand them and to understand ourselves and to get onto a new basis, which is in between these somewhere, without giving up what we consider essential, and nevertheless to resolve this conflict on some kind of mutual basis. This is a trick which may be beyond the capacity of humankind to pull off, but the alternative is not good, and the effort must be made.[37]

To that end, China must resist concluding that the United States is in terminal decline and recognize that Beijing's coercive conduct compels many U.S. allies and partners to strengthen their security ties with Washington. For its part, the United States should appreciate not only that China's challenge to Washington's confidence is likely to endure, but also that that challenge is likely to prove an insufficient guide for policymakers: A power that can only articulate its purposes by invoking a competitor has neither an affirmative vision to inspire others nor the self-confidence to renew itself.

For its part, the United States should appreciate not only that China's challenge to Washington's confidence is likely to endure, but also that that challenge is likely to prove an insufficient guide for policymakers: A power that can only articulate its purposes by invoking a competitor has neither an affirmative vision to inspire others nor the self-confidence to renew itself.

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[15] For a rare and searching consideration of alternative paths that China might take over the coming two decades, see Rana Mitter, "The Once and Future China: How Will Change Come to Beijing?" *Foreign Affairs, 104:3* (*May/June 2025*)*: 52-65. See also Neil Thomas, "Xi Jinping's Succession Dilemma"* (*Asia Society Policy Institute, February 14, 2024*).

[16] David Autor and Gordon Hanson, "We Warned About the First China Shock. The Next One Will Be Worse.," *New York Times* (*July 14, 2025*).

[17] Two former senior officials in the Biden administration explain that "export controls are a limited tool. They can protect

specific exquisite technologies for a limited time to help U.S. companies stay ahead of their Chinese competitors. But they cannot constrain development short of the frontier, and they will have inevitable unintended consequences, including encouraging foreign companies to find creative workarounds." See Radha Iyengar Plumb and Michael C. Horowitz, "What America Gets Wrong About the AI Race: Winning Means Deploying, Not Just Developing, the Best Technology," *Foreign Affairs* (April 18, 2025). Trade attorney Neena Shenai, who served as a senior advisor to the assistant secretary for export administration during the George W. Bush administration, notes that "investment restrictions along with other primary tools of economic statecraft like sanctions and export controls are 'single use.' Once exercised, they either break or preclude economic ties....used enough without alternatives to refill leverage reserves, the strategies risk sidelining the U.S., leaving few policy levers short of military conflict in the long term." See "America Needs to Be Smarter About Its Economic Leverage," *RealClearPolicy* (September 5, 2023).

[18] June Yoon, "The U.S. has spurred the Chinese chip industry," *Financial Times* (*March 4, 2025*).

[19] U.S. officials denote de-risking as involving efforts to reduce interdependence between the United States and China in arenas of advanced technology, principally to ensure that Washington is not assisting Beijing's military modernization. See, for example, Janet L. Yellen, "The Biden Administration's Economic Approach Toward the Indo-Pacific," speech at the Asia Society Policy Institute, Washington, DC (November 2, 2023).

[20] On May 28, 2018, roughly three months after Trump announced his intention to initiate a tariff campaign against China during his first term, Xi delivered a speech that underscored the stakes of greater technological self-reliance: "Only by grasping key and core technologies within our own hands can we fundamentally guarantee national economic security, national defense security, and other securities." See Ben Murphy et al. (translation), "Xi Jinping: 'Strive to Become the World's Primary Center for Science and High Ground for Innovation,'" *DigiChina* (March 18, 2021).

[21] See, for example, Ansgar Baums, "The 'Chokepoint' Fallacy of Tech Export Controls" (Stimson Center, February 6, 2024); Lizzi C. Lee, "DeepSeek and the Strategic Limits of U.S. Sanctions," *Wire China* (*January 26, 2025*); *and Sujai Shivakumar, Charles Wessner, and Thomas Howell, "The Limits of Chip Export Controls in Meeting the China Challenge"* (*Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 14, 2025*).

[22] Howard Chua-Eoan, "Chips, Silk, and Paper: You Can't Keep Secrets Forever," *Bloomberg* (*September 5, 2023*).

[23] Author's interview with a former senior economist at the State Department (July 30, 2025).

[24] Minouche Shafik, "How to live in a G minus one world," *Financial Times* (*July 25, 2025*).

[25] This term refers to the confrontational approach that Chinese diplomats sometimes employ to defend China's domestic and foreign policies and impugn foreign counterparts who criticize those policies. See Duan Xiaolin and Liu Yitong, "The Rise and Fall of China's Wolf Warrior Diplomacy," *Diplomat* (September 22, 2023).

[26] Especially in the early stages of the pandemic, high-ranking Chinese government spokespersons and embassy officials touted China's domestic response to the emergence of the coronavirus and its exports of personal protective equipment. They also threatened economic and diplomatic consequences for countries that called for an independent inquiry into the origins of the virus and accused China of not doing enough to warn the rest of the world about its lethality and methods of transmission.

[27] Susan L. Shirk, *Overreach: How China Derailed Its Peaceful Rise* (*New York: Oxford University Press, 2023*).

[28] Columnist Janan Ganesh observed recently that his earlier hope had been misguided: "The answer to domestic strife — I used to be sure of this — lies abroad. So far, it has to be said, this theory of mine is aging like milk. The U.S. finds itself externally challenged and internally split at the same time. The bonding effect of having a shared national rival is nowhere to be seen. 'Give it time' is the obvious response, but China has been eating into America's share of global output for decades." See "The China challenge isn't bringing Americans together," *Financial Times* (*October 2, 2024*).

[29] Another source of dissensus is Trump's own inconsistency, which makes it a fool's errand to predict what the next three years have in store for America's China policy. During his first term, for example, Trump signed an executive order that targeted TikTok, the Chinese-owned social media platform, but a federal judge extended it a lifeline. Today, despite an April 2024 law — and a unanimous January 2025 Supreme Court decision that upheld it — that would have banned TikTok from operating in the United States unless ByteDance, its owner, were to divest from it within nine months (with a possible three-month extension if a sale were in progress), it is Trump who continues to save the app, citing the role that it played in mobilizing the youth vote during his reelection campaign. Perhaps even more dramatically, in July, he reauthorized Nvidia to sell H20 chips to China, reversing a decision that he had made in April.

[30] See Nancy Okail and Matthew Duss, "America Is Cursed by a Foreign Policy of Nostalgia: Washington Needs Something Better than 'America First' and 'America Is Back,'" *Foreign Affairs* (*December 3, 2024*); *and Van Jackson and Michael*

Brenes, The Rivalry Peril: How Great-Power Competition Threatens Peace and Weakens Democracy (*New Haven: Yale University Press, 2025*).

[31] Representative Gregory Meeks (D-NY) cautions against legitimizing a "competition about who can be the biggest fearmonger about the threats China poses." See "Anti-China Rhetoric Distracts Washington — and Boosts Beijing," *Foreign Policy* (*June 26, 2023*).

[32] Although public sentiment toward China is negative, it is less pronounced than it was last year; 33% of Americans have a very unfavorable opinion, down from 43% last year, and 33% say that it is an enemy, down from 42%. See Christine Huang, Laura Silver, and Laura Clancy, "Negative Views of China Have Softened Slightly Among Americans" (Pew Research Center, April 17, 2025).

[33] For the foundational exposition of that concept, see Henry Farrell and Abraham L. Newman, "Weaponized Interdependence: How Global Economic Networks Shape State Coercion," *International Security, 44:1* (*Summer 2019*)*: 42-79*.

[34] I weigh the prospect of "weaponized detachment" in "The Dangers of Detachment: Why Economic Independence Could Make the World More Dangerous," *Foreign Affairs* (*July 31, 2023*). *A recent analysis notes that as the international financial order fragments, "officials from Washington to Beijing might regret the opportunities and connections being lost. They need not worry they are hastening Armageddon. Yet they are certainly making war more feasible, while simultaneously normalizing the sense of conflict between nations." See "How the financial system would respond to a superpower war," Economist* (*May 3, 2024*). *Political scientist Allison Carnegie raises a sobering prospect: "If the United States reduces its economic reliance on Taiwanese semiconductors...Beijing might decide that Washington won't respond if China blockades or invades the island." See "When Trade Wars Become Shooting Wars: How Tariffs Destabilize an Already Dangerous World," Foreign Affairs* (*May 14, 2025*).

[35] The goal of this policy is to keep both China and Taiwan unsure of how the United States would react if war were to erupt, thus leading each to assume the worst from its respective perch. As such, should Beijing be contemplating an invasion of Taipei, Washington would want Beijing to assume that Washington would intervene as forcefully as possible — a judgment that would presumably dissuade it from attacking. Conversely, should Taipei be thinking about declaring formal independence, Washington would want Taipei to assume that Washington's response would be lackluster — and thus refrain from taking such a step.

[36] *Asia in Flux: The U.S., China, and the Search for a New Equilibrium* (*Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2025*).

[37] "Fairbank Employs 'Historical Perspective' to Understand Patterns in China Today," *Harvard Crimson* (*July 18, 1967*).

After the Age of Trump: Rejecting Competition

Michael Brenes

Donald Trump has once again shaken the foundations of U.S. foreign policy. Commentators worried in 2016 that Trump's election meant the end of the liberal world order — if it had ever existed. To many in Washington, Trump represented a harbinger of a new world, one where liberalism was permanently under siege, nationalism (if not isolationism) reigned, and longstanding U.S. alliances with Europe and Asia would be dismissed as anachronistic. Foreign policy, as national security officials knew it, was over.

That world did not materialize. But in Trump's second term, it looks more likely. Trump has rejected longstanding shibboleths about how the United States should behave in the world. America's relationship with its European allies were once sacrosanct. Not anymore. At the Munich Security Conference in February of this year, Vice President J. D. Vance chastised Europeans on free speech and security issues, arguing that "the crisis this continent faces right now...is one of our own making." Two weeks later, Trump and Vance admonished Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky for not showing sufficient deference to America's role in sustaining Ukraine's fight against Russia. "You don't have the cards right now," Trump told Zelensky. The Ukrainian president had no business telling the Americans how to support Ukraine. And what about our enemies, China and Russia? It is not clear whether they are enemies anymore. Prospects remain of a "grand bargain" with China are bandied about. Meanwhile, Trump has let Russian President Vladimir Putin continue his war in Ukraine, while implying that Russia should obtain favorable terms in any peace deal.[1]

These developments have jarred European and Asian leaders, as well as those inside and outside of the Beltway. Heads of European nations have made conspicuous, unequivocal statements regarding separating their security interests from the United States. The French minister for European and foreign affairs, Jean-Noël Barrot, said in March that "Europe must ensure its own defense and its own security, and we must put in place the necessary resources so that we never again have to ask the United States what it can do for European security."[2]

Although Trump 2.0 has shattered norms and disabused Washington of its priors, the administration has still found it difficult to make a complete break from the past. Trump's "America First" foreign policy has done little to disengage the United States from wars in the Middle East. The United States is as deeply involved in the Middle East today as it was during the presidency of Joe Biden. Trump might have cozied up to autocrats — Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping — but that does not mean he has treated China and Russia with kid gloves or given them carte blanche to pursue their "spheres of influence."[3] Despite Trump's comments that the United States will stop aiding Ukraine in its fight against Russia, Washington continues

to send arms to Kyiv. Trump has also threatened Putin with additional sanctions if he does not deliver a peace deal. And when it comes to China, Trump has imposed and revoked high tariffs hoping to force the CCP to capitulate to U.S. interests on trade. Great-power competition remains in the form of economic warfare and threats to outpace China.[4]

The only reliable factor in U.S. foreign policy, thus far, is that Trump is unreliable. Indeed, he is primarily preoccupied with two issues: tariffs and immigration. He is otherwise willing to adjust his policies or change his mind to achieve his objectives. Trump will employ both carrots and sticks when it suits him; he will pursue deals and "grand bargains" but abandon them when he feels they are no longer in the United States' interest. Trump sees the world in transactional terms, but his vision for the United States relies on "illiberal hegemony": a United States that forces the world to do its bidding — and that wants to be unencumbered by rules, allies, and precedents.[5] The "Trump Doctrine" entails dictating how the international community should behave to the exclusive benefit of the United States.[6]

Washington should treat a post-Trump moment as a postwar moment: as a time of rethinking the position of the United States in the world order and rebuilding for the future, one that avoids competition as the ends (rather than the means) of U.S. foreign policy and that recognizes China's role in global affairs while keeping in mind its strategic differences and irresolvable tensions with the United States.

The jury is out on how and whether Trump can sustain this approach to U.S. foreign policy throughout his second term. Rather than chasing Trump's predilections and idiosyncrasies during the next four years, foreign policy analysts have no choice but to accept the capriciousness and insular manner of his decision-making style. Indeed, Trump is reluctant to accept recommendations that do not come from his inner circle of advisors. The U.S. foreign policy community is largely irrelevant to Trump and will remain so for the remainder of his second term.

Trump is both an interregnum and a breaking point in U.S. foreign policy. He presents U.S. policymakers with an opportunity to envision what comes next: how a post-Trump United States can stabilize global affairs, enhance peace, and facilitate prosperity in an increasingly multipolar order. Washington should treat a post-Trump moment as a postwar moment: as a time of rethinking the position of the United States in the world order and rebuilding for the future, one that avoids competition as the ends (rather than the means) of U.S. foreign policy and that recognizes China's role in global affairs while keeping in mind its strategic differences and irresolvable tensions with the United States. This is the pressing challenge of our times.

US Grand Strategy in an Age of Limits

A new approach to U.S. grand strategy is required at a time when the United States confronts the limits of its superpower status. These limits are not fleeting; they are multiple and enduring.

First, the United States' overwhelming, unprecedented military power has proven to be ineffective in resolving global conflicts. Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan revealed the limits of military power in the past. Although the United States has (once again) turned away from nation-building, its military might will not pay the dividends it once did during the Cold War. During the Biden administration, the United States sought to revive liberal internationalism through arms transfers to allies such as Ukraine. Biden also aimed to deter

China's global influence and constrain terrorist activities.[7] But ongoing aid to countries like Ukraine and Israel has reinforced stasis. The United States now remains committed to a host of conflicts in which it bears direct responsibility for the outcomes. Protecting allies through arms transfers or security arrangements, as opposed to nation-building, does not shield the United States from foreign wars. Arms transfers do not provide leverage; rather, they involve the United States in difficult conflicts (that can lead to further involvement in those conflicts) or make the country complicit in human rights abuses in countries reliant upon U.S. military aid.

The changing nature of warfare will also impose limits on what the United States can accomplish through military power. The use of small drones and artificial intelligence (AI) have reshaped conflicts like the Ukraine War. Israel's pager attack against Hezbollah in September 2024 revealed how novel, if illegal, means can take down insurgencies and militaries without firing a shot. Examples abound of how large militaries will face challenges in seeking to win conflicts and ensure conventional deterrence in this landscape, where a few hundred, cheap drones can reshape great power relations. Nuclear deterrence, though weakened, remains intact, and has inhibited nuclear aggression on a regional scale. Within this military landscape, America's multi-billion-dollar investments in the F-35 stealth fighter and B-21 bomber appear to be outdated — a very expensive reminder that Washington is committed to fighting yesterday's wars with an inflated budget.[8]

Second, America's economic might is increasingly precarious. Although the United States remains the world's preeminent economic power, its access to strategic minerals, production of climate technology, control over global manufacturing, and other indicators of economic growth and power are now second to those of China. For its part, although China's economy slowed after the COVID-19 pandemic — and faces interlocking crises in real estate, consumption, and youth employment — its model of state capitalism has weathered these crises. Moreover, China has maintained growth rates of 5-6%, while generating a surplus of exports in green technology that could spearhead a global revolution in alleviating climate change, the major global problem of the 21st century.[9] As Kyle Chan, a researcher at Princeton University, has argued, the United States may be witnessing the birth of a "Chinese Century."[10] The influence of the Global South will also grow in the coming years. India is slated to be the third-largest economic power in the world by 2030, with BRICS countries and other so-called "middle powers" projected to occupy a greater share of global GDP during the next decades.[11] In this economic environment, U.S. influence is destined to wane.

This does not mean that the United States will lose its status as a great power. Even if Trump's tariffs have a debilitating effect on the global economy, they will not end U.S. preeminence. The American market remains a diverse and attractive one to foreign investors, even if countries like China are currently skittish about investing in more U.S. government bonds because of concerns over Trump's economic policies.[12] Moreover, U.S. military retrenchment on a global scale is improbable in the foreseeable future. Bipartisan support for reducing the military budget is nonexistent and doubtful in the immediate future, given widespread concerns about China and U.S. readiness for "the next war."[13]

Given these factors, the United States will endure as a superpower, but in a multipolar world, its influence will not be as dominant and widespread as it was and has been since the Cold War. The Trump and Biden administrations tried to elide, marginalize, or manage the structural impediments to U.S. power. They failed. The latest instantiation of "America First" has continued this precedent. As Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Senior Fellow Stephen Wertheim has pointed out, even if Trump wanted to

substantially reduce the military budget and make deals to end the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, he "is a thoroughly situational man in a deeply structural bind" determined by the limits of U.S. power and preexisting commitments to allies and institutions.[14]

Policymakers in Washington, D.C., will need to adjust to these structural and political realities. As Council on Foreign Relations Senior Fellow Rebecca Lissner and Mira Rapp-Hooper, a partner at The Asia Group, suggest, "Trump has exposed the growing cracks in the U.S.-led international order. But he is not interested in fixing them — quite the opposite. By the time his second term is over, that old order will be irreparably broken."[15] The United States will not be able to reassemble the broken parts of the international order to reconstitute a new Pax Americana. Nostalgia for a pre-Trump world order cannot be America's future.[16] Trump will not engender a revolution in foreign policy — removing American troops from Europe, ending NATO, or abdicating Taiwan to China — but his presidency ensures that the form of liberal internationalism under President Joe Biden, a world framed by "autocracy versus democracy," will not be popular or obtainable.

The United States needs to find and create new tools to deploy its power to the benefit of global stability, peace, and democracy. American foreign policy has been fixated on retaining primacy at all costs in an age where U.S. primacy is anachronistic. Many in Washington now seek to constrain China to the detriment of U.S. interests — and in ways that have proven futile. This must end. The United States needs to accommodate a multipolar order that no longer has an interest or need for U.S. primacy.[17]

In a post-Trump world, the United States should spearhead the creation of new multilateral and international arrangements and institutions that recognize that economic power is located beyond its borders — and is destined to reside in China and nations in the Global South. It must recognize that competition with China for the sake of dominance — or competition as an end unto itself — will forestall efforts to manage and resolve transnational issues like climate change or AI. American primacy cannot achieve American global preeminence in a multipolar world. The future for U.S. foreign policy is one that once more recognizes the importance of multilateral and cooperative frameworks for achieving its ends.

Against Competition

The United States cannot return to an endless era of competition in a post-Trump world. The end of the second Trump presidency could be a moment of profound transformation in United States foreign policy, setting the tone and course of U.S. grand strategy for the next decade or more. Indeed, Washington failed to take advantage of the last paradigm shift in U.S. foreign policy—the fall of the Soviet Union — and reverted to old Cold War patterns of competition, this time with the People's Republic of China.

When the Cold War ended in 1991, the United States presided over a unipolar order that seemed endless. Policymakers presumed that democratic capitalism would be contagious; autocracies and autarkic economies would succumb to this new era. In response, the United States encouraged the globalization of the world economy, fueling integration of the Global South and the Global North in the hopes that a Pax America could facilitate growth for all. Washington combined a strategy of economic integration with humanitarian intervention. President Bill Clinton sought to stabilize "failed states" in Haiti, Somalia, and other areas of the world, while trying to eradicate terrorism in Africa and the Middle East.

Although most observers believed the unipolar moment — anomalous in global history — would create stability, others worried about a new era of great-power rivalry. The balance of power, so essential to global affairs for centuries, led to nostalgia for the Cold War in some corners of the foreign policy commentariat.[18] Other members of the national security establishment, like the director of the Pentagon's Office of Net Assessment, Andrew Marshall, searched for the next peer rival of the United States, fearing the unipolar moment would not last. Marshall argued in the early 1990s that China would be the major rival of the United States in the next 20 years. He assessed that only China's growth trajectory, combined with its population and military potential, could challenge the United States.[19]

President George W. Bush prepared to challenge China during the early days of his administration. While Clinton viewed China as an economic partner and potential ally — approving Most Favored Nation status for China, integrating it into the World Trade Organization (WTO), which led to the so-called "China Shock" — Bush viewed China as a "strategic competitor."[20] Bush approached China more cautiously than Clinton, and it looked like his administration might take a more aggressive approach to China given his hawkish statements on the 2000 presidential campaign trail.

The September 11, 2001, attacks derailed that effort. The Bush administration invaded Afghanistan and launched a War on Terror that Bush promised would "not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated."[21] Bush's successor, Barack Obama, maintained a U.S. presence in both Iraq and Afghanistan during the remainder of his presidency, while ordering an expansive drone warfare campaign against terrorists and terrorist groups in the Middle East and Africa.

The United States remade its global alliances and allegiances to fight terrorism. It even recruited China and Russia as allies in its War on Terror, with Bush even calling China an ally "in the global coalition against terror."[22] But while the United States remained focus on the War on Terror, it overlooked the changing structure of international relations, namely the rise of China as a great power. The relationship was symbiotic: China's continuing and unprecedented growth rates, fueled by cheap exports and devalued currency rates, also facilitated U.S. economic growth. President Barack Obama recognized this fact and sought to maintain cordial relations with China, even as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and others sought to achieve a U.S. "pivot to Asia."[23] Washington welcomed China's rise when it coincided with its own ambitions and interests during the unipolar moment.

But by 2015, "great-power competition" re-entered the lexicon as the Obama administration took stock of China's new status in the world economy. In 2016, Secretary of Defense Ash Carter used the term to discuss the new dynamics between the United States and China.[24] The United States sought to manage and constrain China's growth, even while profiting from it. When Trump took office in 2017, his administration also saw China as a threat — the singular most important threat to U.S. national security. Trump's National Security Strategy fixated on China and great-power rivalry, but as with his second term, Trump adjusted his rhetoric toward China and President Xi Jinping as his term evolved.

Trump's policies toward China generated concerns over a "New Cold War." He placed export controls and tariffs on China's goods, while members of the Republican Party — and some Democrats — spread conspiracy theories and racist rhetoric toward China, claiming that it deliberately created COVID in a lab in Wuhan or sought to brainwash America's children through its control of TikTok.[25] And when Biden was elected in 2020, he accepted that the notion that great-power competition was here to stay. Biden expanded Trump's tariffs and export controls, while relying on China rivalry to boost American growth and productivity

at home. The passage of the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) and CHIPS and Science Act[26] sought to boost America's competitive edge in climate, technology, and infrastructure to outcompete China and retain the United States' position as the leading economy in the world.

A framework of great-power competition with China has failed to achieve its stated policy goals —a United States (along with its democratic allies) that deters China's military, limits its economic power, and controls the future of the global economy—or any productive ends for U.S. foreign policy.[27] The Trump and Biden administration's efforts to slow China's technological edge in AI have failed. China's production of Deep Seek could prove to be a cheaper yet effective model of AI. China leads the United States by wide margins in solar technology and electric vehicles, two areas that the Biden administration targeted in its effort to constrain China's productive capacity. As Columbia University Professor Adam Tooze has suggested, the United States is likely to find it impossible to catch up to China on climate technology or to be the leader in tackling climate change.[28] Given China's share of strategic minerals, it would be absurd to think that the United States could outpace and outperform China in global manufacturing or technology production.

Today, the United States is once again trying to achieve something it cannot: constrain China to the benefit of U.S. primacy and force the rest of the world to choose the United States over China.

Yet policymakers in Washington believe that rivalry with China is here to stay, that it is the United States' only future. It is the obligation of the United States to cajole countries to do Washington's bidding and extract concessions from them that suit U.S. interests. Less than a year into Trump's second term, its achievements pertaining to securing U.S. primacy are few. The United States has failed to achieve a peace deal to end the wars in Ukraine or Israel, solidify trade rates desired by the Trump administration, inhibit China's access to strategic minerals and overall trajectory as a rising power, or align the interests of the Global South with U.S. goals.

As was the case during the War on Terror, the United States is now stuck again in another paradigm, or paradox, of its own making. For 15 years, between 9/11 and the end of the Obama administration, the United States believed that it could eliminate terrorism — and all terrorists —from the Middle East, if not the globe. This proved to be an impossible endeavor. Today, the United States is once again trying to achieve something it cannot: constrain China to the benefit of U.S. primacy and force the rest of the world to choose the United States over China. If it continues down this path, competition with China will facilitate public discontent and backlash — and therefore lead the American people to vote more "Trump-like" figures into office — as U.S. foreign policy will prove unable to achieve positive developments for the American people. Instead of resisting the "world as it is," the United States needs to come to terms with a multipolar order that includes China as a great power and work to ensure that global resources can be shared, transnational crises can be mitigated, global democracy can flourish, and security concerns can be lessened through multilateral and international cooperation.[29]

Trump-Proofing US Foreign Policy: The Need for a New Multilateralism

Trump's second term has thus far been disastrous for U.S. foreign policy. His transactional approach to diplomacy depends upon American strength — "peace through strength" — but a "strength" that relies upon austerity and cost-cutting on domestic spending, while the military budget approaches $1 trillion.[30]

Trump's accomplishments have largely been in the realm of scaling down American diplomacy: eliminating the U.S. Agency for International Development and slashing personnel in the State and Defense Departments. In doing so, he has ceded the realm of soft power to China, contributing to America's weakened influence in a multipolar era.[31] In a post-Trump era, a new generation of U.S. foreign policy leaders will need to remake and replace new institutions of U.S. diplomacy that prioritize multilateral engagement. New staff and organizations will be required to execute a new multilateral vision for American grand strategy.

The United States cannot solve today's problems with yesterday's solutions. As occurred during the past 10 years, the American public is weary of great-power competition for the sake of it, of supporting competition with no end in sight. Americans' support for U.S. military assistance to Ukraine and Israel — two very different countries with different security issues — has waned.[32] Given the public's declining enthusiasm for a still-popular war like Ukraine, a war in Taiwan will most likely not enjoy the long-term approval of the American public. As Director of Military Analysis at Defense Priorities Jennifer Kavanagh and Stephen Wertheim suggest, it is better for the United States to "make a plan that enables Taiwan to mount a viable self-defense" but avoids the United States' getting involved in a shooting war with China — an event that would lead to untold American casualties. The public's reluctance to support a hot war with China aligns with the fact that only one third of Americans consider China to be an enemy of the United States.[33] With these conditions and potentialities, pursuing a strategy of competition with China (and preparing to respond to a potential amphibious invasion of Taiwan) is both undemocratic and unnecessary.

Instead, the United States needs to prioritize cooperation over competition to address the world's problems. It should create institutions that are multilateral in scope and purpose and consider the fact that China is here to stay as a global actor, as a great power. During World War II, as the United States helped to establish the U.N., it realized that it could not dismiss the Soviet Union's role in ending the Second World War, nor deny it a sphere of influence in Europe. Even as rifts were growing between the two countries — rifts that led to the Cold War — U.S. policymakers knew they could not relegate the Soviet Union from the Security Council or exclude it from multilateral institutions — at least not without extending an invitation.[34]

In a similar vein, this era's new multilateral organizations would support and elevate disenfranchised nations, including many nations in Africa and the Global South, within the international system without shunning China's status and influence. The United States cannot win allies in the Global South through rivalry with China — it has tried this approach and failed. African and Asian nations see little to gain from an international order that marginalizes their agency within a context of great-power rivalry.[35] But great powers can change this system. If Washington wants to gain the sympathies of the Global South, it should support a new form of multilateralism. Engagement from the United States on a new multilateral system will also encourage participation from China — owing to fear that it would lose credibility among nations in the Global South, and fear that the United States would erode its influence in Africa and Asia.

A new multilateralism would help the world to transition out of competition as a framework for global affairs. This needs to be a global, wide-ranging project. As Tim Murithi has noted in *Foreign Affairs,* Africa has an obligation "to build a coalition of the willing, rallying the rest of the global South and whatever developed countries can be persuaded behind its bid to remake the multilateral system." A new multilateral system, a remade United Nations, would prevent veto power over issues of collective security; divide institutional power among great and small powers; and provide democratic oversight and accountability over transnational issues of crime, debt, taxes, and trade.[36]

Africa's possession of strategic minerals — combined with its increasing share of global GDP [37]— provides the Global South with leverage to revise the multilateral system in its favor. When it comes to strategic minerals, the United States, to paraphrase Trump, is not holding the cards. The United States has an opportunity to conduct diplomacy with China on these matters that achieves better results for its economy and security. Indeed, the United States' "Minerals Security Partnership" includes many U.S. allies in Europe, as well as many prospective ones, but it is missing one key player: China.[38] A minerals partnership without China is not a partnership. Washington and Beijing should work together with China on achieving multilateral cooperation on strategic minerals that distributes processing capacity, mitigates labor exploitation and environmental degradation, and establishes international rights to access minerals. Previous international frameworks for sharing nuclear energy — such as the post-World War II Baruch Plan —can provide a model for sharing strategic minerals.[39] Even if the United States remains fixated on constraining China's control over processing of strategic minerals, the only way to achieve that end is through cooperation.

On climate change, the United States can work with China to assist vulnerable nations, such as Vanuatu and other small island states, in mitigating climate's effects on both the Global South and the Global North. Climate change is the existential threat of our time. No one wins in a "competition" to resolve the issue. There are only losers, with all countries suffering to one degree or another. Current international efforts on climate change are performative or lack enforcement mechanisms. The United States and China have failed to hold each other accountable if carbon emissions and sea levels continue to rise. Efforts like COP[40] and U.N. initiatives on climate are not enough. The United States, China, and the other largest carbon emitters can take the lead on climate for the benefit of the Global South — which will benefit their own economic interests. But, if not, ideas abound on how to guarantee that great powers share accountability in the international system for ignoring climate change: from a global tax on billionaires, to a general global carbon tax, to a revised U.N. Framework Convention on International Tax Cooperation that prioritizes climate change.[41] Debt relief to Global South nations should coincide with climate change relief efforts, and both can be accomplished by working through the International Monetary Fund (IMF). International cooperation on these two fronts would help to elevate the interests and priorities of the Global South in a multipolar world, strengthening Asian and African countries and lessening migration and refugee crises, thus moderating the xenophobia and ethnonationalism in the West that fuels today's hyper-partisan politics.[42]

In a post-Trump world, the temptation will be for the United States to maintain its global influence through primacy, to revert to a renewed form of great-power competition. This would be a mistake. The United States has found that the tools of the Cold War past do not work — bipolar competition is outdated. It should be relegated to a bygone era. Great-power competition, in all its forms, has become a distraction from the reality that a multipolar world is on the horizon, and competition for the sake of American or Chinese interests will not manage it. Nor do many countries in the Global South want to live in such a world.

In an increasingly multipolar world, it is time for Washington to think creatively about its options, limits, and capabilities. A more cooperative and inclusive U.S. grand strategy is needed to deal with the challenges that confront the United States now and those that will persist for generations to come. These changes are unlikely to take place under Donald Trump, but the time to begin planning for them is now. For the United States to operate effectively in a multipolar order, its foreign policy leaders must reimagine multilateralism, ensuring that great powers avoid competition, tackle pressing international issues like climate change, and create a more inclusive and stable world order that addresses the concerns of the Global South.

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Techno-Industrial Strategy for the Exponential Age

Mohammed Soliman

American grand strategy has long grappled with a fundamental tension: Should the United States strive to transform the world in its own image, or merely secure its most vital interests in a constantly changing global system?[1] From George Kennan's containment doctrine in the 1940s, which argued that the Soviet regime was inherently expansionist, to the post-9/11 regime-change wars, America has oscillated between ambitious and even more ambitious postures — treating the world as a single contested theater in which any potential competitor, real or imagined, had to be checked. Today, that strategic ambition is under pressure, and the question of what scale of ambition is sustainable has become more urgent than ever.

The American century, which began following World War II, was built on a strategic trinity: military dominance over the Eurasian continent, domestic insulation from great power conflict, and techno-industrial supremacy. From 1945 through the unipolar moment of the 1990s and 2000s, these elements reinforced one another, yielding a grand strategy defined by expansive global reach. This formula enabled the United States to win wars, shape markets, and set the rules of both the post-World War II order and the post-Cold War era of globalization.

> ***American hegemony now rests on unstable ground in a strategic landscape shaped as much by production as by the projection of hard power.***

But the foundations of that world no longer prevail. The industrial base that powered American victories in the First and Second World Wars, and later outproduced and out-innovated the Soviet Union, has been steadily hollowed out.[2] As manufacturing capacity migrated offshore — most decisively to China, now the global factory floor — the industrial sinews that once undergirded American grand strategy have weakened; American hegemony now rests on unstable ground in a strategic landscape shaped as much by production as by the projection of hard power. Today's challenge is that China is expanding its reach not only through naval or military means, but by constructing a full-spectrum industrial stack, integrating infrastructure and digital goods into a seamless platform for economic and strategic influence.

Hard power has always rested on an industrial foundation. Britain's coal-fired factories, America's assembly lines, and the Soviet Union's steelworks all underwrote their respective countries' military might. But the nature of that foundation is new. Today, industrial capacity is no longer measured simply in tons of steel or barrels of oil — rather, it is measured in the integration of compute power, artificial intelligence (AI) systems, and advanced automation into the entire industrial ecosystem. Understanding

this shift requires a clear grasp of what the techno-industrial base actually is and why control over it determines the balance of power in today's world.[3] The techno-industrial base is the fusion of a nation's physical infrastructure, manufacturing muscle, energy systems, supply chains, and knowledge networks into a single engine of capability. What makes it techno is the seamless integration of compute power and large-scale AI systems, enabling automation, optimization, and innovation at unprecedented scale. In the 21st century, drones and low-orbit satellite constellations play the role that tanks and aircraft carriers did in the 20th century, defining the cutting edge of military reach and strategic advantage. This integrated base allows a country to conceive, build, and scale the technologies that anchor its prosperity, hard power, and strategic reach. In the techno-industrial age, this base is not only an economic asset but also the fulcrum of geopolitical leverage.

> ***Adversaries and competitors are not merely arming; they are building.***

In an age of exponential change — characterized by accelerating technologies and significant infrastructural development — production is becoming the primary metric of national power. Adversaries and competitors are not merely arming; they are building. China is outproducing the United States in critical technologies, ranging from solar panels to electric vehicles (EVs), as well as in rare earth minerals and telecommunications infrastructure.[4] In doing so, Beijing projects power through production and construction. Sea lanes and supply chains are increasingly important in the emerging architecture of global geopolitics. U.S. industrial policy today should serve as both a domestic political pivot for the working class and as the cornerstone of Washington's grand strategy.[5] A techno-industrial foundation of the kind that once enabled American global leadership should be built, not as a nostalgic gesture, but as a forward-looking doctrine of power for the AI-driven, infrastructure-centric age.

U.S. policymakers need to rethink the very structure of the United States' grand strategy. Should Washington — as the principal architect of a waning order — continue to support a waning international system as a whole, or shift toward securing a decisive edge in key regions and technological domains, and ultimately change the nature of the liberal international order it once built? Can it maintain legacy alliances on every front, or must it craft a new geometry of selective partnerships, anchored in shared techno-industrial capacities? Should it aim for ideological universality, or instead forge coalitions built around resilient supply chains and critical infrastructure?

> ***This is not purely military: In the 21st century, power will be measured not just by the number of aircraft carriers afloat; rather, it will be equally measured by chip foundries established, grid nodes fortified, megawatts generated, and critical chokepoints secured. Industrial policy is not an adjunct to grand strategy; it is its foundation.***

The task for America is not global domination; rather, it is shaping the international system. U.S. policies need to right-size America's global role, not merely for the sake of retreat, but to reindustrialize. Washington should not abandon alliances; rather, it should redesign them for the logic of shared techno-industrial production. This is not purely military: In the 21st century, power will be measured not just by the number of aircraft carriers afloat; rather, it will be equally measured by chip foundries established, grid nodes fortified, megawatts generated, and critical chokepoints secured. Industrial policy is not an adjunct to grand strategy; it is its foundation. The United States needs to rediscover the industrial logic that

once animated its strategic posture during the world wars. The world is no longer organized around an ideological contest between capitalism and communism; it is now organized around techno-industrialism, as evident in the U.S. AI Action Plan, which treats control of the AI stack's physical foundations — chips, data centers, energy, and supply chains — as the core arena of geopolitical competition.[6] This is less a break from history than a return to the logic of classic great power politics, where industrial capacity was the true measure of strength. The Cold War itself was at root a contest between two industrial systems, even if it was draped in ideological language. What was, and is, at issue is how nations build, integrate, and scale the material bases of power.

Defining Grand Strategy in the 21st Century

In his book *What Good Is Grand Strategy?*, defense analyst Hal Brands describes grand strategy as "the intellectual architecture that lends structure to foreign policy; it is the logic that helps states navigate a complex and dangerous world."[7] But in the 21st century — a period of rapid technological and industrial change — this architecture must be more anchored in physical realities than in the post-Cold War era, when power and production became dangerously decoupled. The key to competing will be how quickly and effectively states can adapt to, integrate, and scale emerging technologies.

Grand strategy as a term gained prominence after World War II, when the United States combined its military power, economic scale, and geographic advantage into a coherent global role, but the core idea dates back to antiquity. British strategist Basil Liddell Hart famously wrote that grand strategy is not simply about achieving victory; rather, it is about ensuring that the use of national resources is worth the cost. Today, that calculus must include whether a country can build the systems it needs to act, compete, and endure.scale, and geographic advantage into a coherent global role, but the core idea dates back to antiquity. British strategist Basil Liddell Hart famously wrote that grand strategy is not simply about achieving victory; rather, it is about ensuring that the use of national resources is worth the cost. Today, that calculus must include whether a country can build the systems it needs to act, compete, and endure.

Traditionally, scholars have divided American grand strategy into four classical models: restraint, selective engagement, liberal internationalism, and primacy. Each of these reflects a theory of how to manage power: Restraint seeks minimal entanglement; selective engagement prioritizes regional stability; liberal internationalism aims to embed American values into global institutions; and primacy seeks to preserve U.S. dominance by deterring peer competitors.

During the past decades, the United States has oscillated between these four paradigms — sometimes adopting hybrid versions. Each model has struggled to address a core 21st-century reality: the fusion of national security and techno-industrial capability. Efforts have been made to integrate the two — from DARPA's[8] role in funding early semiconductor consortia like SEMATECH to today's defense contracts with firms such as Palantir, SpaceX, and Anduril — but these have often been episodic, fragmented, or too narrowly focused to generate the full spectrum of industrial capacity. In this context, industrial policy is no longer just a domestic lever; it must be treated as a central instrument of statecraft.[9] What was once confined to the Commerce Department or the U.S. Trade Representative is once again central to questions of geopolitical power. This marks a return to the foundational logic articulated by Alexander Hamilton in his 1791 report on manufactures, which argues that national strength depends on the state's ability to cultivate its own industrial base.[10] More than two centuries later, the stakes are even higher:

Manufacturing capacity now underpins digital sovereignty, defense readiness, and global economic influence. The key strategic question is no longer whether the United States should intervene militarily — it is whether it can build, scale, and sustain the systems that underpin modern power.

Today, the United States is caught in a profound tension. It suffers from intervention fatigue after decades of regime-change wars, is constrained by its deep economic interdependence with China — making any rapid strategic decoupling costly and difficult to imagine — and exhibits growing dissonance between national security imperatives and the logic of a market-driven economy. The question is not whether America can "lead"; it is whether the techno-industrial system America built in 1945 can be upgraded to meet the pressures of a new age, which extend well beyond AI to encompass energy, advanced manufacturing, and the entire spectrum of techno-industrial capacity. And if upgrades to the old order are inadequate, the open question is whether the United States has the industrial imagination and political will to build the next one.

The Exponential Age and the End of the 1945 Order

We are no longer living in the world that defined the post-1945 system. That liberal international order — anchored in America's techno-industrial supremacy, institutional dominance, and unmatched ability to project force and impose standards globally — enabled a model of leadership built on control over the commanding heights of production and infrastructure. In the aftermath of World War II, Europe and Asia were physically devastated and economically debilitated, creating a power vacuum that the United States was both prepared and equipped to fill. This gave rise to a hierarchical system: The United States at the apex; its allies integrated into a dollarized and American-centric industrial order; and the rest of the world relegated to supplying raw materials, cheap labor, or ideological alignment.[11] American grand strategy could afford to be expansive — spreading liberal democracy, containing communism, and dominating sea lanes — because it rested on a vertically integrated industrial base and an unrivaled capacity to scale technology, capital, and energy.

But that world was built for a linear, slower-moving age — a time when technological development and statecraft advanced in measured, incremental steps. The "Exponential Age" is defined by technologies whose capabilities, adoption rates, and strategic effects grow at compounding rather than incremental rates.[12] Breakthroughs in compute, semiconductors, AI, robotics, energy systems, and advanced manufacturing feed into each other, creating accelerating feedback loops that transform industries, economies, and military capabilities far faster than in previous eras.[13] This marks a shift not only in the pace of innovation but in the structure of power itself.[14] In the exponential age, geopolitical advantage accrues to those with the ability to adapt quickly.[15]

China has fully internalized this logic and institutionalized it through a doctrine of techno-industrial maximalism.[16] Its strategy is not merely to compete, rather, it is to become the physical and digital substrate of the global economy, thereby shaping the hierarchy of great powers. Through massive state investment, long-horizon industrial planning, and relentless scaling, Beijing has transformed itself from the world's low-cost factory into its infrastructural core.[17] Dominance in solar panels, EVs, lithium batteries, telecommunications hardware, and industrial AI is not accidental overcapacity — it is a deliberate restructuring of global value chains around Chinese platforms.[18] Where the United States diverted attention toward wars of choice and distractions, deindustrialization, and financialization, China prioritized system-building, capacity expansion, and global supply chain control.

Indeed, China's rise is not an accident of globalization. It is the result of a deliberate techno-industrial strategy executed over decades.[19] Washington's hubris in expecting ideological change in China through open trade only helped to elevate Beijing's role in the global value chain at the expense of other developing markets. In short, Beijing has positioned itself as the infrastructure leader of today, dominant in EVs, solar panels, batteries, industrial AI and more.[20]

National security has always been inseparable from national production, whether the NSA's prioritization of post-quantum cryptography, or the Defense Department's adoption of AI-enabled systems.[21] In this environment, being first matters — and staying first requires infrastructure. As with the Cold War space race, today's contest spans advanced biotechnology, satellite networks, compute power, real-time AI, and smart factories. These are not abstract arenas.

Yet the United States faces a serious mismatch: It designs and innovates globally, but it produces too little at home, relying heavily on offshore manufacturing, most of all in China. Its strategic vision is expansive, but its industrial muscle has worn thin. The techno-industrial disruption of the past two decades has severed the link between America's geopolitical primacy and its material foundations. Prime examples are the Nvidia and AMD chips. Conceived and architected in California but fabricated overseas — primarily in Taiwan — the United States has kept control of high-end- design while outsourcing the physical production of items that create capabilities. As the U.S. economy financialized — increasingly detaching from the physical realities of the economy in favor of financial engineering,[22] it traded engineering depth and production scale for asset appreciation and platform monetization. In other words, it outsourced the very foundations of geopolitical influence. In doing so, it allowed China to occupy the role America once held: the builder of the systems and integrator of technologies, the architect of global techno-industrial reality. During the 2025 US-China tariff standoff, for example, Washington sought to reassert leverage through trade restrictions. Nonetheless, some exemptions were quickly issued not out of diplomatic deference but because some critical parts of the U.S. economy could no longer fully operate without Chinese production and raw materials — let alone be a war-proofed economy — or sustain a war-proof economy.[23]

In short, today America is a country that might still be able to invent some aspect of the future but cannot reliably produce it. Thus far, policymakers' response to this challenge has been ambivalent, characterized by inertia, distracted by wars of choice, and entranced by the abstract promises of the market.[24] It is no coincidence that America's share of global chip manufacturing has declined, and its electrical grid capacity has remained stagnant since 2010.[25]

But there is an essential contradiction here that suggests a solution: American innovation remains unmatched, at least for now. It is American production that is hollowed out. The divide — between upstream genius and downstream incapacity — threatens to make the United States strategically irrelevant in the very domains it pioneered. Without fabs, foundries,[26] and hyperscale data centers; without domestic capacity to train and deploy frontier AI models; without abundant, secure energy to power inference at scale — the promise of American techno-industrial leadership is a mirage. It also offers a solution.

U.S.A., Inc. and Patriotic Capitalism

To reverse decades of industrial erosion, the United States needs to launch a "second great buildout"— a deliberate, large-scale national effort to reestablish itself as a true builder of systems. This is not about

marginal adjustments or scattered innovation initiatives; it is about a wholesale return to system-building — forging a fully integrated techno-industrial ecosystem where finance, capital, and blue-collar capability converge into a single engine of national power.

At the heart of this buildout is a revitalized ethic of "patriotic capitalism" — the fusion of commercial ingenuity and defense-driven innovation that underwrote victory in the Cold War. In this model, private enterprise serves national purpose without sacrificing competitiveness. Silicon Valley is already beginning to rediscover this tradition, as new defense tech companies challenge legacy primes, disrupt procurement orthodoxy, and inject agility into the defense industrial base. The venture capital ecosystem is emerging as a force multiplier, channeling billions into startups that can translate advanced research into deployable systems.

But patriotic capitalism must go beyond innovation for its own sake. To compete in the 21st-century strategic environment, the United States needs to reengineer itself as "U.S.A., Inc."— a nation-company hybrid capable of scaling its breakthroughs across industries and projecting techno-industrial dominance worldwide. This demands audacious public-private alliances — drawing together DARPA; the Defense Innovation Unit; the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, and the Departments of Energy, Commerce, and Defense — focused on winning in the decisive domains of the future: critical minerals, semiconductor fabrication, AI-driven defense systems, robotics, quantum computing, and space infrastructure. The goal is not just to invent the next great technology — but to build it, scale it, protect it, and embed it into the global order. Only then can America's innovative genius be matched by its ability to produce at scale — and ensure that the United States remains the system-builder of choice for the world's most critical technologies.

Rebuilding the Architecture of Global Power

Policymakers' task today is not to preserve inherited dominance but to reconstruct manufacturing advantage in a world where physical capabilities — not capital alone — matter for geopolitical position. This is why industrial strategy must now serve as grand strategy. America is entering the second great buildout, and compute, not capital, will be the new base layer of influence. Compute is not weightless. It is a physical system: an ecosystem of chips, energy, cooling, model training, edge inference devices, and secure connectivity.

These technologies are the key to power and a kind of sovereignty over the physical world—one that scales. It is physical AI — the fusion of artificial intelligence with robotics, autonomous weapons, smart logistics, and factory-scale automation. The wars of the future will not be fought only with missiles, but with drones executing real-time inference, factories adapting to global disruptions through synthetic agents, and battlefields saturated with intelligent systems. Revolutions in warfare always follow revolutions in industrial production. Today, the frontier of combat is being redrawn by compute.

To compete with China, America should fuse its innovation ecosystem with a restored industrial base; treat compute as a public good and a strategic asset; and reimagine alliances and coalitions as coproduction frameworks. In this new era of strategic flux, the architecture of global power must be reconceived. The 20th-century order was defined by institutions and ideologies — Bretton Woods (the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the United Nations, and the idea that liberal markets and American security guarantees would underwrite peace and prosperity.[27] But those frameworks are outdated for a multipolar world.

In addition to rebuilding domestic capacity, the United States needs to transition from being a hegemon to becoming a systems architect: building the institutions of the 21st century, from semiconductors to cloud platforms, submarine cables to AI models, power grids to protocol standards. Competition to shape these nodes will require new partners and new models of interaction. Each critical chokepoint — TSMC (the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company) in Taiwan, ASML in the Netherlands, energy supplies in the Gulf, or data flows across the Atlantic — has become a site of geopolitical contest.

The goal is a new kind of order. The era of Western liberalism is giving way to an age of techno-industrial alignment, where partnerships are forged through shared infrastructures rather than shared ideology. The United States should build what might be called a "techno-industrial entente" —a strategic coalition of nations willing to codevelop the core infrastructure of sovereignty: computing, energy, and physical AI.

The Techno-Industrial Entente: A Dual-Track Approach

Under this techno-industrial entente, every partnership should follow a dual-track Hamiltonian model: to receive U.S. security guarantees and access to U.S. technology, partners must first commit to investing in America's industrial heartland — financing, building, and scaling critical production capacity inside the United States before parallel facilities are developed in their own territories. This ensures that U.S. intellectual property, chip production, and industries critical to defense -are strengthened at home first.

Such co-production alliances would focus on:

Semiconductors and Compute Infrastructure – Joint foundry capacity, lithography systems, advanced chip packaging, and the secure integration of compute into manufacturing and defense systems.

AI and Physical AI – Hyperscale data centers, AI training clusters, edge inference networks, autonomous systems, robotics-enabled production lines, and military grade physical AI for logistics, manufacturing, and defense.

Electric Vehicles and Battery Ecosystems – Co-development of electric vehicle (EV) platforms, next-generation batteries, gigafactory-scale battery production, and closed-loop recycling systems.

Energy & Critical Minerals – Rare earth processing, lithium refining, high density grid infrastructure, green hydrogen production, and advanced energy storage to power both industrial and compute demand.

Space & Communications – Low orbit satellite constellations, resilient undersea cable networks, and secure terrestrial communications grids designed for allied only use.

Institutionalization of the framework would involve:

Allied Techno-Industrial Council (ATIC) – Modeled after NATO, but focused on joint industrial mobilization, supply chain security, and co-innovation.

Strategic CoInvestment Fund – Capital from sovereign wealth funds, development banks, and private investors for targeted dual track industrial projects.

Interoperable Standards Charter – Shared standards for AI systems, robotics integration, chip security, energy resilience, EV interoperability, and data governance.

The New Grand Strategy: Build to Lead

Although the United States has a history of dual-use innovation — with Cold War-era advancements in chips and the Internet as prime examples — American strategy has, for too long, failed to fully and deliberately integrate defense needs with industrial production at the scale required for global competition. That division, and the failures to connect Silicon Valley with the defense base, is no longer tenable. As in wartime mobilization, the line between civilian and military infrastructure is increasingly blurred. Fabs are dual-use. Fiber is dual-use. So is energy, AI, robotics, and advanced logistics. What matters now is not just who innovates first, but who can deploy at scale, defend what they build, and embed it into global networks.

This is the new task of American strategy: to reconstruct a techno-industrial foundation strong enough to resist disruption and flexible enough to evolve. It means thinking in terms of geoeconomic geometry: building regional constellations of capability from the Gulf states to Latin America to East Asia.[28] It also means recovering the strategic imagination of system-building — not just winning today's contests but shaping the architecture within which future contests will occur. Today, stability can only emerge from systems that are built to endure the shocks of this century: pandemics, cyberattacks, and great power rivalries unfolding at the speed of technology.

America's choice is not between global leadership and retrenchment. It is between building a system that serves its interests, or watching others do so. It is between treating infrastructure as a national burden or as a global instrument of strategy. And it is between defending the past or constructing the next operating system of geopolitical power. This is the central insight of techno-industrialism: that, to lead in the exponential age, a state must do more than act. It must build. The next grand strategy will not be written in declarations. It will be engineered.

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Recognizing Reality: The Case for Nationalizing the US Arms Industry

Julia Gledhill

Introduction

Strategic thinking often falls victim to politics. For example, lawmakers refuse to make difficult decisions about what weapons the U.S. military really needs and what it can practically acquire over the long term. Instead, lawmakers adopt a "yes, and" approach to Pentagon spending and weapons acquisition. This approach is a natural outgrowth of the U.S. obsession with global military dominance.

However, superfluous spending and weapons acquisition would not necessarily cease with the publication of a narrowly focused National Security Strategy — or a major cut to the Pentagon's budget. Military contractors would continue to influence policymakers through lobbying and political contributions to congressional campaigns. Members of Congress and their family members may still own and trade stocks in the arms industry. The military services would still fight to advance their own perspectives on how to win wars, competing for budgets, bodies, and valor. Politics would persist — and as American political scientist Harold Lasswell put it, politics is about who gets what, when, and how.[1]

Politics helps to shape policymakers' choices about Pentagon spending and weapons acquisition, and the strategic rationales follow. This paper explains why the financial interests of military contractors so often take precedence over rigorous strategic analysis and U.S. public interest in avoiding war and Pentagon waste. Ultimately, it argues that, regardless of strategy, the U.S. arms industry requires fundamental reform. It is highly consolidated, specialized, and dependent on the U.S. government — rendering the largest military contractors public firms in everything but name. Policymakers should consider assuming some degree of public ownership over the arms industry to regain control over Pentagon budgeting and weapons acquisition, and to ensure that it corresponds with a coherent grand strategy.

Strategy and Pentagon Budgeting

Policymakers have long struggled to connect Pentagon budgeting and acquisition decisions with strategy. Consider the case of the nuclear triad. Its establishment was not a strategic decision, but a product of interservice rivalry. The services fought to advance their respective theories of nuclear use in an effort to win funding for systems capable of delivering nuclear weapons.[2] Ultimately, there was no single winner of

this budget competition. The triad was born when the United States established nuclear delivery systems for potential launch from the land, the sea, and the air.

Today, the biggest winner of the triad is Northrop Grumman — one of the "big five" U.S. military contractors. The company produces the B-21 bomber and the Sentinel intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), as well as critical components of the Columbia and Virginia-class submarines. As antitrust reformers at the American Economic Liberties Project put it, America's triad would not have any legs without Northrop Grumman.[3] In turn, the company is a loud voice in the nuclear weapons lobby, which works to expand the U.S. nuclear arsenal through modernization programs that are estimated to cost nearly $2 trillion over the next 30 years.[4]

During the next decade, the United States is projected to spend $946 billion on nuclear modernization — a 25% increase over the previous estimate for 2023-2032.[5] The Sentinel ICBM program is the main culprit for such inflated nuclear spending, exceeding its initial budget estimate by over 80%.[6] The Sentinel's shocking sticker price is reason enough to scrutinize the program, but its strategic value is also questionable. In the event of a nuclear attack, the United States does not need ICBMs to launch a retaliatory nuclear strike — thus the Sentinel is unnecessary to maintain a credible nuclear deterrent.[7]

Perverse incentives to pad the profits of military contractors constrain policymakers from making the decisions necessary to better align budgets with strategy.

Unfortunately, however, a procurement approach grounded in parochial interests and pork barrel politics makes it extremely difficult to limit weapons acquisition to systems that align with a focused strategy. Perverse incentives to pad the profits of military contractors constrain policymakers from making the decisions necessary to better align budgets with strategy. Yet the biggest arms producers depend almost entirely on government contracts and face virtually no competition. U.S. military contracting is far from a free market.

The largest military contractors are public entities in all but name. According to the Department of Defense (DOD), tactical missile suppliers dwindled from 13 prime contractors in 1990 to three in 2020. Fixed-wing aircraft suppliers decreased from eight to three, while surface ship suppliers declined from eight to two.[8] From 2020 to 2024, private weapons manufacturers took home about 54% of the Pentagon's annual discretionary budget — $2.4 trillion.[9] The Costs of War project at Brown University reports that the big five firms — Lockheed Martin, RTX (formerly Raytheon), Boeing, General Dynamics, and Northrop Grumman — accounted for $771 billion of that funding. These five companies have dominated the arms industry for decades.

Lockheed Martin reigns supreme. According to the company, it derived 73% of its $71 billion in net sales from the U.S. government in 2024.[10] However, when accounting for foreign military sales — government-to-government arms transfers — Lockheed Martin generated 92% of its total net sales through the U.S. government. The remaining 8% derived primarily from direct commercial sales, in which contractors transfer weapons directly to foreign buyers with the approval of the State Department. Congress provides foreign governments with financing to purchase U.S. weapons from military contractors, thus 92% is probably an underestimate of the sales facilitated by the U.S. government.

Silicon Valley firms work hard to distinguish themselves from traditional military contractors like Lockheed Martin and Northrop Grumman. Palantir Technologies, for example, prides itself on its commercial enterprises, which accounted for 45% of its $2.9 billion in revenue in 2024.[11] Nonetheless, like Lockheed Martin, much of the company's commercial work evolved from its government work. One of the company's primary commercial offerings is the Foundry software program, which was developed with seed funding from In-Q-Tel, the Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA's) venture capital arm. Since Palantir went public in 2020, it has generated over half of its revenue from government contracts.[12]

Military technology firms like Space X and Anduril also work closely with the government. However, the details of their work are less transparent because they are private companies — not to mention the fact that much of their government work is also classified. Nevertheless, military technology firms are publicly deepening their relationships with the government. In December 2024, Anduril and Palantir announced a new consortium of defense technology companies to "disrupt the country's oligopoly of 'prime' contractors," hinting at Space X's involvement, along with several other firms. The consortium would allow firms to jointly bid on Pentagon contracts, undermining competition.[13] In this sense, military technology firms might find themselves following in the footsteps of the prime contractors they vociferously criticize.

Indeed, technology executives are cozying up to the federal government. In June, the army commissioned Palantir Chief Technology Officer Shyam Sankar and three other technology executives as lieutenant colonels — at Sankar's request. In their army roles, the executives will guide the service on how to better integrate and scale "tech solutions to complex problems."[14] And although it is not unprecedented for the military to commission private sector civilians, it is unusual — and there are scant details about what the executives' innovation unit will actually do. Nevertheless, according to Sankar, more technology executives are interested in joining the unit.

Despite their differences, traditional military contractors and Silicon Valley firms share an interest in socializing their costs and privatizing financial rewards. They likewise chafe at regulation and oversight. For example, Lockheed Martin and Palantir have expressed support for policymakers' efforts to overhaul the Pentagon's budgeting and acquisition system. Sankar has advocated for "substantive reforms" to "create a bias toward speed and decisive action."[15] Lockheed Martin CEO John Taiclet has claimed that red tape is "one of the biggest issues, where there's limitations on the speed at which digital technology and even the most advanced physical technologies can be introduced into the national defense enterprise."[16]

Budgeting and Acquisition Reform

As political scientist Thomas McNaugher writes in *New Weapons, Old Politics,* "The key issue is not how speedily the nation rushes new devices to the field, but rather the validity of choices about which technologies to push and at what rate." Existing acquisition reform proposals may expedite weapons development, but they are unlikely to improve policymakers' ability to determine which technologies the military needs over the long term and why.

The "Fostering Reform and Government Efficiency in Defense" (FoRGED) Act and the "Streamlining Procurement for Effective Execution and Delivery" (SPEED) Act are incredibly expansive, well over 100 pages — many of which are filled with provisions to simply strike vast portions of existing regulations

for military contractors. The architects of these bills aim to speed up the acquisition process by "cutting red tape" — a refrain that emanated from the Clinton administration in the 1990s.[17]

> ***The problem is that deregulation did not improve the efficiency of the process, and it discouraged policymakers from making strategic trade-offs.***

The problem is that deregulation did not improve the efficiency of the process, and it discouraged policymakers from making strategic trade-offs. The Sentinel ICBM and Columbia-class submarine programs are years behind schedule and way over budget, but the Pentagon is forging ahead with both programs. If strategic considerations prevailed, the department could cut its losses on the Sentinel and instead focus on nuclear-capable submarines.

The picture is similarly grim for other acquisition programs. During the next five years, annual weapons procurement spending will be about 9% higher, in real terms, than the average from 2001 to 2024.[18] The Government Accountability Office (GAO) reports that "despite reforms, [the Department of Defense] remains plagued by escalating costs, prolonged development cycles, and structural inefficiencies that impede its ability to acquire and deploy innovative technologies with speed."[19]

The SPEED and FoRGED Acts threaten to allow more wasteful spending by the Pentagon. Both bills would exempt contractors from contract cost principles and procedures, enabling companies to charge the government for virtually any of their costs — even if they are unrelated to government work.[20] The reforms outlined in these proposals would also significantly impede the Pentagon's ability to negotiate fair prices on military contracts, increasing the risk that contractors will overcharge the government, and ultimately, taxpayers.[21] Perniciously, these reforms would limit the tools available for policymakers to conduct cost-benefit analyses on the military's weapons acquisition programs — undermining their ability to make trade-offs that take relative costs and benefits into account.

Meanwhile, little, if any, evidence suggests that regulations like basic accounting principles or cost information requirements slow down the acquisition process. Contractors know what they are paying their suppliers and how to claim reimbursements from the government — which, in many cases, subsidizes contractors' research and development (R&D) as well as their capital investments. Industry opposes contract cost procedures and the like because they help the government perform oversight, which threatens profit margins. Accordingly, military contractors exercise incredible political influence to shape policymakers' decisions on Pentagon budgeting and weapons acquisition.

Open Secrets, an organization dedicated to tracking money in politics, reports that the arms industry spent nearly $43 million on political contributions during the 2024 election cycle. The top two recipients were former Vice President Kamala Harris and President Donald Trump, closely followed by the respective chairs of the House Defense Appropriations Committee and both the Senate and House Armed Services Committees (SASC and HASC).[22] In fact, Representative Mike Rogers and Senator Roger Wicker — HASC and SASC chairs, respectively — were among the top ten biggest recipients of industry funds in 2024.[23] HASC Ranking Member Adam Smith came in at number eleven.

In terms of lobbying, military contractors spent nearly $150 million in 2024, sending 950 industry representatives to Capitol Hill — 62% of whom were former government employees.[24] The revolving door is a critical feature of the national security establishment, promising former government officials

lucrative careers in the arms industry after public service. From June 2018 to July 2023, over 80% of four-star generals and admirals who retired from the Pentagon transitioned to the arms industry.[25]

Elected officials do not necessarily have to leave the government to cash in on the arms industry. According to one analysis, at least 37 members of Congress and their families traded up to $113 million worth of military contractor stocks in 2024.[26] Some of the biggest defense stock traders were members of congressional committees focused on national security issues, including the foreign affairs and armed services committees. In 2023, at least 50 members of Congress or members of their households held defense stocks valued at up to $10.9 million.[27]

It is not unique for lawmakers to invest in industries that they regulate, but it is particularly nefarious for members of Congress to financially benefit from war and the threat of war. After all, lawmakers have the constitutional authority not only to declare war, but to provide aid to parties at war through its powers of the purse. Therefore, members of Congress might have financial incentives to pursue policy options that favor the arms industry."[28]

Military contractors sway foreign policy analysts, too. In a recent study conducted at the Paris Center for International Studies, scholars found that researchers focusing on nuclear weapons policy often self-censor rather than experience outright censorship from their funders — which often include military contractors.[29] Private funding does not necessarily limit intellectual freedom, but scholars have good reason to stick to the status quo — which is the preservation and expansion of the U.S. nuclear arsenal.

National security policymakers, in short, have incentives to act in the financial interest of corporate military contractors, whether these align with strategic and public interests or not. Implementing good governance reforms to slow the revolving door between industry and government could help curb undue industry influence on Pentagon budgeting and acquisition decisions. Some of these are broad: Campaign finance reform, for example, could embolden lawmakers to prioritize their constituents' interests over those of private industry. A congressional stock-trading ban could help deter them from abusing public office for personal financial gain.

In the arms industry, specifically, contracting reforms could help to drive competition. Instead of gutting the acquisition process, for example, lawmakers could instead reinstate contracting regulations to prevent legalized price gouging of the military.[30] The Pentagon's industrial policy office could even create plans to convert military industrial capacity for civilian use, offering contractors alternative modes of business during peacetime. This responsibility would encourage policymakers to contemplate the conditions for demobilization, not just how the United States would prepare for a potential conflict. Such plans would be critical to protect workers' livelihoods in the event of a significant cut to the Pentagon budget, which could occur with a drastic strategic shift in U.S. foreign policy.

These reforms would vastly improve Pentagon budgeting and acquisition by incentivizing policymakers to grapple with big strategic questions, like, for example, the costs and benefits of maintaining a nuclear triad. Policymakers might pair these reforms with a whole-of-government effort to facilitate investment in areas of national need that are as important to the lives and livelihoods of Americans as traditional military capabilities. These areas include clean energy, pandemic prevention, and economic development to improve U.S. resiliency and adaptability in the event of global crises — whether they be pandemic outbreaks, climate catastrophes, or wars.

Reinventing the National Security State

Policymakers can also raise their ambitions for national security reform without giving up on civilian-driven industrial policy or good governance measures. Indeed, policymakers should consider every tool to better align national resources with Washington's strategic goals. This is a considerable challenge no matter the strategy — and major challenges require big solutions.

The reality is that military contractors are creatures of the state, and they should operate accordingly. This was true over 50 years ago, when the economist John Kenneth Galbraith argued for nationalization of the U.S. arms industry in the pages of the *New York Times*. As he rightly pointed out, the largest U.S. military contractors lack the most basic features of private enterprises: competition and privately owned capital.[31] Taxpayers foot the bill for capital investments in machinery and equipment while reimbursing contractors for significant portions of their R&D costs. As noted above, the U.S. arms industry is notoriously consolidated, with a handful of prime contractors winning most Pentagon contracts.

In that case, the government might buy out shareholders' stocks, replacing them with Treasury bonds and establishing defense firms as public, nonprofit corporations. In so doing, the government would sever the relationship between private profit and weapons production. Arms producers would be judged based on criteria more consistent with the public interest rather than quarterly earnings targets.

The U.S. government could assume public ownership of military contractors by fully nationalizing them. In that case, the government might buy out shareholders' stocks, replacing them with Treasury bonds and establishing defense firms as public, nonprofit corporations. In so doing, the government would sever the relationship between private profit and weapons production. Arms producers would be judged based on criteria more consistent with the public interest rather than quarterly earnings targets.[32] These criteria might include the strategic value, reliability, and cost-effectiveness of the weapons and equipment that a military contractor produces.

Partial nationalization, on the other hand, can be achieved through the purchase of some — or even most — shares in a company. As a major shareholder, the government would have considerable leverage to encourage contractors to prioritize investment over shareholder dividends or executive compensation. Through partial nationalization, the government could shape how arms manufacturers operate their businesses without taking on a firm's assets and debts. Policymakers might consider partially or fully nationalizing a military contractor based on how reliant it is on government business over several years.

Either way, there is a strong argument for the government to assume some level of ownership over military firms — providing for the common defense is one of the most basic functions of government, and national defense is itself a public good. Partial nationalization is probably the most viable option in the United States, and it has worked well in other countries. In France, for example, the state does not fully control its arms industry, but Paris maintains significant ownership stakes in military contractors like Naval Group, KNDS France, and the Thales Group. Even partial nationalization of military firms would afford policymakers greater freedom to consider Pentagon budgets and weapons programs on their merits — including the extent to which they serve a grand strategy centered on the public interest.

In the international realm, eradicating or eliminating the private profit motive could transform the global arms trade. In the event of military budget cuts or changing defense needs, publicly owned arms manufacturers would not be as motivated as private firms to recoup lost revenues by selling arms abroad. Lawmakers would probably face less political backlash for refusing arms sales to regimes that abuse human rights, and they would be subject to a fraction of the lobbying in support of those transfers.

But the largest military contractors are practically public firms already, by virtue of their dependence upon the federal government for their revenue. Making it official might prove less drastic in practice than it is in theory.

Even under a nationalized system, those with bureaucratic interests would still be intent on shaping spending and acquisition decisions in their favor. Government officials are no less susceptible to the allure of political power than military contractors: government employees have salaries, too. Meanwhile, the military services would continue to vie for the biggest budget. In short, there is no guarantee that government will always act in the public interest.

But the largest military contractors are practically public firms already, by virtue of their dependence upon the federal government for their revenue. Making it official might prove less drastic in practice than it is in theory. Most important, however, repeated attempts to reform the DOD and its budgeting and acquisition system — both to improve efficiency and to better align budgets with strategy — have all failed. It's time for policymakers to consider a different approach.

Through nationalization, the U.S. government would have greater leverage to ensure that arms manufacturers rigorously test the performance and reliability of weapon systems. Presently, the arms industry consistently attacks the independence of the Pentagon's Office of the Director of Operational Test and Evaluation. It threatens industry profits by revealing information that could fuel efforts to try to terminate acquisition programs like the F-35 fighter jet — the most expensive weapon program in U.S. history, in large part due to its persistent design flaws. By nationalizing the biggest military contractors, the government could focus its efforts on R&D to iron out design flaws before spending precious national resources on weapons that do not work as intended.

Arms manufacturers would develop essentially finished prototypes for the government to operationally test weapons for effectiveness and mission suitability. Developing multiple weapons to fill one capability gap is more expensive up front, but doing so would allow the government to test both performance and reliability before advancing weapon systems into full-rate production. Policymakers would have more testing data to inform their decisions on weapons acquisition. Over the long-term, the Pentagon would likely see a decrease in maintenance costs, which currently account for about 70% of a weapon system's life-cycle cost on average.[33] Part of the reason for this is the rush to production. Contractors compete to win Pentagon contracts, principally through marketing gimmicks and lofty promises, rather than demonstrable capability or reliability.

Military contractors tend to low-ball the government when competing for contracts, but they have little reason to minimize costs during the production stage. "Extended competition," as McNaugher describes it, would "encourage innovation in production processes," not just the early development stage.[34] Although he does not argue for nationalization, it is difficult to imagine policymakers extending

competition into the development and prototyping phase without eliminating or curbing private profit motive. Legislative efforts to stoke competition in military contracting face considerable opposition from the arms industry, and few lawmakers are willing to expend their political capital to promote wonky, politically challenging contracting reforms. Through full or partial nationalization of multiple military contractors, the government could instead exercise its ownership stakes to facilitate extended competition among firms. They would be evaluated primarily by how well they meet the military's needs rather than how much value they deliver to shareholders.

Public ownership of military contractors would also make more explicit the tradeoffs between military and civilian economic stimulus. Historically, the United States has implemented industrial policies to create market opportunities for military contractors rather than socially beneficial job opportunities for workers. Indeed, the Pentagon is essentially a giant Works Progress Administration — the public works program instituted by President Roosevelt during the Great Depression.[35] Yet military spending is a poor jobs generator relative to other industries, and it diverts from civilian investment. In an era of stagnation, policymakers need to decide between stimulating the economy through military or civilian spending.[36]

Despite complaints that military spending as a portion of gross domestic product (GDP) is low by historical standards, the military budget's role in the U.S. economy is still considerable if one views it as a capital fund.[37] From 1970 to 2023, Pentagon spending equaled 19% of gross fixed capital formation — a measure of tangible investments in the nation's productive capacity. These investments include public infrastructure like roads, bridges, and railways — assets that bolster quality of life in the United States, as well as national wealth. Military spending competes with such investments. Nationalization would help the United States shift its focus to civilian priorities, which would improve the lives of Americans while expanding the productive capacity of the economy.

Conclusion

An increasingly dynamic geopolitical environment demands that policymakers draw clearer connections between U.S. foreign policy and the economic well-being of Americans.[38] Under nationalization, U.S. policymakers would be largely freed of the political constraints that disincentivize them from opposing nuclear expansion or trillion-dollar-plus Pentagon budgets; they would be able, therefore, to focus on other urgent priorities. Policymakers would be more accountable to the U.S. public — which deserves elected officials who ground national security policy in rigorous strategic analysis of the threats at hand, not what is most lucrative for private corporations. Nationalization would push policymakers to distinguish between military spending and economic development activities, assessing the nation's assets and investments and reevaluating the portion dedicated to superfluous military activities. In the process, the U.S. government would bolster its capacity to formulate a coherent and affirmative strategic vision for its foreign policy — one that serves the interests of the American people, above all.

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To Build the World, Build the Strategy: Progressive US Foreign Policy

Jennifer Lind

Progressivism is having a moment. Mayoral candidate Zohran Mamdani stunned many observers by defeating longtime politico Andrew Cuomo in the 2025 New York City Democratic primary election.[1] The extent of human death and suffering caused by Israel's war in Gaza propelled many Americans into greater political activism. Angered by the Biden administration's support for Israel, progressives rebelled in the 2024 election and cost the Democrats votes in swing states, notably in Michigan.[2] Previously, progressive candidates such as Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders attracted large followings in the 2016 election campaign.

Growing interest in the progressive cause is occurring amidst revived debates about U.S. grand strategy. Liberal internationalists are decrying Trump administration policies and arguing for a return to the longtime U.S. strategy of "global leadership."[3] Realists (of varying persuasions) argue that changes in the balance of power necessitate a change in U.S. grand strategy.[4] As realists and liberal internationalists dominate the debate, progressive voices — outside the realist and liberal traditions — are much quieter and tend to emphasize domestic rather than foreign policy.

This chapter seeks to encourage debate about progressive grand strategy. The author writes as an outsider to progressivism but as a supporter of a richer debate that takes seriously and wants to encourage greater engagement with progressive views. American debates about grand strategy will be much stronger if they include progressive critiques, and U.S. national security policy will be the better for it. Progressive thinkers are correct to lament that the influential communities in U.S. foreign policy debates have generally not welcomed them to the table. Yet another reason for the marginalization of progressive ideas is that they remain underdeveloped, so they tend to be dismissed as utopian. To exert greater influence in foreign policy debates, progressives have significant intellectual work to do.

This paper develops these ideas in four sections. (1) First, I lay out the progressive vision: describing its focus on addressing structural inequality at home and across the world. (2) Second, I explain why progressive ideas may be particularly appealing at this moment. (3) Third, I argue that progressives — in contrast to the richly developed intellectual worlds of realists and liberals — need to flesh out their vision and explain how Americans might come to embrace the progressive agenda. (4) Finally, to encourage such a debate, (4) I outline a few key gaps and tensions in the progressive worldview.

The Progressive Worldview

> ***...progressives are not merely concerned with maximizing the national security of the United States, but with striving for a much more audacious goal of "worldbuilding"/"worldmaking:" creating a more just and equal global society***

A progressive foreign policy stands out from other U.S. grand strategic options for reframing the way people think about security and for the ambitious nature of its goals. Van Jackson, the author of *Grand Strategies of the Left*, writes that progressives hold a different vision of the "security" that grand strategy is supposed to advance: "'Security' does not refer to power position or national survival directly; it relates to greater peace, participatory democracy, and equality."[5] Indeed, progressives are not merely concerned with maximizing the national security of the United States, but with striving for a much more audacious goal of "worldbuilding"/"worldmaking:" creating a more just and equal global society.[6]

In contrast to the realist and liberal traditions, progressive foreign policy is not based on rationalist theories about how the world works, but rather on constructivist and critical theory. The tradition, which is informed by theories about normative change and transnational activism, draws on critical and Marxist arguments about the destructiveness of capitalism, hegemony, and imperialism. Sometimes, progressive ideas overlap with those of the realist or liberal traditions. For example, liberals and progressives view authoritarianism as the source of many of the world's ills; liberal and progressive views might also overlap in calling for encouraging economic development or a "responsibility to protect" victims of human rights abuses (even with military force).[7] Nonetheless, progressive critiques of capitalism, economic development, and economic growth — emphasizing dependency theory or advocating "degrowth"— diverge from liberal thinking.[8] Progressives and "restrainers" (whose grand strategy rests on assumptions from realism) share concerns about a military-industrial complex and the overmilitarization of U.S. foreign policy. But progressives reject the realist concepts (e.g., unitary actors, regional hegemony, and so forth) on which the restraint strategy is based.[9]

Progressives argue that the core U.S. national security problem — at home and abroad — is structural inequality: "any system of social relations that inherently privileges some people over others."[10] Any areas afflicted by structural inequality, progressives argue, feature violence, inefficiencies, weakness of the rule of law, and injustice. Structural inequality also inhibits solutions to common problems.

To date, U.S. progressives have overwhelmingly focused on domestic inequality and how to remedy it. According to progressives, neoliberal policies pertaining to trade, taxation, and intergenerational wealth have enabled elites to obtain and secure gains at the expense of most Americans — and elites used these gains to rig the system in favor of their own interests.[11] Progressives thus favor investment in health care, education, and infrastructure to rectify deep structural inequality that in their view harms the American people and lays at the root of society's ills.

Combating structural inequality at the global level constitutes the core of progressive foreign policy thought. In contrast to liberals and realists, progressives assess that the primary security problem in international politics is not rivalry among countries. By contrast, progressives view conflict as rooted in structural inequality at different levels, and by addressing it they seek "to reshape the very context that gives rise to traditional security problems."[12]

Progressives identify various causes of structural inequality. They blame authoritarian regimes, whose institutions benefit the minority at the expense of the majority and blame the United States for supporting authoritarian governments around the world. Progressives criticize multilateral institutions for a system of global governance that underrepresents the voices of the Global South and for a global economy that disproportionately benefits the wealthy North.

Progressives also see structural inequality as causing and inhibiting solutions to, what they see as the most serious security threat in the world today: climate change. They argue that rich countries grew rich by abusing the people of the Global South, by seizing its wealth, and by wrecking the climate through industrialization. Today, climate change disproportionately affects poorer countries in the Global South. Most of these countries are located in low latitudes and will experience the physical effects most severely and, as victims of colonization, they lack the wealth and technology required to mitigate the effects of climate change. Addressing the climate crisis requires addressing structural inequality: reforming multilateral institutions so they will better represent the interests of the Global South and will better address the climate change issue.

Progressives want to reform several areas that they argue contribute to profound global inequality: U.S. military dominance, unequal political power and influence, and authoritarianism.

US Military Dominance

First, progressives decry the unequal distribution of power in the world caused by U.S. global political and military dominance. America's political, economic, and military jockeying for dominance divides the world into camps, antagonizing other countries and encouraging a 19th-century spheres of influence mentality that undermines cooperative solutions to global problems.[13] Progressives thus want the United States to abandon its pursuit of global dominance. As Jeffrey Friedman, a professor at Dartmouth College, notes, this view contrasts with liberal internationalism, which sees U.S. leadership as facilitating — not inhibiting— collective action on global challenges.[14]

Progressives argue that ending U.S. military dominance requires refashioning U.S. security alliances, which (as advocates of global leadership argue in the positive) sustain U.S. global power and influence. Progressives criticize U.S. alliances as negotiated among nonrepresentative elites to benefit them rather than the national interest. That is, in authoritarian countries the alliances help keep dictators in power, and in democracies U.S. alliances encourage policies that benefit special interests and global elites rather than everyday citizens. In the United States itself, the highly militarized U.S. foreign policy is a product of a nonrepresentative foreign policy elites and enriches powerful interests such as oil companies and arms manufacturers.[15] "On a good day, the national security state neglects the little guy, and siphons resources that might make his life better," writes Jackson. "On a bad day, it makes the little guy cannon fodder, and usually for reasons that are strategically dubious."[16]

Progressives want to downsize America's massive military in terms of personnel, global infrastructure, and spending. "De-emphasizing the military components of American diplomacy could also allow the United States to devote more time and resources to tackling nonmilitary problems such as combating climate change and fighting corruption."[17] Furthermore, in their view, downsizing the military will help the United States address structural inequality at home. Progressives assess that the huge military required for maintaining US global dominance harms American democracy and imposes high costs on

the American people. Savings from a smaller military posture — gleaned from decreased military spending, from less military support for allies and authoritarian countries, and from not fighting costly wars — could be used to benefit the American people.

> ***Progressives assess that the huge military required for maintaining US global dominance harms American democracy and imposes high costs on the American people.***

Unequal Global Power and Influence

Beyond the disproportionately powerful United States, progressives see structural inequality in the Global North's political and military dominance over the Global South. Institutions such as the United Nations Security Council, the IMF, the World Bank, and so on were created by the countries of the Global North, which manage these institutions to advance their own interests. The Global North obtained this dominant position illegitimately by seizing the wealth of the Global South and through industrialization that destroyed the climate.

Progressives urge the United States to support comprehensive institutional reform of global institutions in an effort to democratize global governance away from the current inequitable system.[18] In their view, such institutions should be reformed to elevate the voice and interests of the Global South. The goal, argues Matt Duss, the executive vice president at the Center for International Policy, is "a rules-based order, but for real this time."[19] Furthermore, the United States should support an effort to address the massive wealth inequality that helps sustain the Global North's dominance. Washington should strive "to improve outcomes for the global working class. These proposals typically involve substantial increases in US foreign aid, devoting large-scale expenditures to 'jump-start' global collaboration in fighting climate change, and accepting greater refugee resettlement."[20]

Authoritarianism

Progressives also decry authoritarian governments as a key cause of structural inequality around the world. "On one side we have the forces of oligarchy, authoritarianism, greed and kleptocracy," said Senator Bernie Sanders (D-VT) in a 2024 speech. "On the other side we have a movement which strives to strengthen democracy and economic, social, racial, and environmental justice. And it is vitally important that the United States comes down on the right side of this struggle — the moral side."[21] Autocratic regimes promote inequality — both political and economic — by empowering a narrow "selectorate" that dictators enrich at the expense of the majority. Such elites enjoy access to "rents" (i.e., regime-provided revenue opportunities) in exchange for their support, which creates extreme income inequality.[22] Authoritarian governments also stay in power through repression and violence that progressives decry as unacceptable violations of human rights. Moreover, authoritarianism contributes to instability and war because dictators fan nationalism to cultivate public support and distract the public from internal problems. Examples include the nationalism and violence associated with President Vladimir Putin's Russia and in China's threat toward Taiwan.

Progressives charge the United States as being complicit in maintaining this form of structural inequality. U.S. military operations and alliances often benefit governments "whose politics feature substantial levels of political exclusion or repression."[23] These include Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and other oil monarchies in the Persian Gulf — even liberal states such as Japan and Israel.[24] Recently, progressives' support for Palestinians and their strong criticism of Israel's war in Gaza encapsulate progressives' opposition to

realpolitik, their focus on human rights, and their assessment that international politics must be reformed from a system in which the strong prey on the weak—in which Washington supports the strong.

Progressives thus urge Washington to cease its support for authoritarian governments. "The United States remains the main patron and armorer of some of the worst authoritarian regimes in the world," argues Matt Duss. "The first thing we can do if we're actually serious about defending democracy is stop providing arms and giving political and diplomatic cover to abusive, undemocratic regimes."[25] And of course, progressives argue that Americans must mobilize to support a strong democracy at home.

In short, progressives offer the most ambitious worldview of any grand strategies: a project that Jackson calls "worldbuilding." Through U.S. demilitarization, reparations to exploited countries, institutional reform, and other policies, progressives seek a wholesale redistribution of power from Global North to Global South.

A Moment of Progressive Opportunity

The influence of the progressive wing within the Democratic Party has ebbed and flowed over time, scoring both important victories as well as frustrating failures. With the Democratic Party in disarray following the 2024 elections, the current moment may seem an unlikely time for a progressive surge. However, several trends — in American politics as well as globally — create an opportune moment for progressives to develop and promote their worldview.

First, there's the Donald Trump factor. Since the start of his second term, Trump has implemented numerous policies that directly challenge key liberal positions and values. On "Day One" Trump withdrew the United States from the Paris Agreement on climate, and since then he has pursued policies that have horrified liberals: weakening environmental protections, slashing U.S. overseas aid, ramping up deportations, pressuring universities, and attempting to smash "diversity, equity, and inclusion" efforts at universities and other institutions. Worst of all, liberals see Trump as hostile to democracy itself: implementing policies that they argue create democratic backsliding in the United States.[26] For all of these reasons, Democrats are calling for countering Trump with a compelling alternative leader. Because many people criticize the Democratic Party leadership as lacking vision and energy, and because many observers see progressive candidates as having new ideas and increased momentum, this represents an important opportunity for the progressive wing to assume greater leadership — including foreign policy leadership — within the Democratic party.[27]

Second, the continuing tragedy in Gaza has mobilized progressives, in particular younger voters and people of color, to demand changes in the Democratic Party's foreign policy.[28] Since Israel's military campaign began in response to the October 7, 2023, Hamas attacks, Gaza health officials estimate that more than 38,000 Palestinians — including many women and children — have been killed.[29] Over a million people have been displaced, and the physical devastation has been catastrophic. Despite widespread outcry in the United States and condemnation of the U.S. position overseas, the Biden administration (and subsequently the Trump administration) continued to provide military aid and diplomatic cover to Israel, including weapons transfers and the repeated use of the U.S. veto to block United Nations (U.N.) ceasefire resolutions. For progressives, Biden administration policy diverged starkly from the Democrats' stated commitment to human rights. The crisis galvanized grassroots movements and deepened demands

for a fundamental rethinking of U.S. policy in the Middle East — offering the progressive left a powerful rallying point and a chance to reshape the party's foreign policy agenda.

Third, progressive foreign policy is likely to have increasing appeal because, of its focus on an issue of growing concern: climate change. Climate change is intensifying rapidly, visibly affecting ecosystems, human health, refugee flows, and global economic and political stability. Average global temperatures are rising, and extreme weather events — such as heatwaves, wildfires, floods, and hurricanes—are becoming more frequent and devastating. American voters are increasingly alarmed by the effects of climate change.[30] A record-high 48% of Americans now view global warming as "a serious threat" to their way of life — the highest share since Gallup began asking about climate in 1997.[31] Out of all the contending grand strategies, only progressivism prioritizes the climate threat. Indeed, the other U.S. strategies (restraint the only possible exception) would engage in security competition with China, thus undermining progress on climate by stymying cooperation between the planet's two largest carbon emitters. Progressivism is thus likely to have growing appeal as Americans view climate change as an increasingly pressing threat.

Out of all the contending grand strategies, only progressivism prioritizes the climate threat.

Blocking progress on climate is not the only cost of alternative grand strategies; progressivism might have broad appeal because of the high — potentially catastrophic — costs of great power competition with China. With the exception of some (not all) restrainers and America Firsters,[32] the progressive strategy is distinctive in that it would keep the United States out of a costly security competition or even a war with China. War with China could inflict high casualties on the U.S. military and, given the risks of escalation, result in Chinese nuclear strikes on American cities. Even in the absence of war, mobilization against China would be costly. The United States would need to mobilize sufficient military power for an extremely difficult war (100 miles off the coast of a military superpower, thousands of miles from the U.S. homeland). Furthermore, there are economic, technological, and diplomatic costs associated with the US-led technology export control regime aimed at reducing Chinese military power.[33]

A lack of allied balancing in Asia also raises the costs of a U.S. balancing effort: suggesting that a strategy aimed at containing China will not enjoy much regional support. Asian allies have hardly balanced in response to China's rise; increases in Japanese and Taiwanese defense spending have been very recent and restrained. South Korea is a U.S. treaty ally but has not been willing to discuss whether Seoul would assist in Taiwan's defense or would allow U.S. base usage in the event of a war.[34] Whether or not these countries will ever increase their balancing efforts remains to be seen.

Though a regional counter-China coalition has not taken shape, the Biden era shows that regional countries responded positively to U.S. leadership in areas more aligned with progressive goals. During the Biden era, East Asian countries welcomed the administration's "latticework" of "minilateral" engagement. Such efforts focused on initiatives pertained to the environment, fisheries and coast guard activities, disaster relief, public health, and infrastructure.

For all of these reasons — the state of American politics today, rising worries about a climate crisis, the nature of superpower competition with China — the progressive message is likely to be increasingly compelling.

Constructing a Strategy

Although progressive voices are gaining traction in U.S. debates — particularly regarding domestic policy — progressives remain on the fringe of grand strategy debates. Many observers argue that progressivism falls short of a clear and workable strategy, with many unaddressed tensions and gaps that make it ill-suited for the real world. Daniel Bessner, a professor at the University of Washington, laments that in national security debates, "the left is either silent or confused."[35] Senior Fellow at the Stimson Center *Emma Ashford describes progressives as having* a "mostly vibes-based view of US foreign policy." Ashford notes that progressives "have a clear picture of the world as they want it to be; they have almost no agreement on how to get there."[36]

The prominent schools of grand strategic thinking in the United States — realist and liberal internationalist — resting on hundreds of years of their respective intellectual traditions, developed and empirically tested an extensive theoretical architecture on which arguments about grand strategy could rest. Realist and liberal scholars developed arguments about how international politics operates; scholars created a common language and conceptual universe, which they could use to engage in lively intra-paradigm debates (for example, among realist "restrainers" versus "prioritizers").[37] Scholars in these traditions disseminated foundational ideas for which policymakers could reach, trained generations of students, and built communities and networks — both within universities and think tanks and between civil society and the policy world.

Advocates of a progressive foreign policy need to make similar efforts to develop and persuasively communicate their grand strategic vision. To be sure, progressives are correct in arguing that some of their community's marginalization stems from the fact that people "who depart from the consensus view have largely been kept out of the State Department, the Pentagon and other parts of the government."[38] However, progressives have significant intellectual work and institutional creation to do before they can expect a receptive audience to their calls for a stunning departure in U.S. foreign policy.

Key Gaps and Tensions

As progressive thinkers and political leaders develop their vision, they need to grapple with a few glaring gaps and tensions in their worldview. To be sure, all grand strategies suffer from logical or practical problems; progressivism is just another example of a foreign policy approach fraught with contradictions and tough trade-offs. The following sections highlight four tensions in need of clarification and debate.

Getting There

Unlike other grand strategies, the progressive grand strategy lacks a clear and compelling theory of transition — from today's flawed world toward the more just and equitable world that progressives envision. Despite advocating an unprecedented, dramatic turn in U.S. policy, progressives have not persuasively explained why and how such a turn would occur. Rather, political theorists are holding insular, meta-theoretical conversations about moving from what they call "ideal theory" to "non-ideal theory."[39] Progressive scholars are focusing not on the mechanics but the ethics of transition: for example, how to protect displaced workers and other vulnerable communities as the fossil fuel industry declines.[40] But critics of the strategy want to know why such changes would occur in the first place.

One path through which progressives envision change is evolutionary: a process of persuasion that occurs in an environment of intensifying crisis. As the climate crisis worsens, the logic goes, progressives will find increasingly receptive voters. Once in office, progressive leaders could pass legislation and sign international agreements to promote the progressive agenda. For example, Thomas Piketty, a French economist — who advocates a global wealth registry and tax — argues that such a tax would attract growing support amidst worsening inequality and continued climate havoc.[41]

But this vision leaves a lot of questions — and seems out of step with current politics in the United States. Progressives favor redistributing wealth from the United States and the rest of the Global North to poor countries in the Global South. As the United States and other wealthy countries face populist backlashes after years of policies to support a "liberal international order," publics seem less and less likely to move even *further* down the globalist continuum toward progressivism. After decades of an interventionist and highly militarized grand strategy, the *zeitgeist* in the United States — which Donald Trump twice campaigned on — is that the U.S. government has elevated the interests of a global elite over the interests of ordinary Americans for too long. Trump's "America First" slogan is a nationalist policy in rhetoric and in substance — the opposite of cosmopolitanism. "America First" voters — people who feel strapped and neglected — want wealth redistributed *to* them and their communities, not *away from* them. Progressives have yet to explain how such voters would embrace a policy that redistributes their hard-earned dollars to strangers in other countries.

Many progressives are indeed skeptical that an evolutionary transition is possible, particularly due to entrenched interests. Scholars lament that "the fossil fuel industry and the world's largest producers of oil and gas will resist any real cuts to production with everything they have." Capitalist societies will resist change because "the goals of the imperialists are money and power, capital and control. The climate movement can no longer proceed as if our goal is persuading such governments to act."[42] The other path, some progressives argue, is revolution.

Revolution is coming, write Kai Heron, a lecturer at the University of Lancaster, and Jodi Dean, a professor at Hobart and William Smith Colleges: "from the mass migration of people fleeing floods, fires, and droughts, rioting for food, shelter, and energy, and seizing what is rightfully theirs. It will result from armed, indignant, and racist reactionaries fed up with government 'overreach' and willing to take power into their own hands in the name of self—defense."[43] A "general crisis of hegemony," predicts The New School Professor Nancy Fraser, will destabilize elite coalitions and create opportunities for "counter-hegemonic blocs" to pass sweeping reforms: for example, a global wealth tax.[44] Progressive leaders must prepare for revolution now, argue Heron and Dean, in "crisis-as-opportunity" logic, by building coalitions across rural, Indigenous, working-class, and Global South communities.

The revolutionary story is not only alarming but unpersuasive. Why, for example, would growing political instability prompt a shift toward more progressive politics? Is it not as or more plausible that amid national turmoil the public would embrace more conservative policies — favoring politicians who promise a return to law-and-order: curtailing immigration and strengthening border security. Furthermore, progressives believe that only through revolution will their vision be realized. If progressive policies are truly good for the American people, why won't voters embrace them without the need for national catastrophe? This raises the uncomfortable possibility that — at least from the standpoint of an American household — perhaps progressivism does not, in fact, seek to benefit Americans more than other people. Indeed, because of its emphasis on climate mitigation and wealth redistribution, it seems to elevate the interests of other people at Americans' expense.

This point returns us to progressives' redefinition of "security," which they frame not as U.S. national security but as human security. In the rationalist tradition, grand strategies seek to create national security and national prosperity; they lay out how a state "can best 'cause' security for itself"; they aim for the "preservation and enhancement of the nation's long-term best interests"; they provide a "logic that helps states navigate a complex and dangerous world."[45] If progressivism is not aimed at enhancing the national interest — but instead subordinates it to cosmopolitan goals — perhaps it is not a grand strategy at all.

> ***The revolutionary story is not only alarming but unpersuasive. Why, for example, would growing political instability prompt a shift toward more progressive politics?***

"Democratizing" vs. "Liberalizing" the Order

The progressive agenda advocates an increasingly expansive advancement of human rights. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights emphasized political freedoms such as speech, assembly, religion, and protection from torture. Since then, liberals and progressives have expanded the human rights agenda to encompass the rights of women, Indigenous peoples, LGBTQ+ persons, and others.

But progressives face a serious, unacknowledged tension between their efforts to promote liberal values and their efforts to democratize the international order. Progressives want to both advance liberalism and human rights while making the order more democratic — by reducing great power influence in international institutions and conferring a greater voice to smaller, weaker, and poorer countries in the Global South. However, a tension lies in the fact that many countries in the Global South do not share progressive values. Promoting such countries into positions of greater global influence could thus democratize world politics — in the sense of representation — but make the character of world politics less liberal: thus undermining progressives' own agenda.

Ongoing debate among human rights scholars about universalism versus cultural relativism highlights many differences in the conception of human rights around the world.[46] For example, many cultures do not support the Western conception of political or human rights for women. In the Global South, many leaders claiming to represent Islam support gender-based violence. Afghanistan's Taliban leader said, "You may call it a violation of women's rights when we publicly stone or flog them for committing adultery because they conflict with your democratic principles... [But] I represent Allah, and you represent Satan."[47] Similarly, the World Health Organization reports that female genital mutilation (FGM) is practiced in 30 countries in Africa, the Middle East and Asia. Today, the World Health Organization's (WHO's) website describes FGM "a violation of the human rights of girls and women."[48] But if those 30 countries gained greater influence at the WHO, they would probably forbid such discussions: just as greater Chinese influence at the WHO curtailed investigations into the causes of Covid-19.[49]

Furthermore, in stark contrast to the progressive community in the United States and other liberal countries, many cultures continue to view the LGBTQ+ community as deviant and oppose greater rights for people in those communities. Some liberal governments within the Global South "would like to promote progressive agendas on gender issues and LGBTQ rights at the U.N., but they run into opposition from more conservative G-77 members, including many Muslim-majority states."[50] Empowering countries with such views to have greater influence in world politics would in many respects thus erode — not advance — the human rights dear to progressives. Progressives struggle to resolve this tension.

The Rise of an Autocratic Regional Hegemon

Progressives also lack a compelling response to the threat to their own values posed by China: an authoritarian superpower and aspiring regional hegemon. They blame the current security competition on the United States, arguing that China built up its military in response to U.S. hegemony. The best course for Washington in its relations with China, they argue, is conciliation. Van Jackson recommends "carrots over sticks. Reassurances. A whole package of policies and signals meant to convey not a willingness to nuke the world but rather our conditionally benign intentions. Including showing that we prioritize war prevention over war preparation."[51]

This view commendably encourages self-reflection among Americans about how the rivalry came to be. However, it casts China as a scared deer in the headlights rather than viewing it as a superpower with an agenda. Many other observers (and indeed Xi himself) argue that Beijing intends to "reunify" lost territories; toward this end China is relying on a variety of economic, military, and gray-zone tools.[52] Blaming China's military rise and increased use of force on the United States neglects to consider Beijing's agency and revisionist goals.[53]

Progressives argue that U.S. hegemony is the root of many ills in the world and call for reduced U.S. political influence (i.e., the diffusion of power to other states) and US demilitarization. But as flawed as U.S. leadership is, ceding that leadership would enable powerful, ambitious authoritarian countries to assert agendas that progressives oppose. "The retreat of the United States will in no way create a more progressive world," Georgetown University Professor Dan Nexon warns. "After all, the main rival suppliers of international order combine various degrees of imperialism, authoritarianism, and capitalisms marked by strong kleptocratic tendencies."[54]

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Absent U.S. leadership and balancing in East Asia, Chinese intentions and current regional trends suggest eventual Chinese regional dominance. Chinese regional hegemony would threaten many progressive values and goals for world politics. To be sure, progressives might celebrate the improved health and security of the Chinese people that has accompanied China's economic rise, and they might support Chinese efforts to support similar self-improvement in developing countries. But progressives decry other Chinese policies. China's economic growth occurred along with environmental devastation; at home the Chinese Communist Party rules through authoritarian repression and persecutes minorities in Tibet and Xinjiang. In its takeover of Hong Kong, China smashed a more liberal society and seeks to do the same as it "reunifies" with Taiwan: extinguishing the freedoms of 23 million people in a thriving democracy.

For the long term, progressives have an answer to problems of authoritarianism. They argue that authoritarians are propped up by the United States and other countries, and that authoritarianism thrives amidst the global inequality of the world system. Thus progressives expect that in the long run, democracy will spread as global inequality decreases. They believe that as international institutions reform they

will grow more capable of tackling the challenges posed by authoritarian countries. Taking this (highly questionable) logic at face value, however, still leaves progressives with the immediate problem of an ascendant authoritarian hegemon that, as it grew more influential because of declining American influence, would harm progressive values. By encouraging a policy of U.S. military drawdown and foreign policy restraint, progressives would create a situation in which China would be likely to obtain regional hegemony — thus Beijing would be empowered to form a regional and perhaps international order that, ironically, would undermine progressive goals.

Conclusion

The shift in the balance of power away from U.S. primacy and the backlash to three decades of a "global leadership" strategy, offers an opportune moment for a national security debate in the United States. Progressives have much to offer such a debate. Unlike every other strategy, the progressive agenda prioritizes a security issue of growing concern: climate change. A progressive strategy also satisfies the need for greater fiscal restraint, and — compared to nearly all other national security strategies — would keep the United States out of a costly and potentially devastating security competition or even war with China.

As the American national security conversation evolves, progressive thinkers — in academia, think tanks, and in the policy world — have more intellectual work and institution-building to do before they can expect the American public to more fully embrace their vision. As Friedman incisively puts it, "Implementing the progressive vision would involve absorbing short-term costs in pursuit of benefits that have no historical precedent, and whose theoretical foundations are underdeveloped."[55] To translate this intriguing vision into policy, progressives should lay out a plausible route to "worldbuilding" that translates to kitchen-table politics, convince skeptics that a "democratized" world could also be a more liberal world, and reassure people that authoritarian countries would in fact be weakened — rather than strengthened — by a U.S. drawdown and military restraint.

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Eat, Pray, Govern: The Search for Meaning in Democrats' Foreign Policy

Jeremy Shapiro

Nothing inspires reflection like losing an election. At this early stage in its grief, the Democratic Party has not even reached a consensus on why it lost in 2024 — much less on how to run a campaign in 2028, or whom to nominate. But beneath this emotional firmament, a new idea is emerging amidst the party's internal divisions: a hunger not just for better policy, but for more meaningful politics.

This is no small task. It is not enough simply to deliver on policy. As Jennifer Harris, a former Biden administration official, has argued, the Biden administration's economic policies may have "fed the body but not the soul," delivering jobs and investment but without providing a vision of shared national belonging or public life.[1] Similarly, on foreign policy, Biden's support for Ukraine in its war against Russia followed a coherent theory of reinforcing alliances and deterring authoritarian aggression. But this approach often failed to connect with the public emotionally, lacking a compelling narrative about how the war's outcome will serve American identity, purpose, and everyday well-being.

This lack of meaning has emerged as the hole in the heart of American liberalism. Democratic leaders like Senator Chris Murphy (CT) see this void clearly and are attempting to fill it. Murphy believes that American politics must respond to what he calls the "spiritual unspooling"[2] of the nation: rising loneliness, loss of trust, and a thinning sense of solidarity.

Apparently, as Americans feel more atomized, emotionally adrift, and distrustful of institutions at home, they are more skeptical of U.S. missions abroad. After all, if elites cannot even govern California, how can they govern or even reform Iraq?

Of course, foreign policy is not the leading edge of this partisan vision quest. Many voters pay almost no attention[3] to international issues; others appear to view foreign aid, military assistance, and climate diplomacy as expensive distractions[4] at best and elite indulgences[5] at worst. Apparently, as Americans feel more atomized, emotionally adrift, and distrustful of institutions at home, they are more skeptical of U.S. missions abroad. After all, if elites cannot even govern California, how can they govern or even reform Iraq?

Nonetheless, some prominent Democratic politicians are attempting to articulate a foreign policy that does more than just accommodate that skepticism. They are trying to make foreign policy at least supportive of their overall effort to reconnect emotionally with the voters. This means attaching America's global role to a sense of emotional fulfillment, moral clarity, and communal purpose.

Senator Cory Booker (D-NJ), for example, gave a 25-hour speech in the U.S. Senate in March 2025 as part of a broad protest of the Trump administration's policies. He hardly mentioned foreign policy in a speech that necessarily ranged quite widely. But when Senator Booker did broach foreign policy, he critiqued the forever wars in strictly emotional terms: "We spent trillions of dollars in those foreign wars and guess what?...No common sacrifice. Only about 1% of our people will fight in those wars."[6] Booker is explicitly tapping into a widely held frustration with U.S. foreign policy. But he uses it to deliver a deeper point: If foreign policy demands sacrifice, it must restore dignity, equity, and national purpose. Otherwise, it is a betrayal of American values. Although he does not dismiss the American public's "war fatigue," he reframes it as a legitimate concern that must be addressed through a more accountable, community-based foreign policy.

If foreign policy demands sacrifice, it must restore dignity, equity, and national purpose. Otherwise, it is a betrayal of American values.

This type of effort is a much deeper exercise than simply advocating for a values-based foreign policy, as many Democrats have traditionally done. It is instead a reimagining of foreign policy as an extension of the moral and emotional needs of the United States. Potential democratic leaders are, in essence, trying to reinvent foreign policy to better align with the emotional needs of the U.S. public for community, dignity, justice, and so forth.

This effort to forge a more emotionally resonant foreign policy is still taking shape, but the effort already begs the question: What kind of engagement with the world would a more meaningful U.S. grand strategy promote? In fact, there are many potential choices, covering nearly the full gambit from restraint to primacy — the various Democratic candidates represent most of that spectrum already. But this essay argues, perhaps surprisingly that given the current state of U.S. politics and geopolitics, a grand strategy of restraint could effectively serve the emotional needs of the U.S. electorate.

A Brief History of Strategic Disillusionment

The Democratic Party has long been a more consistent proponent of American global leadership than even the often-bellicose Republicans. From the Truman Doctrine[7] to the Clinton-era belief in globalization and NATO expansion, Democrats were for decades confident that active global leadership served both U.S. interests as well as their own political interests. Former President Barack Obama, often associated with a more cautious foreign policy, expanded drone campaigns and maintained forward-deployed forces across the globe. Former President Joe Biden went even further, proposing a sort of new cold war aimed at an axis of authoritarian powers anchored by China and Russia.

During the last 20-plus years, disillusionment with this traditional democratic approach to foreign policy has grown, particularly among base voters but also within Democratic elite circles. The failures of post-9/11 interventions — most notably in Iraq and Afghanistan — have left a lasting mark on Democratic strategic thinking. The rise of populism at home and the persistence of geopolitical disorder abroad have further strained confidence in liberal internationalism and the leadership clan that promotes it.

The traditional Democratic foreign policy of liberal internationalism supported by U.S. global leadership faces two overlapping lines of critique from within the party ranks:

The first comes from the progressive wing of the party, which argues that U.S. foreign policy has been morally compromised — too often aligned with authoritarian regimes, militarized interventions, and economic arrangements that undermine justice both at home and abroad. From failed nation-building efforts to complicity in autocratic crackdowns to support for Israeli cruelty in Gaza, the gap between values and behavior has increasingly weighed on the Democratic conscience and thus Democratic politics. Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-MA), for example, noted that "the failure by the Biden administration to follow US law and to suspend arms shipments [to Israel] is a grave mistake that undermines American credibility worldwide."[8] Senator Bernie Sanders (D-VT) was even more blunt: "This wholesale slaughter [of Palestinians] makes my stomach turn."[9] Overall, the progressive critique calls for a values-based realignment: one that centers human rights, racial justice, and global equity, even at the expense of short-term strategic advantage.

The second challenge to the leadership clan comes from those who advocate strategic restraint — pulling back from excessive military engagement. Realist thinkers and even some progressive Democrats see American global ambition as strategically unsustainable and politically untenable. "We have to return to a foreign policy of restraint," according to Representative Ro Khanna (D-CA), "one that develops our capabilities and our potential in communities across America, and not become bogged down in unwinnable conflicts that lead to greater resentment of the United States, and that don't advance American interests."[10] For restrainers, the issue is not so much moral hypocrisy as imperial overreach. They argue that America must do less, not only to purify its soul, but to protect its core interests and its fragile communities amid finite resources and waning public patience. Where progressives seek a better kind of political engagement with the world, restrainers seek less political engagement altogether.

Meanwhile, "leadership" Democrats have not passively accepted the progressive or realist reimagining of American global engagement. During the first Trump term, they effectively sought to retain relevance by championing a "foreign policy for the middle class," which aimed to tether trade, security, and diplomacy more tightly to American economic prosperity. This was a strategic attempt to defend the core tenets of U.S. internationalism while acknowledging the political salience of domestic inequality and economic dislocation.

During the Biden administration, this rhetoric often came across as vague or technocratic. The administration, for example, invested heavily in semiconductors, clean energy, and alliance-building, but it struggled to explain how these efforts tangibly improved the everyday lives of working Americans or helped to build communities. The emphasis on industrial strategy and competition with China appealed to elites and policy wonks but lacked an emotional or moral narrative that could unify the public. Instead of stirring a sense of national purpose, it reinforced the perception that foreign policy is a distant, elite concern — ambitious abroad but unconvincing at home.

In the wake of former Vice President Kamala Harris's loss in the 2024 election and as progressive and restrainer critiques gained traction, particularly through a repudiation of the Biden administration's efforts in Gaza, leadership voices began adapting their own rhetoric. Increasingly, they framed foreign policy not merely as a source of material benefit, but as an expression of democratic renewal, shared values, and national dignity, borrowing the emotional register of their critics while seeking to preserve the architecture of traditional alliances and global leadership.

Andy Beshear, for example, the governor of Kentucky, has argued that alliance stability is not an abstract goal, but a precondition for reliable investment and local prosperity. "[O]ur alliances — especially our alliances with Europe," he told the World Economic Forum in January 2025… are critical to global stability…and the ultimate reliability and consistency that we need to do global business and ultimately live in as safe of a planet as we can."[11] This reformulates alliance as reinforcing U.S. and global prosperity rather than as vehicles of U.S. leadership. In doing so, Governor Beshear hopes to persuade voters that international engagement can be meaningful, even if its structures remain largely unchanged.

The Emotional Foundations of Restraint

Despite these examples, the leadership, progressive, and restrainer clans all struggle to connect emotionally with the public. Restrainers have found this to be particularly difficult. Owing to their roots in realism and academia, they often frame foreign policy in the cold language of tradeoffs, limits, and core interests.[12] They tend emphasize what the United States should not do, rather than offering a compelling vision of what actions Washington should take.

This inherently negative approach, focused on avoiding quagmires and conserving power, rarely provides the kind of moral or aspirational language that resonates with voters seeking purpose or national pride. America, after all, is a can-do country. It put a man on the moon; won World War II; and invented nuclear weapons, the Internet, and online dating. Culturally, it prefers the language of moral crusades to the notion of limits.

Restraint's language of prudence over passion represents a real disadvantage relative to both the leadership and progressive schools of Democratic foreign policy. Its advocates argue persuasively for limits, but they often fail to articulate how a restrained America might still lead, inspire, or do good. In a political culture that hungers for affirmation and meaning — especially after decades of disillusionment — the cold logic of strategic restraint can feel emotionally empty.

Public support for restraint already exists in latent form. Polling suggests that Americans are increasingly tired of foreign wars, skeptical of military aid, and hesitant to expand commitments.[13] Concretely, this fatigue does reflect some genuine and probably inescapable failures of U.S. foreign policy. But in U.S. political culture, the failures of the past do not absolve politicians of the need to find a positive emotional frame for the future— one that says restraint is not retreat, but renewal.

To succeed in this competition for the next democratic foreign policy, realists need to fill this emotional void. And they can. The hunger for a more meaningful foreign policy is not inherently progressive or traditionalist, even if those schools have achieved more progress in embedding their policies in U.S. political culture. After all, what is more emotionally satisfying to a weary nation than the idea of moral purpose at home rather than endlessly intervening abroad? One can easily imagine a future aspirant to the mantle of John F. Kennedy connecting to the public by intoning, "Ask not what you can do for the world, ask what together we can do for our country."

Some of the potential democratic presidential aspirants have already demonstrated this possibility, even as they do not necessarily associate themselves with the restraint school.

For example, Pete Buttigieg, the former Secretary of Transportation and a possible presidential aspirant, seeks to rest his policy agenda on a foundation of national character. He advocates engaging with the world in ways that reflect not just what America does, but who Americans aspire to be — a framing that makes space for restraint without sacrificing moral clarity. According to Buttigieg, "[T]he world needs America. But not just any America. Not an America that has reduced itself to just one more player, scrapping its way through an amoral worldwide scrum for narrow advantage…It has to be an America that knows how to make better the everyday life of its citizens and of people around the world, knowing how much one has to do with the other."[14] But within this moral appeal, Buttigieg also cautions against the reflexive use of force, noting that "strength is more than military power — it's our power of inspiration. At key moments, the world has envied not just our strength but our prosperity, not just our prosperity but our liberty."[15]

In other words, if foreign policy is a mirror, then what it reflects must be credible to a skeptical public.

In other words, if foreign policy is a mirror, then what it reflects must be credible to a skeptical public. In particular, Buttigieg has signaled support for countering authoritarian digital practices — especially from China — by championing transparent global norms rather than military confrontation. Such an approach illustrates how restraint can be married to moral ambition, by grounding U.S. leadership less in the projection of power and more in democratic values that resonate at home.

Similarly, Senator Chris Murphy of Connecticut imagines foreign policy not as a theater of dominance but as a stage for reaffirming human dignity — through anti-corruption efforts, democratic transparency, and cooperation over climate change. In practice, this is restraint in the sense that it means much less emphasis on military and other coercive tools and more on diplomacy and economic justice. The next administration, according to Murphy, will need to "gain back America's faith in the national security establishment."[16] To do so, according to Murphy, the next president will need to adopt "restraint as a strategy" when it comes to military involvement abroad, to "show the American public that that finally, we have leaders that are willing to learn the lessons of the mistakes we've made." Notably, Murphy advocates for at least a modest form restraint but casts that idea in moral rather than material terms.

Despite these resonances, restraint and the search for meaning are not automatically aligned. There are tensions — especially when moral purpose implies moral obligation. A values-based foreign policy could very well compel the United States to act more, not less, during humanitarian crises or when blatant injustice occurs.

It is hard, as former President Bill Clinton found out during the leadup to the 1999 US-led military intervention in Kosovo, to preach about the importance of preventing genocide and then resist the temptation to use whatever power your country has to prevent such an act. So, the Clinton administration bypassed United Nations Security Council approval and launched an intervention to stop Serbian ethnic cleansing and mass atrocities in Kosovo. This was not a war of self-defense or a war that resonated back home, nor was it tied to a vital strategic interest — rather, it was grounded in a perceived moral imperative to act.

It is not hard to imagine progressives going down this route in the future. Consider Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, (D-NY), for example. Her critique of U.S. militarism is oriented around justice, which clearly has emotional resonance. But her worldview might sometimes compel more, not less, forceful international action, particularly in humanitarian crises or to rectify past wrongs. Her call for accountability in U.S. foreign aid, particularly regarding the conflict in Gaza, reflects an emotionally driven foreign policy, but one that does not necessarily preclude intervention. Her emphasis is on justice, not restraint for its own sake.

Bridging the Divide: Moral Narratives and Strategic Coherence

Even beyond these specifics, the problem is that foreign policy often employs an elite discourse. The vocabulary of restraint — realism, offshore balancing, primacy — still feels remote from the emotional register of everyday politics. For a foreign policy of meaning to enable restraint, its advocates need to translate academic abstractions into public values. A strategy premised on "offshore balancing" might be more appealing if it is reframed as a commitment to "shared global stewardship," or if "making allies do more" is recast as "responsible democratic partnership."

But this is only the beginning. To reconcile restraint with the Democrats' search for meaning, it helps to think in terms of a emotional narrative that connects restraint to what voters value. A narrative gains public traction when it offers not just logical coherence, but moral clarity. Restraint, therefore, must be pitched to the U.S. public as a pathway to something emotionally intelligible: fairness, accountability, self-respect.

Governor Gavin Newsom, (D-CA), for example, offers one potential route. Newsom pioneers a sort of subnational diplomacy on climate change, which permits a narrative that allows internationalism to move more to the local level. "With the all-out assault we're now facing on low-carbon, green growth from the federal level," he announced in March 2025, "it's the subnational leaders — those of us leading our states and cities — who have to step up."[17] His approach bypasses federal overreach while addressing transnational threats cooperatively — a kind of restrained engagement that reclaims the moral ground.

Importantly, neither Newsom nor most of other the political figures mentioned in this essay are inherently restrainers, but nor do they fully align with either of the other camps. Their foreign policy follows from their broad approach to policy, which in turns rests on an increasingly emotional foundation. Any of these leaders could end up with a restrained foreign policy if they find a coherent narrative that aligns restraint with their specific emotional appeal and their broader policy approach.

In other words, the challenge is not to replace foreign policy with sentiment, but to use foreign policy to support a candidate's broader sentiment. Remember, the U.S. public does not care very much about foreign policy. The goal, therefore, is not to remake foreign policy for its own sake. Rather, the goal is to create a foreign policy that supports a candidate's existing emotional approach to gaining connection with the voters. For restraint to serve that purpose, the restraint camp must demonstrate that pulling back from excessive military entanglement does not mean moral abdication or loss of meaning. Rather, it can involve investing in human security, decarbonization, technology norms, and democratic solidarity — all of which serve U.S. interests but also support meaning and community in U.S. politics.

The Meaning of Strategy

The Democratic Party's current introspection is not merely a policy recalibration — it is a moral reckoning. The party's emerging foreign policy voices are seeking to reinvigorate global engagement with a sense of coherence and community. They want foreign policy to do less harm, reflect more honesty, and help Americans feel less estranged from their institutions.

This search for meaning is not incompatible with strategic restraint. In fact, it may be its best hope for political traction. A foreign policy that heals rather than hollows, that prioritizes dignity over dominance, and that is emotionally sustainable as well as strategically sound could prove to be the bridge between elite doctrine and democratic legitimacy.

In the wake of defeat, Democrats are not just searching for votes — they are searching for meaning. In that search may lie the foundation for a new kind of American strategy: restrained, yes, but also resonant.

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