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JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2026

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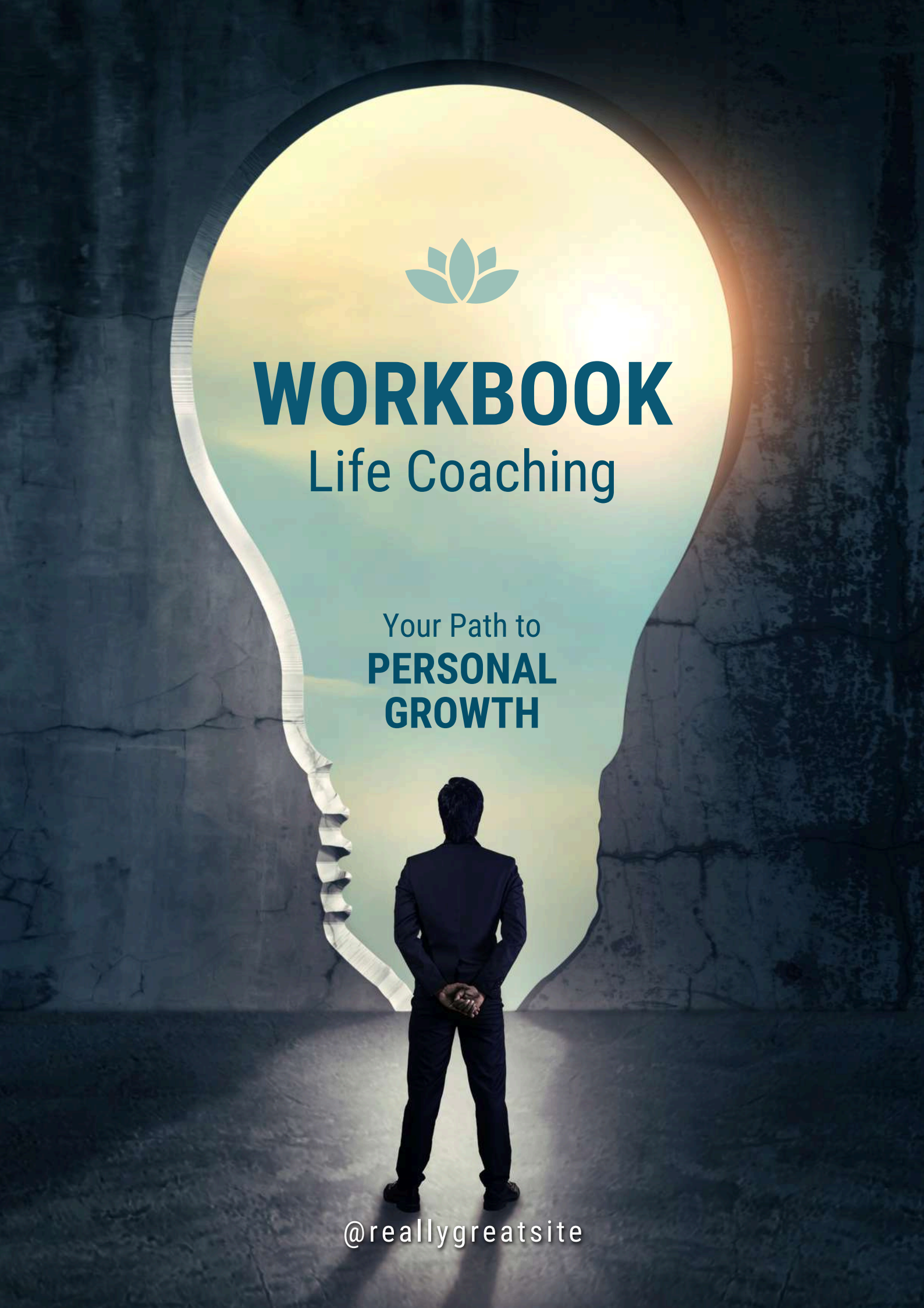
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More Than a Doctrine

U.S. Foreign Policy as a Debate Without End

ISABELLA BLACK

If the past twenty-five years have demonstrated anything, it is that United States (U.S.) foreign policy (USFP) decision-making can change on a dime. Undoubtedly, Donald Trump's presidency has forced the entire USFP apparatus to revisit questions long since considered to be answered, such as the value of globalization and participation in international fora. Coupled with Trump's distinct rhetorical style, the USFP community largely views his choices with disdain, as an unnecessary, harmful break from the steady, predictable, and coherent foreign policy of the past several decades.

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Illustration by Artificial Intelligence

However, President Joseph Biden's attempts to undo Trump's first term had mixed results. To be sure, Biden diligently campaigned on a familiar and effective strategy of policy rejection. Upon taking office, however, his efforts to "return to business as usual" ultimately failed. On the one hand, transatlantic partnerships were weakened under Trump 1.0, and agreements were more difficult to reach. On the other hand, Biden actually maintained some of Trump's changes, such as the tougher economic approach to the People's Republic of China (PRC) and his plans to withdraw troops from Afghanistan. For those in the anti-Trump camp, however, the most devastating blow of all was that Biden's four-year term did not prevent Trump's historic comeback in 2024.

Historically, USFP takes on the character of the people in power. In fact, there are four schools of thought named for consequential historical figures who pioneered distinct approaches to the decision-making process. This century, especially, each of the twenty-first-century presidents have demonstrated through policy and policy rejection how differently they view the U.S.' international role. Simultaneously, USFP decision-making powers are increasingly centralized within the Executive Branch rather than coordinated with Congress. Consequently, changes in USFP feel more abrupt, more damaging, and more partisan than ever before.

The narrative of USFP coherence is enticing, but misleading and politically charged. Biden's "return to normalcy" campaign fell short because USFP is not a doctrine that can be reinstated. Rather, it is historically, and currently remains, a dynamic apparatus which arms the U.S. with the flexibility to navigate complex short-, medium-, and long-term goals. To that end, this essay challenges the assumption that USFP was ever in a state of true "coherence" that the U.S. can somehow return to under the right political conditions. Rather, it is a complex story of contradicting values, policies, and people which materially resulted in geopolitical power. Moreover, it highlights the issue with high levels of unitary centralization and suggests that stronger decentralization will mitigate the effects of abrupt changes while still allowing the U.S. to maintain higher levels of strategic ambiguity.

COHERENCE WITHOUT CONTINUITY

An ideal-typical characterization of policy coherence is conceptualized as a set of closely related values from which decision-making is derived. States utilize coordination mechanisms that span legal bodies to ensure policy on trade, national security, and diplomacy are aligned and do not undermine or conflict with one another. As a result, policy decisions are stable, potentially even static. Moreover, decisions likely embody a state's national self-conception, generate popular support, and remain in place across leadership. Importantly, changes in policy occur gradually and as a natural reaction to shifts in the international system.

Utilizing this characterization, we cannot easily claim that USFP is coherent. Thinking through the past four election cycles, Barack Obama, Trump 1.0 and 2.0, and Biden spent a considerable amount of their terms undoing the policy decisions made by their predecessor rather than adding to or expanding upon

them. Notable examples from Trump's first term include withdrawing the U.S. from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA; Iran Nuclear Deal), the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and the Paris Climate Accords. Similarly, Biden sought to re-enter the U.S. into various internal fora, including Paris, as well as to renegotiate a nuclear deal with Iran. While the hot-and-cold nature of USFP may seem commonplace now, these actions were a complete shock to U.S. and international stakeholders alike and damaged U.S. credibility as a reliable partner.

American foreign policy has never been guided by a single, uncontested logic. From its earliest days, U.S. foreign policy decision-making has been shaped by competing priorities, worldviews, and underlying assumptions about power, commerce, democracy, and America's role in the world. As Walter R. Mead famously argued in Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World (2001), these tensions can be understood through four distinct traditions that continue to influence U.S. foreign policy thinking.

One of these traditions is the Hamiltonian approach, which places international commerce at the center of American power. Hamiltonians view global trade not merely as an economic activity but as a strategic instrument, emphasizing U.S. engagement with international markets and the institutions that sustain them. Accordingly, strong relationships with economically significant states are seen as essential to national strength and global influence.

SEAL OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES SYMBOL IS SEEN ON A PODIUM BEFORE THE PRESS CONFERENCE OF THE U.S. PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN ON THE FINAL DAY OF THE NATO SUMMIT IN MADRID, SPAIN ON JUNE 30, 2022. (PHOTO BY JAKUB PORZYCKI/NURPHOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES)

In contrast, the Jeffersonian tradition reflects a deep skepticism toward expansive government authority and large institutional structures. Rooted in a strong belief in individual liberty and democracy as a domestic practice,

Jeffersonians prioritize preserving the American republic from external entanglements. As a result, policies associated with this tradition often appear inward-looking, cautious of foreign commitments, and at times openly nationalist or isolationist in tone.

The Jacksonian tradition, meanwhile, draws its character from popular sovereignty and a pronounced emphasis on military strength. Jacksonians are less concerned with abstract principles or institutional norms and more focused on national honor, security, and decisive victory. This approach frequently channels populist sentiment and tends to mobilize nationalism more explicitly than the Jeffersonian worldview, particularly in moments of perceived threat.

Finally, the Wilsonian tradition emerged from the trauma of the First World War and rests on the conviction that American power carries a moral responsibility. Wilsonians champion international liberalism, multilateralism, and human rights, arguing that democracy must be defended and promoted beyond U.S. borders. Unlike Jeffersonians, they do not see democracy promotion as a risk to the republic, but rather as an obligation—one that requires active engagement to make the world, in Woodrow Wilson's words, "safe for democracy."

None of the four schools lay claim to USFP decision-making and, certainly, no one president engages in policies reflective of a single school. For instance, the Biden administration espoused Wilsonian values, such as by actively participating in the historic multilateral sanctions regime against Russia for its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. However, his administration was also sensitive to public perceptions against U.S. internationalism. Policies like the CHIPS Act aimed to reshore critical manufacturing back to the U.S. and thus could be representative of a more Jeffersonian approach.

Interestingly, three out of four of Mead's schools of thought are named after a specific U.S. president. In a practical sense, this is because each of these men exemplified specific patterns and preferences during their time working with or presiding over the federal government, which have since been emulated by subsequent leaders. However, it also speaks to the enduring trend of power consolidation within the Executive Branch that contributes to the hyper-incoherence in USFP today. In fact, the most notable swings in USFP seem to occur when POTUS has the most say.

There are myriad historical examples of individual personalities and behaviors affecting key foreign policy decisions. For instance, take the Cuban Missile Crisis. President John F. Kennedy's commitment to non-invasion likely saved the world from total nuclear annihilation. A common question posed to students of international relations is whether the outcome of the most fraught 13 days in nuclear history would have ended differently if another president, say Richard "Tricky Dick" Nixon, had been in charge.

Indeed, individual presidents and their voting constituencies historically impose their own values and personalities onto USFP. For instance, scholarship on the Cold War increasingly considers how President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's personality was far more agreeable in the eyes of USSR Premier Joseph Stalin than was Harry S. Truman's (FDR's vice president and successor), which may have impacted the outbreak of the Cold War in 1949.

Similar political arguments abound today; for instance, pundits argue that Russia would not have invaded Ukraine if Trump had won the 2020 election.

In fact, U.S. history suggests that presidential candidates can impact foreign policy before ever stepping foot in the Oval Office. For instance, American kinetic operations during the Vietnam War (1964–1973) may have ended much earlier if Nixon had not gotten involved. In late 1968, evidence surfaced that Nixon had interfered with President Lyndon B. Johnson's ongoing peace negotiations with Hanoi, effectively prolonging the war (i.e., the Chennault Affair). To some, this failure cost his vice president, Hubert Humphrey, the 1968 election and allowed Nixon to win by one of the slimmest popular majorities in U.S. history.

More than anything, these examples underscore the importance of reputable, responsible leaders serving at the helm of USFP. Likewise, they also suggest that irresponsible, cavalier, or morally questionable leaders can have damning consequences for Americans and global actors.

EMPIRE OR PRINCIPLE?

To be sure, there is a lot of variation in the way in which USFP decision-making is approached and which policies are supported or discarded. It is important to note that the inherent nature of policy making—foreign or domestic—lends itself to the preclusion of a rigid decision-making structure; as such, it is often difficult to determine which national values or institutional cultures affect policy making and how. Moreover, consistency in policy outcomes is not necessarily the same as true coherence in policymaking. Measures of consistency concern the material effects or consequences of a policy decision, whether or not that decision was made according to a standard set of values.

This being said, there are strong arguments in favor of coherence which rest on the values that comprise USFP. Particularly, leftist thinkers and historians, such as William Appleman Williams, Howard Zinn, Noam Chomsky, and Michael Parenti, similarly argue that the history of USFP is one of empire—values and consequences alike. To this end, leftist thinkers often argue that policy decisions are informed by a core set of assumptions about American character, which is best understood as American exceptionalism.

On its own, American exceptionalism asserts that the founding of the U.S. was, well, exceptional. To be sure, the American experiment was novel circa 1776, and its growth since is unprecedented. According to leftist and even some conservative thinkers, this belief has evolved into a conviction that these historical accomplishments differentiate the U.S.' role in the world from all other countries, affording it impunity and, at times, messianic impetus. Common phrases meant to communicate exceptionalism include both historical anecdotes such as "the U.S. is a city upon a hill" or "the frontier shaped a distinctive American character," as well as current policy talking points (e.g., the U.S. is a beacon of democracy; the U.S. is the leader of the free world).

Importantly, American exceptionalism is invoked by folks across the political spectrum for both benign and violent reasons. For instance, Cold Warriors active in the USFP arena, like George F. Kennan, often cited U.S. moral

superiority based on its values of political and economic liberalism (e.g., freedom of the press) to condemn the violent oppression exercised by the USSR. Similarly, during the 1990s, the U.S. openly advocated for humanitarian intervention to liberate populations from violent governments or to provide aid for healthcare, education, and gender equality for comparable reasons.

Ultimately, whether exceptionalism is a USFP value is moot; the jarring policy changes of this quarter century persist, suggesting that all values are in flux.

However, exceptionalism has also been historically weaponized to support territorial expansion or military operations. For instance, social gospel leader Josiah Strong in 1885 published a book titled Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis, wherein he argued for the racial superiority of Anglo-Saxon-descended Americans, of Christianity, and of the mission Americans had to spread both to all corners of the globe. Similar sentiment was invoked by President Ronald Reagan during the 1980s, such as in his famous "Evil Empire" speech delivered to the National Association of Evangelicals in 1983 or in defense of military operations in Guatemala.

Certainly, American exceptionalism is an important theme in U.S. national mythology. Claiming it is a static value informing USFP decision-making, however, is more difficult to assert. Like all things, there are times in which ideas inform material realities; likewise, there are times in which material realities inform ideas. The dialectic process of both often occurs simultaneously, and the syntheses meld and turn into something completely new (a visual I would often provide students with was that of wax in a lava lamp). Ultimately, whether exceptionalism is a USFP value is moot; the jarring policy changes of this quarter century persist, suggesting that all values are in flux.

Foundationally, USFP decision-making is an enduring contest between the Executive Branch, Congress, and interest groups. This is important, as it is neither realistic nor strategically sound to promote a monolithic, unitary, or static approach to foreign policy. Coordinating across multiple actors and affording distinctive powers or spheres of influence for each ensures that USFP remains dynamic. However, this also introduces myriad challenges. Actors continuously vie for influence, and some feel incredibly entitled to decision-making powers at the expense of others or, on the extreme end, of the democratic process entirely.

PRESIDENTIAL OVERREACH

From the outset, USFP was never intended to be controlled by one federal branch. In 1958, political scientist and constitutional scholar Edward Corwin posited that the U.S. Constitution is an "invitation to struggle" over which entity—the president or the Congress—gets the privilege of deciding the direction of USFP. U.S. presidents are endowed with certain powers, most obviously that they are the Commander-in-Chief. Likewise, Congress is afforded a broad range of responsibilities that it alone can carry out, such as declaring war and ratifying treaties (much to Woodrow Wilson's dismay).

The decentralization of USFP decision-making written into the Constitution is intentional. Ideally, it affords both Congress and the President individual powers and encourages collaboration. A balanced foreign policy actively coordinates and includes Congress, which results in a more durable, forward-thinking, and democratic foreign policy apparatus.

Instead, decision-making power is increasingly concentrated within not just the Executive Branch (primarily between the Department of State, the Department of Defense (War), the Department of the Treasury, and the Department of Commerce), but within the White House itself. Each of these departments spearheads different areas of the President's foreign policy agenda—diplomacy, defense and war, and trade. As such, there is often overlap in their duties, and they sometimes engage in interagency cooperation regarding national security issues (e.g., sanctions policy and foreign aid).

However, the extent to which Presidents outsource USFP decision-making solely depends on their personal preferences. For instance, POTUS is legally required to maintain the National Security Council (NSC), but not to hold regular meetings or invite certain key individuals (e.g., State, DOD). In fact, some presidents have even appointed secretaries to oversee other executive functions. For instance, Nixon appointed his secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, to dually serve as his National Security Advisor (NSA); similarly, Secretary of State Marco Rubio is Trump's interim NSA. The Trump Administration is particularly untrusting of outside parties, and often appoints special envoys, such as Steve Witkoff, to handle emerging issues rather than rely on career foreign service officers or ambassadors.

Frustratingly, some of this decision-making power is willingly abdicated by Congress itself. Key legislative decisions made as early as the 1930s provide the president with an immense amount of autonomy. Further, Congress often fails to enforce its own attempts to reassert some power over USFP. The 1973 War Powers Resolution, passed in response to U.S. entrance into and presidential decisions made during the Vietnam War (such as Nixon's decision to bomb Cambodia), is rarely enforced. Indeed, there is an astonishing lack of political will on the part of members of Congress to assert their constitutionally given powers over the direction of USFP; this is especially true if the political affiliation of the majority party and the president are the same.

Still, presidents continue to push the envelope on what they can and cannot do. For instance, presidents of both parties continue to challenge Congressional war powers. Both Obama's 2011 air strikes in Libya, in

coordination with NATO against Muammar al-Gaddafi's regime, and Trump's most recent threats to all but declare war on Venezuela (including sinking "drug boats" in international waters) blatantly challenge the War Powers Resolution. In both cases, presidents and their legal teams have argued that the War Powers Resolution is an infringement of their own powers as Commander-in-Chief. However, these arguments are hardly needed, as bills introduced by members of Congress to rein in presidential action rarely even make it to a vote.

LOBBYING FOREIGN POLICY

In addition to both the Executive and Legislative Branches, interest groups also wield heavy influence over the direction of USFP. In short, interest groups comprise a wide, complex range of actors who each vie for specific policies from which they will benefit. These actors largely consist of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), foreign and domestic lobbyists and political groups, corporations, foreign policy research institutions and laboratories, whether or not affiliated with a university, as well as think tanks, journals, and other official outlets of public opinion.

Not all interest groups are created equal, however. Some organizations are far more powerful than others and, consequently, have more sway over USFP. This is especially true in Congress, where Members represent constituencies comprised of both voters and interested stakeholders, e.g., special interest groups, business associations, labor unions, campaign donors; the list is not exhaustive. Congressional members are locked in a constant tug-of-war between these myriad actors, wherein the strongest groups, characterized primarily in terms of size and funding, have the most direct impact on the issues members are concerned with and the legislation they write or support.

One of the more obvious examples of a strong organization is the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). Regardless of individual opinions on the costs and benefits of maintaining a "special relationship," the fact remains that AIPAC and what John Mearsheimer refers to as the "Israel Lobby" wield a great deal of influence over the direction of U.S.-Israel policy. In 2024 alone, AIPAC boasts it directly supported 361 Democrats and Republicans with a cumulative US$53 million. Those dollars went into congressional campaigns, helping endorsed candidates win their primaries and garner support from other affiliated entities. This approach is not unique to AIPAC, but it is salient due to both the size of the organization and the sensitivities surrounding Israel, the ongoing hostilities in Gaza, and antisemitism more broadly.

There are also a host of private sector actors which maintain strong relationships with the federal government. Think tanks like the Council on Foreign Relations, the Cato Institute, the RAND Corporation, the American Enterprise Institute, the Heritage Foundation, and the Brookings Institution all have robust government affairs divisions and regularly interface with Members of Congress as well as Executive Branch officials. NGOs and non-profits, like Amnesty International, also lobby Congress over specific issues. Similarly, corporations and business associations dedicate an immense number of resources to government lobbying over foreign policy-related issues like trade and defense spending (particularly regarding procurement).

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It is important to note, however, that the degree of influence USFP-related interest groups have largely depends on the political affiliation of the president. For example, business associations are generally pro–free trade and oppose economic tools like tariffs and sanctions. A president affiliated with the current Democratic Party is more likely to listen to free-trade lobbyists and enter into free trade agreements that promote specific industries, like high technology. Likewise, a president of the current Republican Party is more likely to support policies promoted by conservative lobbyists. The Heritage Foundation, for instance, pushes nationalist policies, like cutting foreign aid or imposing high tariffs, that the current White House is very receptive to.

THE WHITE HOUSE IN WASHINGTON, D.C., U.S., ON TUESDAY, APRIL 8, 2025. U.S. PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP IS MOVING TO EXPAND THE MINING AND USE OF COAL INSIDE THE U.S., A BID TO POWER THE BOOM IN ENERGY-HUNGRY DATA CENTERS WHILE SEEKING TO REVIVE A DECLINING U.S. FOSSIL FUEL INDUSTRY. PHOTOGRAPHER: AL DRAGO/BLOOMBERG VIA GETTY IMAGES

Without a doubt, both the high levels of USFP centralization and the number of competing voices put a strain on policy coherence. To make matters even more complicated, policymakers themselves assert their own understanding of national self-conception into their work. The degree to which this impacts USFP coherence, however, depends on the era and historical conditions.

MANY "ISMS," ONE STATE

National self-conception is a topic that has the physical attributes of a non-Newtonian liquid. In times of immense external threats or pressures, defining what America is seems easier to accomplish (or strongarm). In times of few or intangible threats, national self-conception seems thin and watery. It is more difficult to grasp and often falls prey to partisan actors seeking to weaponize it.

For a country like the U.S., its entire inception and rapid growth create fertile ground for multiple, competing ideas of what the country stands for and who

it protects. Often, answers to these questions differ according to ideological convictions, political affiliations, personal experiences, and historical conditions. Is the U.S. a global leader and a beacon for democracy? Or is it an empire that ruthlessly sought territorial expansion and capital accumulation at the expense of the nation's and the world's most vulnerable populations? Does exceptionalism translate into moral obligation? Is it a sign of divine favoritism? Most importantly, can multiple self-conceptions be true at once?

Overall, the goal is to avoid a post-modernist spiral. However, it is important to recognize that the U.S. has worn many "-isms" during its 250-year history. These broadly consist of isolationism, protectionism, expansionism, imperialism, and globalism. Each captures important processes that accompany or result from historical events and is often embodied by POTUS in the form of strong executive actions, like foreign policy "doctrines."

From its founding through the 1960s, the U.S. steadily progressed through each of the "-isms." Often, it did so reactively. Both the growth of the U.S. and changes in the international system contributed to the evolving landscape in which American values were created. As such, there was not much competition among these "-isms" for determining national character. Rather, presidents often built on the policy decisions made by their predecessors in three distinct areas: continental, hemispheric, and global affairs. For this reason, USFP prior to the late-twentieth century appears far more linear, and thus coherent. Determining whether appearance is fact, however, requires in-depth analysis and primary source research.

Even without a novel-length analysis, though, there is an observable departure from the steady evolution of USFP that emerged in the 1970s. Spurred by the unpopularity of the Vietnam War, late-twentieth-century presidents, from Nixon to Bill Clinton, all had different approaches to USFP that, at times, contradicted the decisions made by their immediate predecessor; most notably, the policy shifts spearheaded by the Carter and Reagan administrations. To make matters even more complicated, during the final decade of the twentieth century, the U.S. navigated a completely different kind of international system.

Indeed, the 1990s mark an important, and controversial, embrace of interventionism, multilateralism, free trade, and the spread of market democracy. These broader concepts dominated the minds of both George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton, albeit in different capacities. Guiding both nineties' presidents, however, was an optimistic international spirit that did not readily reflect the outbreak of violent civil wars, humanitarian crises, and the rise of transnational threats like terrorism. The apparent disconnect between what foreign policy leaders wanted and the situation on the ground grew throughout the decade, introducing gaps between civilians and institutions. However, the latent fractures in U.S. self-conception did not fully surface until the early-aughts.

As the U.S. entered the twenty-first century, national tragedy, global recession, and polarization amplified the existing swings between political parties in Washington. Consequently, each twenty-first-century president has successfully run on a platform of policy rejection that has left foreign policy in a state of hyper-incoherence. Coupled with the increasing

centralization of decision-making powers within the Executive Branch, USFP is at risk of being held hostage by four-year election cycles.

FROM REPUBLIC TO EMPIRE

Contrary to popular belief, the U.S. was not born with a natural inclination for international affairs. Quite the opposite. There are some noteworthy exceptions, such as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, who understood the value of courting strong relationships with other countries. However, the newly created "American public" circa 1776 detested all things "European," which included diplomacy.

Foreign policy in terms of territorial expansion, however, evolved rapidly. Westward expansion as well as hemispheric interests soon dominated USFP. Key events include the Louisiana Purchase (1803), the Indian Removal Act of 1830, the annexation of Texas (1845) and the resulting Mexican-American War (1846), and the Alaska Purchase (1867), all of which exemplify how the U.S. promoted its territorial growth.

Notably, U.S. hemispheric appetite grew alongside its continental expansion westward. To be sure, engagement with Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) throughout the nineteenth century was strained. For example, the U.S. refused to recognize Haiti as a sovereign state until 1862, over 50 years after it declared independence from France. However, President James Monroe's enactment of the Monroe Doctrine (1823) plainly articulated that Latin America was off-limits to further European interference, despite tenuous relations down south.

At the core of both continental and hemispheric foreign policy through the nineteenth century lie several historical processes. Slavery (which was both a process and a 400-year-long event), pan-hemispheric idealism, and westward expansion (including the ongoing expulsion of indigenous peoples and mass industrialization) all had a significant impact in molding the nation's raison d'être for its foreign policy. Gradually, physical growth expanded the U.S. imagination; it could be a regional power.

The gestation of USFP was largely complete when, in 1898, it acquired several non-continental territories. Following the end of the Spanish-American War, the U.S. inherited the Philippines, Cuba, Guam, and Puerto Rico. In addition, the U.S. also acquired Hawai'i after several years of struggle between Sanford Dole and Queen Lili'uokalani. The current president, William F. McKinley, welcomed expansion and often invoked messianic impetus to justify U.S. involvement with the new territories.

To be sure, late-nineteenth-century presidents struggled with appeasing groups like the Anti-Imperialist League and popular isolationism. In fact, presidents themselves disagreed over acquiring non-continental territory. For instance, President Grover Cleveland, McKinley's predecessor, strongly opposed U.S. acquisition of Hawai'i. However, territorial expansion eventually won out, and the U.S. entered 1900 far larger than anyone had anticipated a century earlier.

Continental and hemispheric engagement persisted throughout the early-to-mid twentieth century. For instance, President Theodore Roosevelt is well known for his "big stick" diplomacy, which favored showcasing American military might and enforcing hemispheric superiority. For instance, the Roosevelt Corollary (1904) armed the Monroe Doctrine with "teeth," cementing the U.S.'s role as a regional policeman.

Other early-twentieth-century presidents pursued economic expansion. For instance, William Howard Taft famously engaged in "dollar diplomacy," believing that the U.S. can, and should, assert its interests abroad through economic prowess. Still, capital growth often resulted in military interventions in the LAC region (e.g., Cuba and Nicaragua) when business interests were threatened. It should also be noted that the U.S. engaged non-regional actors between the mid-to-late nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Particularly, the U.S. was heavily invested in the Indo-Pacific and pursued economic opportunities in Japan and China. For example, the 1899 diplomatic initiative known as the Open Door Policy sought to create a favorable business environment for American capital.

However, the internationalism spurred by the two world wars and the Great Depression is wholly different than any kind of limited, bilateral engagement the U.S. had previously pursued. President Woodrow Wilson was the first to expand USFP imagination beyond the LAC. Wilson's "fourteen points" were first introduced in a speech to Congress in January 1918, where he famously articulated the concept of national self-determination and championed both the creation of international fora and active U.S. engagement within them. To Wilson, the U.S. had a moral obligation to uphold democracy, especially in the face of threats. Ironically, the U.S. had a strong isolationist phase following the immediate aftermath of WWI. However, this was short-lived as many members of Congress blamed isolationism for the outbreak of the Great Depression.

FDR's four terms mark the next significant shift in U.S. internationalism. As the Great Depression waned, Americans and Congress alike both grew more receptive to sustained international engagement. It is here that the first major willing abdication of USFP decision-making power occurred. In 1934, FDR signed into law the Reciprocal Trade Agreements Act (RTAA), which gave the president the ability to reduce tariffs on other countries by up to 50% without the need for congressional approval. This resulted in a substantive relinquishment of control over international commerce and benchmarks an inflection point of Executive Branch centralization.

By the mid-1930s, FDR was committed to creating a strong framework for international trade. It just so happened that U.S. entry into WWII provided the opportunity to not only create that framework, but to lead its implementation. The bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, resulted in a declaration of war first against Japan, then against Germany and Italy in response to their own declarations. U.S. financial and kinetic participation in WWII turned the tides of the war, and Allied leaders began preparing for postwar victory in mid-to-late 1944. FDR quickly emerged as a leading voice,

particularly with regard to the Bretton Woods Conference (1944), which founded the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and established the U.S. dollar as the global reserve currency.

The end of WWII marks the beginning of the liberal international postwar order, sometimes referred to as Pax Americana. Through economic prowess, nuclear weapons, and military might, the U.S. emerged in 1945 as an avid global actor struggling to balance national self-interest with global policing and moral impetus. The beginning of the Cold War, marked by key events like the Berlin Blockade (1948–1949) and the Korean War (1950–1953), secured the U.S.'s ascension from regional powerhouse to global superpower. Suddenly, the U.S. was everywhere, fighting communism, policing international waters, and helping to build a rules-based, globalized international system on the principles of free-market trade and global democracy.

THE UNIPOLAR MOMENT

Seemingly overnight, U.S. global participation had moral consequence. At least, this was the story told to Americans at home. The "Cold War consensus" was, in many ways, more myth than fact. To be sure, there was a strong push for aesthetic, rhetorical, and ideological consensus on USSR, China, and Cuba policy. However, as the Cold War waned, positions on U.S. global engagement shifted. Politicians and constituents alike openly criticized U.S. involvement in Viêt Nam and were wary of U.S. adoption of the Middle East from the United Kingdom as a region of interest. By the late 1960s, public confidence in the government dropped significantly. The Cold War consensus, even aesthetically, no longer existed. Civil rights movements and pop culture openly criticized U.S. global involvement, and the U.S. found itself in the midst of intense polarization.

At the same time, the ideological makeup of American political culture was undergoing an intense transformation. For Democrats, the party worked to expel the Southern Democratic bloc and to embrace social progressivism. This pivot allowed the Democrats to maintain a strong hold over Washington into the 1980s. For Republicans, the old guard began reconciling with a new, more aggressive postwar conservatism that sought a home within the party. By the late 1970s, figures like William F. Buckley Jr., Barry Goldwater, and Phyllis Schlafly had become household names. Fundamentally, this new brand of conservatism was fiercely anti-establishment and welcomed the recently ostracized Southern Democrats with open arms.

As these ideo-political shifts occurred domestically, USFP began to fracture. For the most part, presidents of the 1970s and 1980s agreed on some goals, such as active U.S. leadership in the fight against global communism. Nixon, Carter, and Reagan all supported trade with China and sought ways to make regions like the Global South more "amenable" to free-market enterprise. However, the means by which they achieved those goals varied considerably. For instance, Carter's approach to USFP was diplomacy-forward and sought to disengage American military operations as much as possible.

By contrast, Reagan's presidency sought a wide expansion of U.S. global military presence. Under the Reagan Administration, the U.S. kinetically engaged the LAC, such as in Grenada, and attempted to support anti-communist resistance movements throughout the region as well as in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Africa (often referred to as the "Reagan Doctrine"). Soviet failure in Afghanistan, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the eventual dissolution of the USSR in 1991 are often credited to Reagan's "we win, they lose" approach to USFP.

Undoubtedly, the 1990s mark a significant inflection point in U.S. national self-conception. President George H. W. Bush's successful invasion of Iraq (Persian Gulf War) softened wounded morale from the Vietnam War. Coupled with the fall of the USSR, it really did feel like a new world order had emerged thanks, in large part, to U.S. influence. Under Bush Sr., the U.S. embraced a new role as a peace broker and defender against human rights abuses. After all, as Francis Fukuyama famously asserted, the international system had reached what ought to be the end of history. Seemingly drunk on victory, the U.S. and its Western partners vied to welcome Russia into the fold, to mold the PRC into a responsible global actor, and worked to promote global norms.

If nothing else, coherence mythology is at best misleading and at worst disingenuous.

Building on Bush Sr.'s foreign policy approach, Clinton expanded the new multilateral mission of the U.S. to unprecedented proportions. Though the start of his presidency was rocky, such as in pulling out of Somalia and inaction in Rwanda, Clinton's vision of western-democratic enlargement quickly came to the fore. In 1994, the U.S. entered into one of the most controversial free trade agreements in recent history, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), advocated for the growth of NATO, and selectively intervened in humanitarian crises in Eastern Europe. These policy choices, though not an exhaustive list, exemplify a new national self-conception that was self-righteous and committed to spreading free-market democracy across the globe.

To be sure, thinkers of the realist variety rebuked the whole notion of a "selfless" foreign policy. As they predicted, the international camaraderie of the 1990s was short-lived; however, this was for reasons that hardly anyone saw coming. On September 11, 2001, the U.S. endured tragedy that shook its self-conception to the core. The resulting "Bush Doctrine" reflects an abrupt shift in USFP towards something insecure and more unilateral. The 2003 invasion of Iraq was largely unpopular within the international community and, when the 2008 financial crisis (really, 2007–2013 or so) went global, countries increasingly paid more attention to their own citizens and regional partners, the U.S. included.

In many ways, dissatisfaction with the violence of George W. Bush prompted the election of Barack Obama. Under Bush Jr., leaders started intractable conflicts in the Middle East against violent terror organizations, inadvertently catalyzing regional destabilization and globalism fatigue. In stark contrast, Obama's approach to foreign policy emphasized reduced military presence (as

drone use, he argued, is distinct from boots on the ground), multilateralism, and approaching challenges as they emerged rather than adhering to doctrine. For most, however, Obama's legacy lies in domestic issues such as championing civil rights like gay marriage and government-subsidized healthcare.

A notable feature of the 2010s is that domestic concerns largely outweighed international ones. This is true across the political spectrum, but admittedly more polarizing since the election of Trump in 2016. In fact, the nationalist principles embodied by the America First movement are not even necessarily new. Trump's use of protectionist economic policy during both his first and second terms to exact political concessions is uncouth in a system built on free trade (one that the U.S. forged), but not unheard of. Further, skepticism of globalism runs deep in the American public writ large, not just within conservative camps. Organic intellectuals of Gramscian proportions like Tucker Carlson, Nick Fuentes, the late Charlie Kirk, and Candace Owens recognized this a decade ago, pandered to it, and effectively pushed American voters farther right. It is for this reason that condemnation of globalism "feels" conservative even though, just ten years ago, it was more likely for Democrats to oppose free trade.

NO FINAL ANSWER

Today, there is profound cognitive dissonance in U.S. politics. On the one hand, there are leaders in government committed to preserving the multilateralism of the late-twentieth century, often at the expense of the American working class. Perhaps manufacturing is not coming back, but leaving Middle America out to dry is precisely why movement conservatism remains so powerful. On the other hand, there are currently leaders in government who care only about enriching themselves and exploiting the very real immiseration of millions of Americans. They leech off their votes and redirect their pain towards immigrants and ethnic and social minorities.

When our institutions become museums, populism thrives. The very real effects of political polarization on USFP are already being felt. On the one hand, rejection politics wins votes but lacks longevity and threatens to burn important partnerships and alliances. On the other hand, a doctrinal approach to USFP is inadvisable. Flexibility allows the U.S. to practice the strategic ambiguity it needs to navigate a multipolar (or, as Amitav Acharya argues, a multiplex) international system. Instead, Americans need to reassert the delicate balance of stability with dynamism. To do so, the U.S. should prioritize decentralization of USFP decision-making and, thus, interagency and inter-branch cooperation and coordination. This likely entails Congress wrestling some USFP decision-making power away from the Executive Branch.

If nothing else, coherence mythology is at best misleading and at worst disingenuous. It is crucial that both Americans and U.S. partners and allies understand the complexities of the USFP apparatus rather than rely on comfortable, simplistic narratives; after all, coherence—real or imagined—may be a detriment in the present state of the international system. To that

end, the following essays explore the four dominant schools of thought, illustrating that not one idea holds exclusive claim to USFP or American grand strategy. Moreover, these essays convey an important message: USFP is not a settled doctrine, but rather a perpetual conversation about power, purpose, and identity. Though this is not unique to the U.S., perhaps it is that je ne sais quoi that provides insight as to why this process carries so much weight internationally.

The War Was Never Ours

How Jeffersonians See Foreign Burdens?

GRANT MORGAN

On April 26, 2007, former Senator Mike Gravel, while running for president within the Democratic primaries, was asked what his potential administration's policies would be towards Iraq. Up until this point, America had been occupying portions of Iraq following our 2003 invasion of the country, with thousands of American soldiers being stationed in areas which were rather dangerous and insecure.

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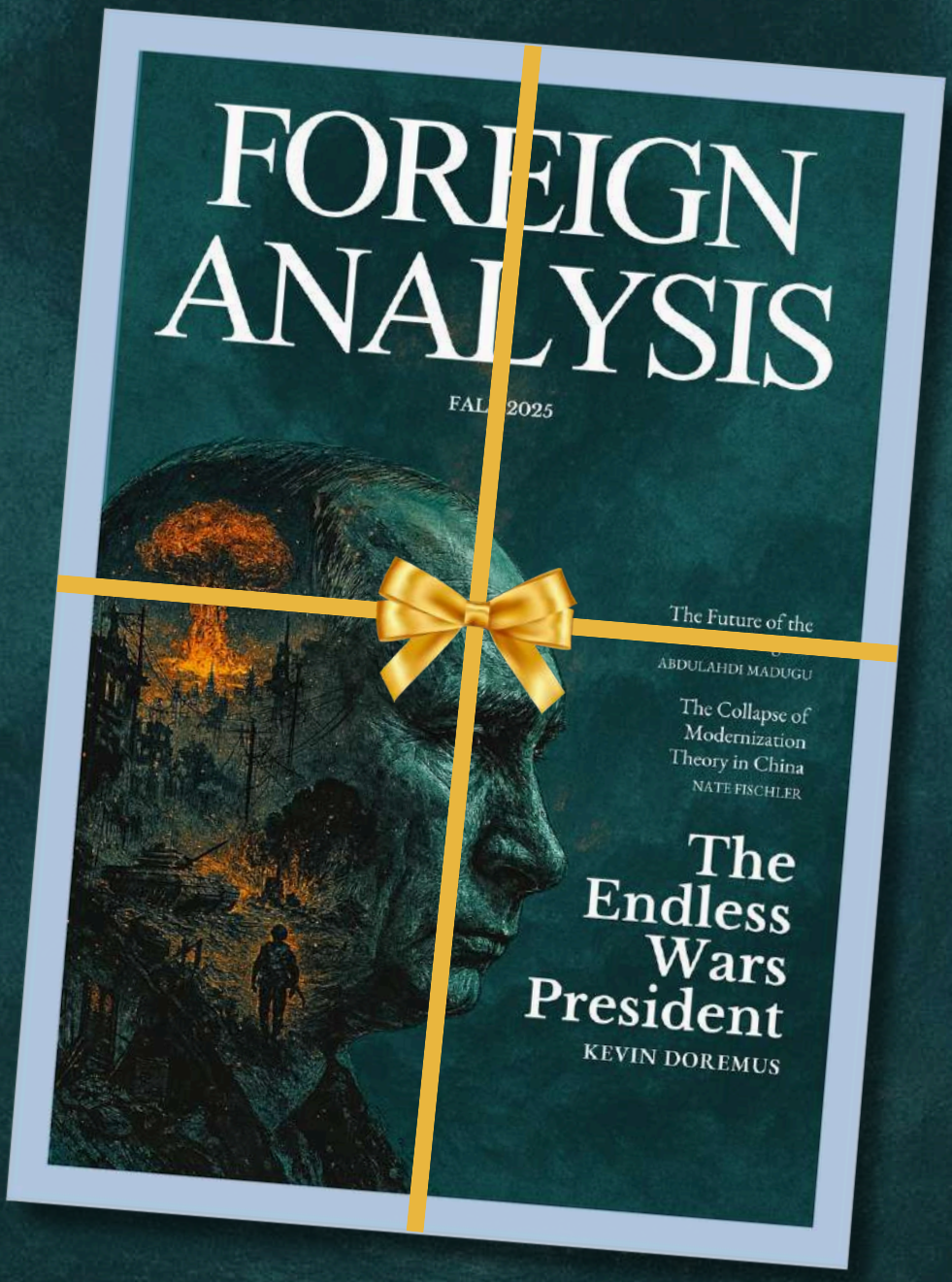

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Quagmire and insurgency had become a rather persistent problem since our initial victory over Saddam Hussein, and despite new goals, tactics, and even military leaders, all of these attempted solutions failed to mitigate any of the region's underlying structural issues. We were not greeted as liberators, democracy had not been swiftly delivered, and thousands of Americans had died for very little material gain. Many Americans were outraged, and some of this brewing anger eventually managed to find itself being expressed on a debate stage. Gravel's response was blunt: "I gotta tell you, we should just plain get out—it's their country, they're asking us to leave, and we insist on staying there! And why not get out?"

Most of the hand-selected audience wasn't interested in Gravel's argument for more restraint, nor were any of the major candidates on stage. Smiles and laughs followed Gravel's comments rather than open rejection or debate, conveying a deep sense of shared humor and skepticism for Gravel's vision of limited foreign intervention. No major candidate, be it Republican or Democratic, was interested in what Gravel and other gadflies had to say, and by the end of the election cycle, very little of the anti-war fervor had moved beyond temporal backlash against the Iraq War. International intervention wasn't the problem; rather, it was just the way it was being led and delivered.

Jump forward to today, and Gravel's comments no longer seem so silly or humorous. Americans are increasingly against foreign interventions, such as with the current opposition to a potential war in Venezuela. Similarly, growing numbers of Americans have found themselves opposing aid to both Ukraine and Israel, signaling yet another area of discontent and frustration.

The United States, in a multipolar world, cannot limitlessly expand its commitments and interventions. Eventually, something will give as imperial fatigue sets in, and as foreign adventurism yet again turns into a series of crises and disasters. Put simply, what is occurring among the U.S. population is not exactly new, but it is indeed taking on an interesting flavor.

Our growing desire for restraint and focus on the homefront is yet another example of America's on-again-off-again relationship with Jeffersonian foreign policy. This reemergence of Jefferson's tradition, passed down through various parties, groups, and individuals, is indeed significant, as are its potential consequences for foreign policymaking writ large. Further, in our increasingly competitive world, something different will eventually have to drive U.S. foreign policy as conditions change and sources of power no longer hold as strong. As we delve deeper into the 21st century, change is indeed occurring, and in the United States, it is a Jeffersonian vision which is seemingly gaining ground faster than any of its competitors.

NO MONSTERS TO DESTROY

Jeffersonianism began within the mind of the 3rd President of the United States, Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson, who wrote the Declaration of Independence and served as a fundamental figure in early American politics, was a son of the planter class and received an education and upbringing which was different from most Americans. He was well-read, having studied history, mathematics, and philosophy during his time at William and Mary,

and was also well-traveled, especially from his ventures in France and Western Europe. Jefferson, the man, was indeed impressive, as was the titular ideology he constructed through his various writings and publications. But it is important to note that Jeffersonianism was not purely based around Jefferson and his career.

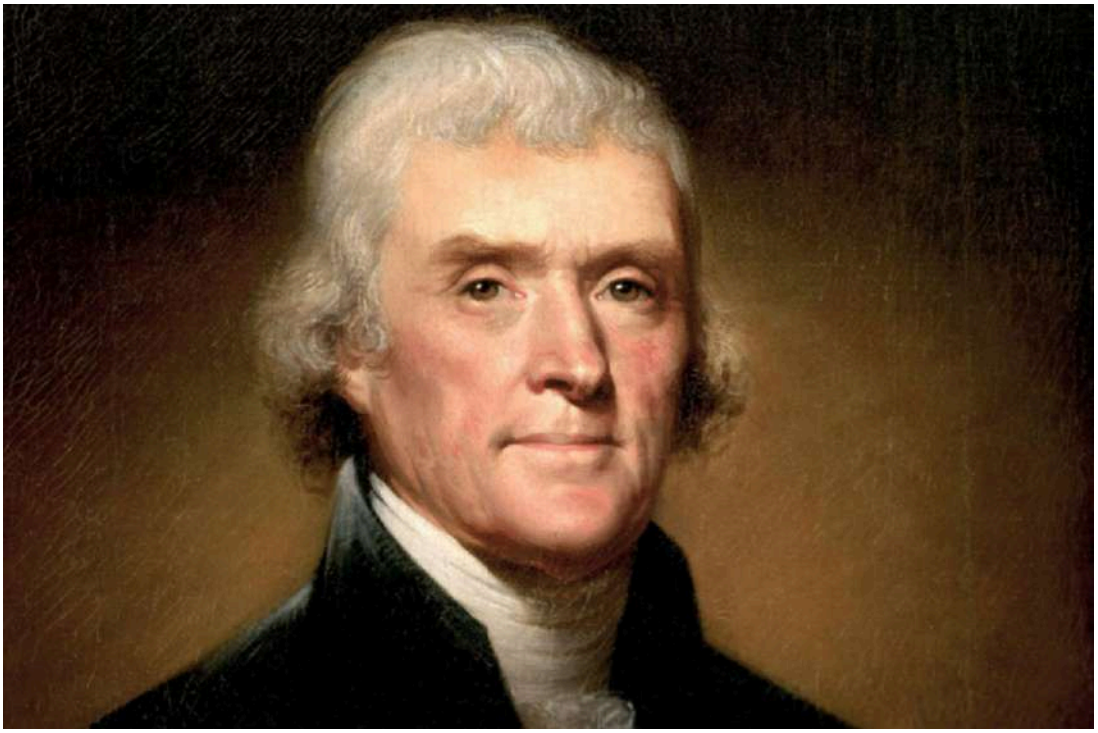
Just as with any individual, Jefferson's outlook for the world was shaped by material conditions and a plethora of entrenched narratives. He stood on the shoulders of both planters and philosophers, statesmen and revolutionaries, and came to develop a worldview that adapted these realities to changing political events. Jefferson's philosophy, while influential, was not exactly unique just to himself and instead represented a broad and rather inevitable elite political backlash against the excesses of British imperialism in North America.

America's colonial gentry, composed largely of planters and merchants, led this backlash and witnessed firsthand just how disruptive imperial conflicts could be for both business and general tranquility. Vast imperial wars were followed by economic coercion, mercantilist policies, and an ever more expansive state presence. Taxes were high, western expansion was halted, trade was constricted, and slavery's survival as an institution seemed to be in question. What were once fundamentals of colonial political economy now seemed quite tenuous, and as these conditions only became more restrictive, this helped to further push American elites toward different ends.

It is within these conditions where Jefferson and his ilk developed their views on political economy and foreign policy. Domestically, they longed for a country where strong individual rights, especially those around property, would be guaranteed by a limited federal government which was to be regulated by various checks and balances. Government, above all else, needed to be restricted in its ability to impose restrictions on individuals and their right to engage in commerce. The end goal of this project, beyond just political independence from Britain, was to cement in place a polity where individual farmers and planters could venture out west in search of abundant land and self-sufficiency. It was to be a country free of monarchs, aristocrats, mercantilist monopolies, and any other form of state-sanctioned hierarchy. It was, put simply, to be a country of free men, free land, and free expansion.

With regard to foreign relations, Jefferson and his class demanded an end to foreign entanglements, alliances, and proxies. Rather than asserting imperial domains or claims, America was to become a global vehicle for freedom. It would soon morph into an "empire of liberty," focused on delivering republicanism, agricultural freedom, and examples of good governance to all nearby imperials or political ne'er-do-wells.

From its inception, Jeffersonianism, beyond the mere thoughts or criticisms of just one man, was a regional class project, designed by elite planters and shaped by a vehement reaction against British colonial overreach. In essence, it was an attempt to construct a new paradigm where state power was limited, agriculture was king, expansion was fundamental, and foreign relations were solved through "peaceable coercion[s]."



PORTRAIT OF THOMAS JEFFERSON BY REMBRANDT PEALE (AMERICAN, 1778–1860) (OIL ON CANVAS FROM THE WHITE HOUSE COLLECTION, WASHINGTON DC), 1853. (PHOTO BY GRAPHICAARTIS/GETTY IMAGES)

George Washington emerged from this milieu and quite famously gave a speech where he warned of entangling alliances and the threats of partisanship. Once in office, Jefferson also grew to adopt Washington's line, especially as his once-admired France became plagued by Napoleon Bonaparte's despotism. President after president came to adopt these Jeffersonian class principles in stride, and as America emerged into the 1810s and 1820s, alliances were largely avoided in favor of expansion and internal improvements.

As Jeffersonianism came to be interpreted by new generations of elites and political actors, however, mutations began to occur. Domestically, the growing desire for western expansion and yeoman farming became increasingly bogged down by a growing divide between America's sectional economies. Northern farmers viewed Jeffersonianism's promise as being anti-slavery and pro-free labor; Southerners viewed slavery and the protection of their property as being a fundamental purpose of government. Soon, Jeffersonianism's promise of tight-knit rural communities became increasingly impossible as both sectional conflict and growing industrialization came to define 19th-century development.

Concurrently, on the foreign front, Jeffersonianism's aversion to imperial war and foreign entanglement remained quite present and also rather pertinent as America continued to expand westward. Anti-war sentiment first emerged as America's conquest of the west brought war with both Mexico and various Native American tribes. It was during the buildup to these contentious decades and conflicts where John Quincy Adams famously stated that "But she [America] goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own."

Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, these Jeffersonian reactions repeatedly emerged during moments of intense polarization and imperial conquest. It emerged during our war with Mexico; it emerged as the Gilded Age generated vast domestic inequality and increasing foreign intervention; and it emerged during the 1890s and 1910s, as America engaged in rapid territorial expansion, gobbling up Hawaii, Guam, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, the Panama Canal Zone, and various other small islands in the Pacific.

War, beyond just being a racket, is now a fundamental part of our political economy.

This anti-interventionist tradition again emerged during World War One, being led by various pacifist and socialist organizations who opposed the American government's ongoing crackdowns on political and civil liberties. Thousands were jailed during this period, including famous socialist organizer Eugene Debs, who described America's anti-democratic activity and foreign interventions quite bluntly: "They tell us that we live in a great free republic; that our institutions are democratic; that we are a free and self-governing people. That is too much, even for a joke. ... Wars throughout history have been waged for conquest and plunder... And that is war in a nutshell. The master class has always declared the wars; the subject class has always fought the battles."

As America emerged further into the 20th century, now having conquered various territories and peoples, the anti-interventionists found themselves trying to halt a forward march which seemed almost inexorable. While isolationist sentiment grew during this period, the birth of fascism and Soviet totalitarianism abroad forced many Americans to come to terms with what non-interventionist restraint—or even isolationism—would look like in a world littered with authoritarianism and violence.

The Great Depression and then World War Two eventually forced America's hand and subsequently led to the undermining of Jeffersonian foreign policy. In the new world of the 20th century, restraint and non-interventionism could not survive the interwar period or the post-WW2 order. Fascism had to be defeated; genocides abroad could not be ignored; and entire regions of the world had to be reoriented and re-developed following intense conflict. Government, and especially the American one, could not be limited or restrained in its approach to the world. Following 1945, the world was now entirely different, shaped by new paradigms, new rules, and new assumptions about the role of American foreign policymaking.

THE INCREMENTAL RETURN

Jeffersonian restraint had some resurgences throughout the latter half of the 20th century. Its climax emerged largely during the anti-war movement, as millions of Americans came together to oppose our country's proxy wars in Indochina. But this movement, for all its publicity and moxie, eventually caved in on itself as domestic pressures and elite domination of foreign policy rendered its motors inactive. Despite bouts of domestic protest and opposition, America from 1945 to now has repeatedly engaged in wars and operations which have directly expanded our commitments and wars abroad.

Countless coups, civil wars, assassinations, rigged elections, and other covert operations have been launched by our intelligence services and militaries. Millions have died as a result of our conflicts, with Vietnam and Iraq serving as the worst examples of overreach. And much like the British before us, America since 1945 has found itself leading a global order which requires more and more resources. Trillions have been spent on these interventions, and all while domestically, American institutions and democratic strength have continued to decline.

American overreach has led to hundreds of military bases abroad, an increasingly bloated military budget, increased surveillance, and a military-industrial complex which is one of the most powerful lobbies in the country. War, beyond just being a racket, is now a fundamental part of our political economy. Both humanitarian interventionism and neoconservative logic have both found themselves being drained and supplanted by the harsh reality of graft and cash. Imperial power and its profitability have now replaced any notion of political principle, and as this has occurred, America has finally reached the point where its external decline is indeed beginning to boomerang.

Many Americans have noticed these conditions, and as decline has continued to be represented by both political and economic inequality, Jeffersonian traditions have indeed begun to emerge. Especially following our escapades into the Middle East, many engaged foreign policy activists and elites have come to view restraint and non-intervention not as a weakness, but as a possible avenue for strength. In a global order increasingly defined by climatic shocks and shortages, resources are going to become harder to come by, and as America comes to terms with this crisis, more corrections will likely be geared toward these emerging realities.

Various businesspeople, academics, congresspeople, and policy wonks have indeed come to recognize this, and instead of trying to repeatedly smash the imperial button—as we see currently in Venezuela—they are simply trying to fight for a foreign policy that finally departs from the post-1945 order. Within both parties, whether it's opposition to America's support of Israel, more aid for Ukraine, or even just the Trump administration's regional actions against Venezuela and Greenland, many figures have come to broadly oppose intervention and entanglement.

Restraint, no longer an albatross, is now a rallying cry among an emerging segment of our political and foreign policy elite. Partially tied to class and partially tied to ideology, these emerging neo-Jeffersonians are indeed gaining steam, and as our nation's imperial ambition only continues to run out of steam, it is increasingly likely that our political system will have to eventually come to terms with the new world we find ourselves in.

EMPIRE COMES HOME

The Neo-Jeffersonians are a result rather than a precursory warning. Unlike the restrainers of the past, we have now lived through imperial overreach and its effects; we have seen firsthand, much like Jefferson and his ilk did with the British, how foreign entanglements and imperial ambition could harm

domestic rights and democratic accountability. Since 2000, America's political system has been rocked by a series of political crises which have harmed both our civil liberties and our overall ranking as a democratic state.

Freedom of the press, freedom of speech, academic freedom, the right to privacy, and freedom from unwarranted search and seizure have all been increasingly weakened by both the war on terror and growing illiberalism. Colleges and media companies are being extorted, as are the law firms and independent agencies which do not follow the President's direct wishes. The same logic has been applied to immigrants and foreign students who speak out against the administration, with some being disappeared for months without any right to trial.

Economically, monopoly capitalism and graft now dominate our system. Wealth and income inequality are at their highest in well over a century, as is cronyism and the increasing use of the state to benefit private actors, both foreign and domestic. Budgetary deficits, many of which are tied to foreign commitments and expanded defense procurements, have become more constraining. Wages are broadly stagnant, inflation is still rather high, and price gouging has become more common. Small and medium-sized businesses are struggling, as are young workers who now find themselves graduating into an economy where hiring rates are low, AI is disruptive, and assistance is scant.

Put these dual crises together and neo-Jeffersonianism's purpose becomes much clearer. Rather than an homage, modern day Jeffersonians are attempting to build a new paradigm for American foreign policy, one in which lessons will be learned from the failures of our unipolar moment. In their minds, no longer can domestic freedoms and industrial competitiveness be sacrificed for imperial competition with China, nor can foreign alliances and proxy conflicts come to define our nation's overarching goals abroad. Fundamentally, it is a movement which clamors for restraint, realism, and strategic minimalism abroad, viewing foreign commitments and conflicts as burdens rather than opportunities.

To claim to support global democracy and liberty but then only back it up with symbolism is great in principle.

Various groups, from both the left and right, now fear overreach and domestic illiberalism more than the power of China and Russia. Questions over our commitments abroad have become common, with Europe often receiving much of this ire and criticism. Foreign allies are now expected to pick up slack in both military preparedness and procurement. Largely, it is an environment where multipolarity, rather than being viewed as an encroaching threat, is now viewed as a fact of global affairs that must be reconciled with, and this truly is a shift for DC.

Domestically, while varied, this realist reaction has called for an interest-first agenda focused on improving internal political-economic problems. Green industrialization, targeted industrial policy, wealth redistribution, expanded healthcare access, a cutting of the military budget, and infrastructural development are all examples of what has been presented as

worth pursuing. Political freedoms have also been highlighted as something in need of protection, with many attempting to carve an agenda which both attacks the national security-military apparatus while not undermining civil service independence or civil liberties.

It is ultimately an ideological project which has energy and promise, both moxie and the ability to appeal to growing discontent among the American people. But much like previous Jeffersonians, it is not without its own shortcomings and contradictions.

Realism's self-interest is often vague and shaped by partisan leaning. While libertarians and progressives may agree on eschewing war and international entanglement, they are very likely going to disagree on what must be done domestically to strengthen liberty and renewal. Concurrently, many conservative figures, while opposing military intervention, have had no problem interfering in regional and global affairs, such as in recent European and South American elections. Many of these same figures have also had no quarrels with the Trump administration's ongoing attacks against the administrative state and civil liberties. While largely united on external affairs, these various political strands will inevitably find themselves disagreeing harshly over what our country's domestic politics and interests should be oriented around. This will cause conflict, and no amount of anti-interventionism will paper over this reality.

Realism's restraint bent is also going to face mountains of criticism as global affairs become more unruly and conflict-driven. As we see currently with the genocides in Gaza and Sudan, or with Russia's war against Ukraine, symbolic leading by example can only take you so far. While reducing aid or engagement with global perpetrators may be a good first step, where would these actions go from here? Would America then work with international organizations to help oppose these countries through sanctions or embargoes? Would this increased international engagement be considered an entanglement or a threat against our liberty? Moreover, how would our country's shining example even help to stop atrocities without any kind of enforcement mechanism?

To claim to support global democracy and liberty but then only back it up with symbolism is great in principle. But in reality, this worldview is bound to run headfirst against harsh realities which will demand much and provide little. The American population, while opposing intervention, will not stand idly by if global atrocities are committed and our country chooses to do nothing. They will not accept a government which, by trying to eschew the last 80 years of globalist development, inadvertently builds a new foreign policy which is reckless, isolationist, and antiquated. Change is being demanded, but the likelihood that this change will be led by a comprehensive neo-Jeffersonian movement without flaws or contradictions is highly unrealistic.

WHY LESS CAN BE MORE

Jeffersonianism's place within American politics has evolved countless times throughout our country's history. Its foreign policy goals and views, while sometimes prominent, have instead often been sidelined as new conditions

and conflicts demanded a far more interventionist and engaged America. Washington and Jefferson never could have predicted the rise of fascism or its ability to inflict such widespread destruction and killing. The founders and the framers never could have conceived of capitalism's ability to rapidly industrialize and urbanize our society, nor did they have the clairvoyance to predict the emergence of a globalized world order where commerce, trade, diplomacy, and transportation would all be predicated on global engagement and interaction.

Isolationism and comprehensive American retrenchment are both unlikely in our globalized world, but what the neo-Jeffersonians have shown us is that the promises of less war and conflict are indeed possible. Americans are not clamoring for war with Venezuela, and many are taking growingly hostile stands against possible American intervention in Asia and the North Atlantic. Skepticism in Washington over foreign spending and alliances is also at its highest in well over 90 years, and the public's demand for domestic renewal now triumphs any kind of commitment to international policing or intervention.

Put simply, after nearly 80 years of an American-led global order, American politics is finally coming around to the idea that conditions and policies will have to change within the foreign policy realm. Some will attempt to repackage interventionism to make it more palatable and popular; others will try to supercharge our country toward a new cold war with China; and many will likely just end up following which way the short-term foreign policy winds are blowing. But in the long term, domestic fatigue and broad insecurity will help to reduce the amount of political capital that these groups are afforded. Now more than ever, both restraint and non-interventionism have an incredible opportunity to reshape American foreign policy. And if anyone can do it successfully, it will likely be within the age-old tradition which is as American as apple pie.

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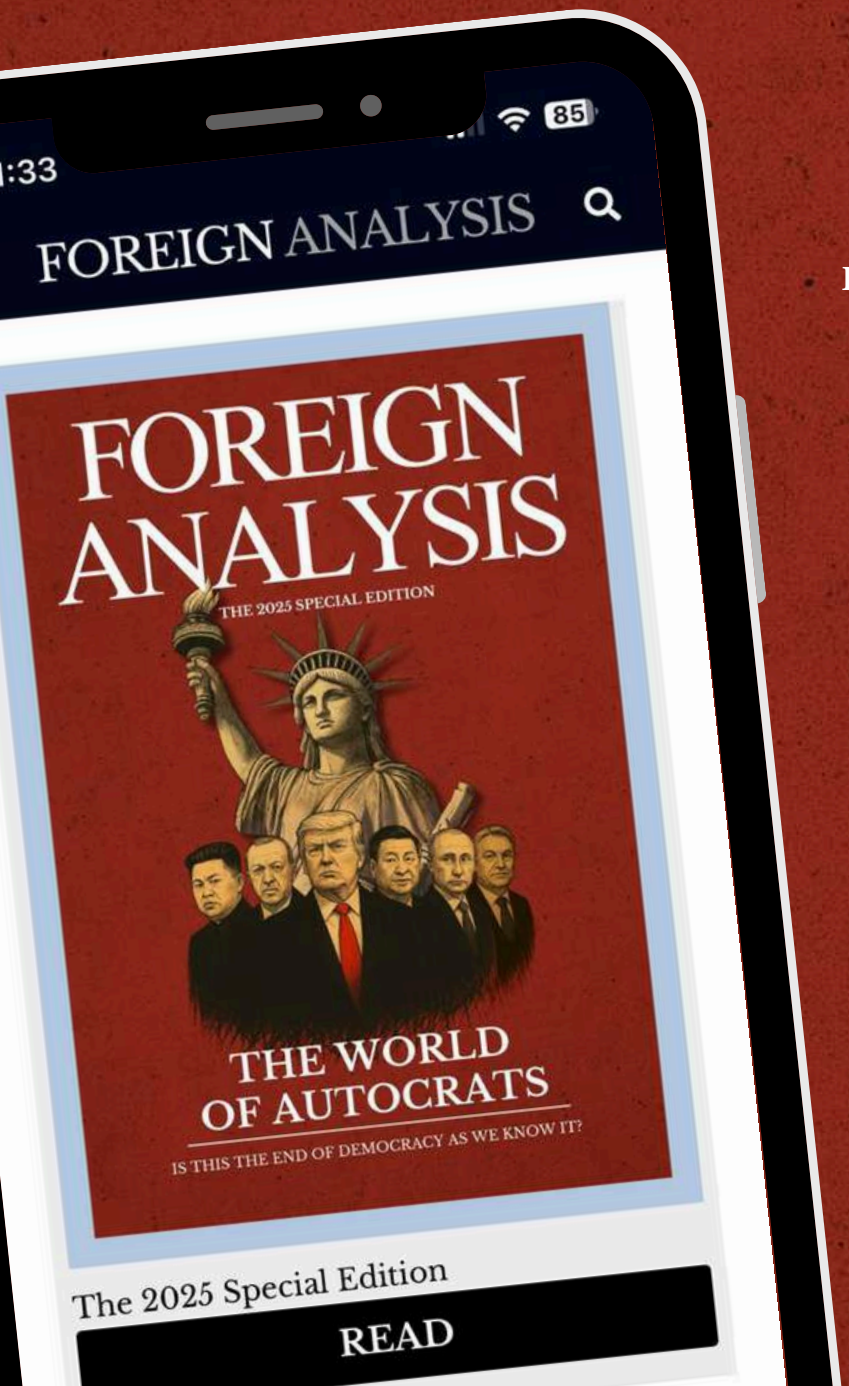

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Lead the World, Don't Police It

A Hamiltonian Approach to Power and Foreign Policy

BILLY AGWANDA

In the aftermath of the Great Wars, and particularly from the post-World War II period, the United States, amidst the weight of global destruction and the power vacuum occasioned by a weakened Europe, was viewed by both domestic and foreign audiences as the indispensable guarantor of the stability of the international system. In its role in championing the post-war liberal international architecture through international institutions such as the United Nations, the Bretton Woods institutions, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the United States fused its domestic power with global responsibility. This assessment was reinforced even further in the immediate post-Cold War decade, when the American position as a unilateral superpower—victorious in its ideological struggle against the Soviet Union, confident in the universality of its capitalist model, and convinced of its important leadership in shaping the international system—wholesomely embraced its "burden" of global leadership. For many observers, the 20th century could rightfully be claimed as the "American century."

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Illustration by Artificial Intelligence

Yet the same cannot be said of the present. Indeed, two and a half decades into the 21st century, much of the previous century's assessment has changed, and conflicting assessments revolve around whether the United States remains an indispensable stabilizer or an unreliable global actor that is in an inevitable and perhaps even irreversible decline. In large part, America's global posture in the last two and a half decades has been rooted in an exceptional ambition that the international order could be policed by a single actor that can suppress threats across the globe, deter great power competition, and promote democratic rule. Indeed, from Africa to Asia, to Europe, to the Middle East, and now South America, much of the security logic underpinning American foreign policy is that it requires perpetual vigilance and active engagement. Yet, as will be aptly demonstrated in this analysis, this strategic overstretch has, over time, revealed serious contradictions and growing perceptions of an unsustainable burden of American foreign policy, resulting in an American global leadership that is highly fragmented and marked by diminished global credibility.

Cognizant of these developments, there is an imperative to rethink American global leadership for both present and future ends. Specifically, how can the United States reclaim and maintain its global leadership without overreaching as the world's enforcer or isolating itself from the community of nations? There are many traditions that shape a country's foreign policy, and a "Hamiltonian" tradition offers one such framework. Although much of the reference to Alexander Hamilton, a military officer, founding father, and the first United States Secretary of the Treasury (1789–1795), is often confined to his contribution to domestic policy, there has been limited attention to the implications of his political thought on American foreign policy. It is, however, important to recognize that this passive attention to Hamiltonian thinking in foreign policy is not without rationale. Indeed, unlike the contemporary era, where America has evolved into a global power, the international system of the Hamiltonian era lacked the complexities of today's world. As such, Hamilton was largely writing for a young, vulnerable republic whose fundamental strategic concern was survival and autonomy, and whose greatest challenges were internal.

But Hamilton's sparse intellectual visibility in foreign policy is not tantamount to weak influence. This is because core tenets of Hamiltonian thought have selectively been part and parcel of a range of intellectual traditions that emerged to suit the needs of distinct historical periods and challenges. From the 19th-century advocates of an American System to the 20th-century liberal economic order, to the 21st-century proponents of geostrategic statecraft, the relevance of Hamiltonian foundations of economic strength, national cohesion, and institutions as the premise of national power and global leadership continues to endure.

INTELLECTUAL ROOTS OF HAMILTONIAN TRADITION

When debate over how to best organize the emerging post-revolutionary domestic political systems took hold in the late 18th century in the transatlantic hemisphere through the intellectual contributions of

Enlightenment thinkers and revolutionary movements, the implications were not merely attuned to domestic ends but also extended into foreign policy domains. For instance, proponents of limited or enlightened monarchical orders at the time—from Burke, to Hume, to Montesquieu, to Voltaire—all alluded to its comparative advantages of stability, continuity, efficiency, and long-term strategic vision insulated from the threat of factional ideologies. However, this position found its strongest critique in the scholarship of pro-republican or radical democratic constitutional thinkers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Thomas Paine, and the Radical Jacobins in France.

In the United States, a similar critique was found among the American Federalist anti-monarchists, a group often linked with Thomas Jefferson, who advocated for a decentralized republican system on the premise that consent-based governance could produce a more rational, restrained, and peaceful political order. Specifically, these voices, shaped by the anxieties of past experiences in the hands of a widely perceived corrupt, tyrannical, expansionist, and inefficient English monarchy, coalesced around the idea of "democratic republicanism," a system that was more egalitarian, closely linked to grassroots political mobilization, suspicious of hierarchical authority, and practiced through popular participation and majority rule.

Yet, for the flaws and risks associated with monarchical systems, and the limitations of excessive decentralization and agrarian idealism inherent in democratic republicanism, Hamilton occupied a third, more complex position in the debate. This position, often described as that of an "energetic" or "commercial republican," was tweaked to emulate selective virtues of a monarchical system's executive decisiveness, vigor, and unity, combined with republican political legitimacy and commerce, that collectively could preserve liberty at home and safeguard American interests abroad. In The Federalist Papers, Hamilton argued that: "There is an idea, which is not without its advocates, that a vigorous Executive is inconsistent with the genius of republican government. The enlightened well-wishers to this species of government must at least hope that the supposition is destitute of foundation; since they can never admit its truth, without at the same time admitting the condemnation of their own principles. Energy in the Executive is a leading character in the definition of good government. It is essential to the protection of the community against foreign attacks; it is not less essential to the steady administration of the laws; to the protection of property against those irregular and high-handed combinations which sometimes interrupt the ordinary course of justice; to the security of liberty against the enterprises and assaults of ambition, of faction, and of anarchy..."

This Hamiltonian conviction of an "energetic" executive in a post-revolutionary, anti-centralist political environment placed him as one of the most contested and polarizing figures in early American political thought, mainly because his political vision, even if politically necessary for the republic, was culturally counterrevolutionary, while his economic vision was far ahead of American public opinion. Indeed, on the one hand, his political propositions threatened popular ideas of agrarian independence and small government, thus pitting his idea of centralization as dangerously close to monarchism. On the other hand, Hamilton's economic program, which

advocated for a national economic architecture anchored in manufacturing, finance, commerce, and public debt—vital architectural components for national strength—was interpreted by democratic republicans as aristocratic, corrupt, anti-republican, elitist, and British-leaning.

However, it is this opposition to Hamilton that deeply shaped his vision of the commercial republic. Indeed, unlike the dominant intellectual currents that gravitated towards agrarianism, Hamilton believed that commerce as a principle of political order is the foundation of national security and the bond of the republican union. In other words, internal economic unity and stability are the first condition of America's security. In The Federalist Papers Nos. 11 and 12, Hamilton put forth two important arguments.

First, Hamilton warned of the danger that loomed should America fail to build a powerful national economy, observing that: "There are appearances to authorize a supposition, that the adventurous spirit, which distinguishes the commercial character of America, has already excited uneasy sensations in several of the maritime powers of Europe. They seem to be apprehensive of our too great interference in that carrying trade, which is the support of their navigation and the foundation of their naval strength. Those of them which have colonies in America look forward to what this country is capable of becoming with painful solicitude."

In this warning, Hamilton recognized the "uneasy sensations" in Europe, revealing that, more than a mere economic activity, commerce was inherently a security question with implications for the international system. Indeed, while he recognized that America would not be a powerful and sovereign republic through an agrarian and decentralized political system, he was also aware of the reality that its commercial expansion through global trade would directly threaten European security and provoke efforts to either contain or undermine American power. Thus, Hamilton considered that a commercial republic could provide the necessary economic leverage to protect America from powerful external actors, writing that, "If we continue united, we may counteract a policy so unfriendly to our prosperity in a variety of ways. By prohibitory regulations, extending at the same time throughout the States, we may oblige foreign countries to bid against each other, for the privileges of our markets."

Second, he argued that a commercial republic would foster internal unity by resolving a longstanding tension and misunderstanding between proponents of agrarian agriculture and commerce, writing that, "The often-agitated question between agriculture and commerce has, from indubitable experience, received a decision which has silenced the rivalship that once subsisted between them, and has proved, to the satisfaction of their friends, that their interests are intimately blended and interwoven."

This financial triangle proved unstable, as the entire reparations system was dependent on American credit, which dried up, leading to the Great Depression.

For Hamilton, this was a dangerous conflict, and it was only by entrenching the identity of the new republic in commerce that national unity could be achieved. This is because, as he argued, there is a symbiotic relationship between the two sectors, in the sense that agriculture (agrarian farmers) depended on commerce to expand markets, while commerce (merchants) depended on agriculture for raw materials. Overcoming this rivalry and misunderstanding therefore meant that national prosperity required the input of all social and economic classes in the republic. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, Hamilton understood that a purely agrarian republic was incapacitated to generate the revenue, industrial capacity, and institutional sophistication that are needed to protect the autonomy of a modern state that could survive in an international system dominated by powerful empires.

As such, Hamilton considered that it was vital to have a predictable and uniform political and economic system, which culminated in his revolutionary reforms at the Treasury. These were reflected in the establishment of the first national bank, the development of a financial system created through the consolidation of federal and state debts incurred during the Revolutionary War, the construction of a federal revenue infrastructure through tariffs and excise taxes, and the enactment of uniform laws to support domestic manufacturing and economic diversification.

Much of Hamilton's vision of a commercial republic took hold in the 19th century, when American Anglophobia—that is, a nationalistic disdain for Britain—continued to shape economic policies, especially towards external actors. Protectionist policies, which had roots in Hamilton's political thought aptly captured in his Report on Manufactures, published in 1791, later found support amongst proponents of protectionism such as Henry Carey and members of the Republican Party, who argued—especially after the Panic of 1819—that Britain had waged an economic war of extermination against America. As such, protectionism was presented as a "really American policy" capable of mitigating class divisions and promoting mutual interests between capitalists and workers. This push resulted in decades of trade restrictions in the United States, as was reflected in the enactment of the Morrill Tariff (1861), the McKinley Tariff (1890), and the Dingley Tariff (1897), the latter increasing tariffs to 50 percent on more than one thousand goods. It was not until the Underwood Tariff of 1913 that the United States briefly departed towards a freer trade regime by lowering taxes from an average of 41 percent to 27 percent—the lowest in over five decades—before it was disrupted during World War I, reverting the United States back to protectionist tendencies.

Observers agree that the interwar years saw the collapse of the global trade and financial system, beginning with the unstable reparations of war debts in the 1920s that culminated in the Great Depression, which was characterized by defaults, banking crises, and protectionist responses. After World War I, Germany was committed to paying massive reparations to the Allied powers for its responsibility in the war, while the Allied powers were also indebted to the United States from their borrowing during the war. This financial triangle proved unstable, as the entire reparations system was dependent on American credit, which dried up, leading to the Great Depression.

As such, in the post–World War II period, the United States recognized the need for an alternative global economic, financial, and political framework to lead the postwar recovery. Much like the Hamiltonian vision, albeit scaled from the domestic into the international sphere, the United States understood that a stable international order could only be established through predictable and robust multilateral lending institutions. Thus, the emergence of the dollar as an international reserve currency, the establishment of the Bretton Woods institutions, and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), coupled with the belief that economic interdependence rather than coercion and imperial control could diminish geopolitical rivalry, paralleled the Hamiltonian tradition that centers economic and financial institutionalization as the foundation for stability. The Marshall Plan, for instance, which availed American credit and market access to Europe, did not only communicate benign intentions but also reassured European allies that American power was safe for the international system.

This post-war posture by the United States marked an important transition from the classical frontier-managing that was common, for example, with the British and French empires that both governed expansive colonies and enforced exclusive economic zones, to a framework-building, rules-based global leadership that incentivized cooperation. Even with its unparalleled military power in the post-war period, rather than engaging in territorial annexation or occupation, the United States prioritized alliance-building with other sovereigns such as Germany, Korea, and Japan, a phenomenon described by some observers as "empire-building by invitation."

However, it is important to recognize that although the post-war system functioned as an international liberal order, this does not contradict the view that it also carried a Hamiltonian tradition. Indeed, when speaking about the liberal international order, reference is made to its normative character, comprised of values and goals such as open markets, multilateralism, free trade, and democracy. The Hamiltonian tradition, on the other hand, is fundamentally concerned with institutional design logic and statecraft logic, meaning the means through which the United States built its power and influence by structuring international economic life in ways that enabled it to embed its own advantages. In other words, the United States promoted liberal aims through Hamiltonian instruments.

RESISTING THE TEMPTATION TO POLICE

In the post-9/11 era, the character of the United States' foreign policy has revealed a profound departure from the foundational principles that once guided the rise of America to the status of a global power and systemic leader. In many arenas, the allure of framework-building as a core principle of American post-war global statecraft appears to have been abandoned in favor of a model of hyper-engagement characterized by a militarized interventionist posture focused on managing local conflicts and social engineering of distant civilizations. This departure from post-war statecraft has been consequential for both American domestic and foreign policy, where its material and institutional power has eroded, and the legitimacy,

credibility, and strategic coherence of its leadership role within the international liberal order have declined.

However, after 9/11, there was an accelerated shift in favor of global policing and frontier management, whereby the underpinning assumption of American security was that it depended on its ability to manage and determine security outcomes in far-flung regions spanning the Middle East, Central Asia, and Africa. The "never-ending wars" that primarily involved counterterrorism and counterinsurgency campaigns, as well as nation-building efforts aimed at redesigning entire political orders—especially in Afghanistan and Iraq—came at significant strategic costs.

First, the fiscal implications were substantial. Indeed, estimates show that the United States spent at least eight trillion dollars on military deployments and reconstruction efforts, much of it funded through debt. A Hamiltonian lens would have viewed the costs of this form of hyper-engagement as extremely dangerous, as it not only negated the imperatives of prudent public debt but also departed from past practices of funding debts through a mixture of higher taxes, budget cuts, and regular defense budgets. For example, one observer argues that: "Using an unprecedented combination of borrowing, accounting tricks, and outsourcing, presidential administrations, Congress, and the Pentagon were able to circumvent traditional military budget processes in a way that kept war costs out of the public debate and resulted in trillions being spent with minimal oversight. The result: corporations and wealthy investors raking in huge profits; massive waste and fraud; and—combined with the Bush and Trump tax cuts—a shifting of the burden of the costs of war away from the wealthy and onto middle- and lower-income people and future generations."

Yet, even beyond the financial costs, the opportunity costs have equally been severe, given that resources that could have revamped the engines of national power—such as investments in advanced technology, modern infrastructure, and capacity building of the American workforce—were consumed by protracted conflicts with minimal returns. Indeed, few would deny that the emergence of China as a strong competitor to American global influence and leadership in manufacturing, emerging technology, global supply chains, and modern infrastructure is partly due to the financial and opportunity costs of America's hyper-engagement.

Second, the military activism of the post-9/11 era substantially eroded the moral and political legitimacy of America's global leadership. On the one hand, American interventions contributed to the total breakdown of governance, radicalization, and violent extremism, and on the other hand, the United States evolved into a militarily powerful actor capable of intervening anywhere but too unfocused to consolidate any meaningful gains. Moreover, while the war on terror was packaged as an international coalition, it merely reflected a symbolic rather than a substantive coalition. Much of the intervention reflected a willingness on the part of the United States to bypass international institutions and law, and to act unilaterally rather than through consensus-building. As such, a large part of the post-9/11 period has seen the implementation of a foreign policy that has elevated tactical activism rather than strategic clarity that foregrounds realistic assessments of national

interests and capabilities. Had that been the case, the post-9/11 conflicts would have been embedded in clear, credible, and feasible political and economic objectives, instead of the sweeping goals of spreading liberal democracy by attempting to reengineer whole societies and civilizations.

AMERICA FIRST OR AMERICA ALONE?

Today, the United States finds itself in an international environment that is bedeviled by crisis. Unlike the post-war period, where much of the dynamics shaping the international system revolved around cooperative liberalism, the contemporary order is embedded in conflict and strategic competition. The rise of China and the gradual fragmentation of American hegemony have produced an international order in which tariffs, sanctions, and control of critical global supply chains are increasingly wielded as geoeconomic instruments of rivalry, while emerging technologies in artificial intelligence and cybersecurity function as strategic battlegrounds.

Yet, the rules-based liberal international order, which once anchored the emergence and subsequent spread of American hegemony, has been weakened not only by the assertiveness of other great power actors such as China and Russia, but also by the strategic choices of American foreign policy, which has often been structured around partial contests such as realists versus liberalists, and interventionists versus non-interventionists. However, Trump has not neatly fit into these debates. For instance, his stance is often contrary to the tenets of the liberalist tradition because of his rejection of altruistic foreign policy and the promotion of liberal democracy as a principle. Neither is Trump a realist, given his disregard for prudence, the logic of balance of power, and the management of alliances. As one observer argues: "Although U.S. military preparedness matters, the cornerstone of a wise response to the China challenge would be close political partnerships and committed alliances with key players in the region." Indeed, on multiple instances, Trump's skepticism of foundational multilateral alliances such as NATO embodies his preference to treat alliances as merely transactional arrangements rather than strategic assets.

Moreover, even those who are persuaded to regard him as non-interventionist because of his rhetoric opposing "endless wars" would be tasked to explain his lack of restraint and willingness to intervene in domestic political affairs in countries with far-right opposition groups. In many regards, the Trump administration appears to have embraced the notion that refusing to cooperate presents the best strategy to win. Some observers caution that this position largely communicates that America is both an opportunistic and unstable actor whose commitments may not have lasting value in international relations.

It should not be lost that at face value, Trump's rhetoric on "America First" appears to be laced with Hamiltonian traditions, particularly through his emphasis that trade, manufacturing, technology, control of critical global supply chains, and finance are the core foundations of national and global power. However, the parallels largely end at this level of diagnosis. This is because in the Hamiltonian tradition, statecraft in foreign policy is not merely

about using economic tools to coerce; rather, it is about leveraging economic power to build domestic and international systems and institutions that create predictability and confidence. For the current administration, embedding a Hamiltonian approach in foreign policy would significantly strengthen American national interests and global leadership in at least three important ways.

First, it would shift the current transactional nationalist approach into strategic economic statecraft that neither ignores Trump's core intuition that economics is the primacy of global power, nor requires a return to liberal internationalism that is critiqued for much of the costly, open-ended American interventions of the last two decades. Instead, unlike Trump's policy, which weaponizes the American economic base as an instrument for unpredictable and episodic bargaining rather than as an instrument of a coherent system, a Hamiltonian statecraft would induce greater predictability and coordination in ways that produce long-term productive power. Multiple reports highlight that the use of tariffs has not had much of an impact on American "adversaries" such as China or "competitors," but instead has isolated America within the international system, as allies have increasingly looked elsewhere for trade. A Hamiltonian economic system seeks to make participation in the American economic system advantageous and difficult to exit and, in the process, embed American leadership in market institutions rather than short-term threats.

Second, although Trump's trade war with China reflects an appropriate strategic calculation that economic rather than military confrontation presents, perhaps, the axis of great power competition today, extending that confrontation to allies and neutral actors ultimately harms American power. Indeed, it is widely recognized that the international, dollar-centered economic and financial system provides the United States with the most decisive leverage over China. Recent research, for instance, notes that the unilateral imposition of global tariffs by the Trump administration triggered unprecedented feedback, in which, rather than flocking to American Treasuries as a safe haven, foreign investors dumped dollar-denominated assets. From a Hamiltonian tradition, Trump's trade wars are self-defeating, as they not only escalate de-dollarization, but also free China from an international currency system that it has long struggled to replicate.

As such, securing American national interests in the form of deterring China would require a decisive shift from how the current administration weaponizes trade through tariffs toward a policy that is centered on attraction, inducement, and systemic leadership to signal that America is committed to continuing to use economic instruments to generate mutual gains for allies and bind strategic competitors more deeply into a U.S.-led economic and financial order. Otherwise, a confrontational posture toward China, whose defensive economic and financial buffers are formidable because of its domestic market, diversity of economy, financial insulation, and control of key global supply-chain chokepoints, would fail to produce the desired outcomes for American foreign policy goals. A winning strategy against China is not to block it but to outorganize it within a competitive but rule-based international system that invites participation based on incentives


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in critical areas such as digital trade, climate finance, artificial intelligence, data governance, and development lending, in which China is increasingly playing the dominant leadership role.

Lastly, and perhaps the most profound Hamiltonian revision to Trumpism, is the recognition that a nation's foreign policy is only as coherent and influential as its internal cohesion, institutional capacity, and public confidence in government. America finds itself in a position where these foundations have come under much pressure, and perhaps even eroded, and this is reflected not just in material indicators, but equally in public perceptions of what direction the country should take when engaging with international society. For example, a recent survey found that six out of ten Americans expressed concern that the country is headed in the wrong direction on measures such as the economy, the functioning of the federal government, the management of immigration, and foreign relations. Specifically, a majority of respondents opposed sharp cuts to health care, universities, and research institutions, new tariffs, and the aggressive enforcement of immigration policies. A Hamiltonian perspective would treat this survey with much concern, given that such fragmentation is not merely a social issue, but also a strategic vulnerability.

Using episodic trade wars is shortsighted, as it not only erodes American credibility but also alienates key partners and accelerates the fragmentation of the international order.

While there is a strong case to make that domestic renewal, be it in the form of additional investments in education, workforce development, manufacturing, and infrastructure development, is imperative to restore national greatness, it also has much utility for foreign policy goals. Indeed, domestic renewal is equally an issue of legitimacy. The Hamiltonian tradition recognizes the challenge of making a claim to global leadership if other governments perceive failure on the domestic front. Contemporary domestic challenges have raised many concerns about American democracy, which has been downgraded from a "full" to a "flawed democracy" by some observers. This is of great relevance, especially when it comes to competition with China, whose challenge is not only material but also narrative; that is, China's order has proven to be orderly, effective, and capable of delivering development. Consequently, if the United States cannot demonstrate that its pluralistic and open political system can equally guarantee broad-based prosperity, institutional reliability, and order, then the attractiveness of its model diminishes regardless of how economically or militarily powerful it becomes.

POWER IS BUILT AT HOME

Revisiting the utility of a Hamiltonian tradition is timely because it offers a compelling framework to rethink American foreign policy beyond the mainstream choices oscillating between overreach and isolation. As argued in this analysis, a Hamiltonian statecraft appreciates that power and global

leadership are built, sustained, and legitimized through credible, predictable, and productive institutions that generate confidence in the systems through which nations pursue their national interests. This begins at the domestic level, where the role of leadership is to provide stability, order, and opportunity that other countries would consider rational to accept and costly to avoid or replace.

This means that, as an alternative to the mainstream belief that a powerful nation must either engage in exercises of overreach or abdication to maintain its influence, a Hamiltonian tradition underscores the imperative for caution and strategic engagement. Evidence from the post-9/11 era clearly shows the costs of American strategic overreach in the form of fiscal exhaustion, eroded legitimacy, and strategic distraction. Yet, to retreat would also mean abandoning the system that shaped the emergence of the United States as a global power and surrendering the strategic arenas of competition—such as institutions, rules, and norms—where long-term global leadership is decided.

The promise of a Hamiltonian tradition is clear, especially in the face of a strong strategic competitor like China, which is resilient and harbors systemic ambitions. Using episodic trade wars is shortsighted, as it not only erodes American credibility but also alienates key partners and accelerates the fragmentation of the international order. A Hamiltonian response offers an alternative counterstrategy that could push American leadership to prevail by shifting American foreign policy toward widening institutional trust, productive capacity, and innovation in ways that position American leadership as principled without being reckless, and powerful without dominating. In other words, rather than a call for restraint, "to lead the world, not to police it" is a call for strategic maturity that builds power from the domestic arena through strong and credible institutions that allow the United States to remain engaged, influential, and appear legitimate in its role in shaping international institutions through which other actors pursue their interests.

The World Must Be Just

The Wilsonian Mission Never Ends

JARED O. BELL

Can a great power truly lead the world through moral vision rather than sheer force? This question has long defined American foreign policy. For many in diplomacy, development, and human rights, the answer once seemed clear: U.S. leadership meant advancing justice by building institutions, nurturing cooperation, and defending shared values. Yet this ideal, liberal internationalism, has always been in tension with Realpolitik, the pursuit of power by any means necessary. The realist impulse shaped nineteenth-century U.S. policy, where expansion and self-interest reigned. It never vanished. From Cold War proxy wars to post-9/11 interventions, American strategy has swung between the pull of ideals and the push of raw interests.

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Illustration by Artificial Intelligence

A turning point came with Woodrow Wilson, who envisioned America wielding influence as a moral force. The carnage of World War I, he argued, proved the bankruptcy of power politics. Lasting peace, he believed, must rest not on rival alliances but on law and shared values. His call for a League of Nations sought to institutionalize cooperation and justice over narrow ambition. As historian Arthur S. Link observed, "Wilson's statesmanship was animated by a vision of a new international order based on law and morality, not power politics."

Yet Wilson's vision was riddled with contradiction. A staunch segregationist, he preached self-determination abroad but ignored colonial subjugation in Africa and Asia. At Versailles, he dismissed petitions from colonized peoples, including a young Ho Chi Minh, revealing the limits of his moral reach. As historian Erez Manela argues in The Wilsonian Moment, Wilson's rhetoric inspired anti-colonial movements worldwide even as his own policies exposed American hypocrisy.

Still, Wilson's ideas endured. The creation of the United Nations, NATO, and the Bretton Woods system reflected the belief that U.S. leadership was credible not when it served itself, but when it served something greater, the security and dignity of the international community. Today, that legacy is under strain. U.S. commitments to development, diplomacy, and cooperation have waned, replaced by a narrower "America First" posture that questions whether moral leadership still matters. Yet America's greatest victories have rarely come from military might, but from building partnerships, turning rivals into allies, investing in development, and promoting human rights.

For all its flaws and double standards, from Vietnam to Iraq, and from backing dictators to tolerating abuses, the United States has remained, for many, a symbol of justice and freedom. Dissidents, reformers, and oppressed communities have long looked to Washington not for perfection, but for possibility. Its Constitution, civil rights legacy, and global advocacy for democracy, even inconsistently applied, made it a moral reference point for universal aspirations.

This paradox is Wilson's enduring inheritance, a nation caught between power and principle. America has never fully lived up to the role of moral leader, yet the world still measures it against that ideal. That, in itself, speaks to the Wilsonian promise, that moral purpose, however imperfectly realized, remains essential to global order. The question is not whether values can guide foreign policy, but whether we still choose to let them. Indeed, the deeper question is not simply whether values can guide foreign policy at all, but whether any strategy can endure without justice at its core. The evidence suggests we can. From the U.S.-led coalition confronting Russia's aggression in Ukraine to the life-saving reach of PEPFAR, America continues to prove that when it leads with values, it makes the world safer, freer, and more just.

THE MORAL FOUNDATIONS OF U.S. LEADERSHIP

Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points stood as one of the foundational documents of a new world order. When he unveiled them in 1918, Americans were stirred by his idealism, a vision of peace grounded in justice,

transparency, and moral leadership. Progressives hailed his call for open diplomacy, disarmament, and moral cooperation as a turning point in U.S. foreign policy. As historian John Milton Cooper Jr. observed, Wilson's rhetoric captured the nation's desire to align moral principle with power, though it set expectations no peace treaty could meet. Yet enthusiasm soon gave way to skepticism. Henry Kissinger later argued that Wilson's moral universalism "collided with the realities of power politics," dividing Americans between idealism and pragmatism.

At home, isolationists condemned the League of Nations as a threat to sovereignty. Historian Thomas A. Bailey noted that many in Congress saw it as a "trap that would shackle American independence," while diplomatic historian George F. Kennan described public sentiment as leaning "toward withdrawal rather than crusade." Across the Atlantic, European leaders admired Wilson's vision but dismissed it as naïve. French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau mocked, "God himself was content with Ten Commandments, but Wilson insists on fourteen." As Margaret MacMillan recounts in Paris 1919, Clemenceau and Lloyd George prioritized security and empire over Wilson's universalist ideals.

Despite opposition, Wilson pressed on, believing that democracy, law, and multilateralism were not luxuries but necessities for peace. Yet in the end, the U.S. Senate rejected the Treaty of Versailles, and America never joined the League of Nations. Though his plan failed, Wilson's ideals endured. As historian Alan Brinkley observed, his internationalism collapsed at home but its moral legacy shaped American diplomacy throughout the twentieth century. Wilson's ideas helped lay the intellectual and ethical foundations for later supranational institutions, from the United Nations to NATO, the European Union, and the African Union, all reflections of the enduring Wilsonian belief that democracy, law, and cooperation remain essential to global stability.

The notion of leading through moral legitimacy and principle became one of the United States' greatest strategic assets, especially as it entered a bipolar world and competed with the Soviet Union for global influence and the hearts and minds of emerging nations. In the aftermath of World War II, the United States launched a series of initiatives to rebuild war-torn regions and stabilize the international order, efforts that advanced democracy, self-determination, and respect for human rights. Chief among these was the Marshall Plan, a sweeping economic recovery program announced by Secretary of State George C. Marshall in 1947. Through this initiative, the United States provided more than $13 billion in aid to Western European countries, not only to rebuild infrastructure and revive economies, but also to prevent the spread of communism by fostering prosperity and democratic stability. The plan reflected the enduring Wilsonian belief that peace depended on justice, cooperation, and shared economic security, principles that would come to define the postwar liberal order and anchor U.S. leadership in the twentieth century. The United States also leveraged this moral legitimacy as it confronted autocrats and totalitarian regimes around the world, establishing, just as Wilson had envisioned, the moral and political standards by which democracy, justice, and human rights would be judged in the modern era.

Along these lines, the United States maintained protocols in its foreign policy and development practice that reinforced these values. It established policies to restrict lending and development assistance to known human rights abusers, implemented sanctions against regimes responsible for atrocities, and required annual human rights reports through the Department of State to assess global conditions. Over time, additional mechanisms such as the Global Magnitsky Act, the Foreign Assistance Act, and U.S. participation in multilateral institutions like the World Bank, IMF, and UN Human Rights Council further embedded human rights considerations into economic and diplomatic decision-making. These frameworks reflected a continuing effort to align American power with moral purpose, echoing Wilson's conviction that legitimacy in global affairs rests not merely on strength, but on principle.

SERVICE MEN POSE FOR THE MEDIA WITH NATO, DENMARK, GERMANY, POLAND AND U.S.A. FLAGS AT DEVONPORT NAVAL BASE ON MARCH 15, 2019 IN PLYMOUTH, ENGLAND. TWO NATO MARITIME GROUPS HAVE ARRIVED IN THE UK AHEAD OF THE LARGE-SCALE TRI-SERVICE EXERCISE 'JOINT WARRIOR' LATER THIS MONTH. AFTER PRESERVING EURO-ATLANTIC PEACE AND PROTECTING ITS PEOPLE FOR NEARLY SEVEN DECADES NATO WILL CELEBRATE ITS 70TH ANNIVERSARY NEXT MONTH. (PHOTO BY FINNBARR WEBSTER/GETTY IMAGES)

In the end, the U.S. presidency came to be known as the leader of the free world precisely for embodying these Wilsonian ideals in both principle and practice. Over time, the office itself came to wield a unique form of moral power, one that positioned the president as a global broker for peace, a defender of democracy, and at times, the conscience of the international community. From Wilson to Obama, each administration carried forward some dimension of this moral legacy, using American power not only to defend national interests but to promote a vision of justice and human dignity. While far from perfect or wholly commendable, political agendas and shifting priorities often influenced how this moral legitimacy was exercised or ignored. Even so, this legacy materialized in the creation of institutions such as the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the Peace Corps,

and an expanding framework for humanitarian intervention and global development assistance. The United States became not just a superpower, but a standard-bearer of moral responsibility, shaping a world order that sought to balance power with purpose.

JUSTICE AS FOREIGN POLICY

The international organizations that have grown and expanded over the decades, such as NATO, the European Union, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), are not merely partnerships established to maintain or protect security. They are communities of nations committed to what might be called a shared gospel, united in common ideals of democracy, human rights, good governance, and economic prosperity. These shared norms and values have done more than strengthen alliances. They have cultivated a way of life and a new collective identity. Across borders, citizens increasingly recognize one another as participants in a common pursuit of something larger and greater than the nation-state: the enduring project of peace, dignity, and mutual progress.

One of the key buzzwords I encountered while working in the Balkans was the notion of Euro-Atlantic integration, a process through which states of the former Yugoslavia and Soviet Union were drawn into the broader Euro-Atlantic space of values and institutions. At the end of the Cold War, this integration represented both a political and moral reward for countries that prioritized democracy, human rights, and free-market economies. It symbolized entry into a community defined not merely by treaties and defense pacts, but by a shared belief in liberal democracy as the cornerstone of peace and prosperity. And, for the most part, this has proven true. As the democratic peace theory suggests, democratic states bound by shared values and mutual interests are far less likely to go to war with one another, reinforcing the notion that cooperation and common ideals remain the surest safeguards of lasting peace.

Maintaining these values, and ensuring that those who belong to these communities remain genuinely committed to them, is essential to their strength and credibility. This is precisely why membership in NATO and the European Union involves such a rigorous and often prolonged process. Every member must demonstrate a true dedication to the shared principles of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. When these values erode, alliances begin to fracture. For instance, Serbia's ongoing interest in joining NATO illustrates this tension. While the country has expressed aspirations toward Euro-Atlantic integration, its continued political and military closeness with Russia raises questions about its alignment with NATO's core democratic and security principles. Similarly, within the European Union, countries such as Poland and Hungary have faced growing criticism and even formal rebuke for democratic backsliding, politicized judiciaries, and restrictions on media freedom. These challenges have strained their relationships with Brussels, highlighting how the erosion of shared values can undermine not only trust but the very cohesion of the alliances themselves. Upholding these principles is therefore not a symbolic exercise. It is the moral and political glue that keeps the liberal international order intact.

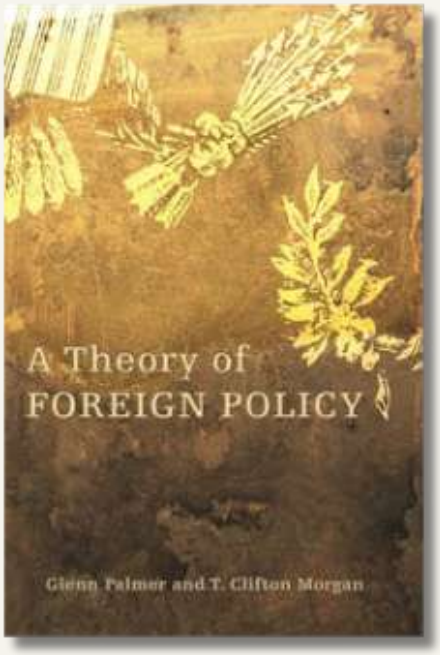
Humanitarian intervention embodies one of international relations' enduring paradoxes, the clash between moral responsibility and political self-interest. One of the key ideas that evolved from Wilsonian philosophy, it sought to elevate human rights above the sovereignty of states and to enshrine moral duty as a cornerstone of global order. After World War II, interventions justified on humanitarian grounds, from Bosnia and Herzegovina to Libya, revealed both the promise and the peril of this idealism. While intended to prevent atrocities, such actions often exposed deep contradictions over legitimacy and selectivity. Who decides when to intervene, and whose suffering merits protection?

The later emergence of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine reflects a modern extension of Wilsonian ideals, asserting that the international community has a moral duty to act when states fail to protect their citizens. Yet even with R2P in effect, the practice of humanitarian intervention continues to test the boundaries of the U.N. Charter's commitment to state sovereignty and non-interference, and remains constrained by realpolitik, where doing the right thing often clashes with national interest. The Clinton administration's reluctance to act during the 1994 Rwandan genocide, shaped by the loss of U.S. soldiers in Somalia, underscored this tension. Similarly, the United States' continued support for Israel amid the bombardment of Gaza, and Russia's repeated vetoes blocking U.N. action in Syria, reveal how political calculations still determine when, and for whom, humanity intervenes. This uneven application reflects an enduring hierarchy of human suffering, where some lives are deemed more "intervenable" than others.

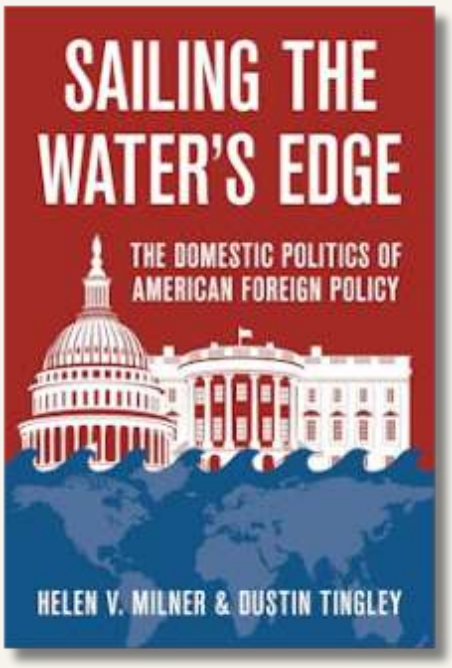
Taken together, Rwanda represents the failure to act when intervention was morally essential, Gaza reflects the tendency to shield allies despite grave humanitarian costs, and Syria illustrates how geopolitical rivalry can paralyze collective action even as atrocities mount. And as I write this, with genocide again unfolding in Darfur, the international community remains largely silent, proof that moral resolve continues to yield to political convenience. Until moral responsibility outweighs political expedience, the promise of Wilsonian idealism will remain just that, a promise unfulfilled.

The international legal mechanisms for justice and human rights, anchored in the principles of international law and embodied by institutions such as the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, UN treaty bodies, the International Criminal Court (ICC), and the International Court of Justice (ICJ), are not merely procedural forums. They represent a noble pursuit to uphold accountability and preserve peace and order across the globe. These institutions lay the foundation for a moral order and civility within the international community.

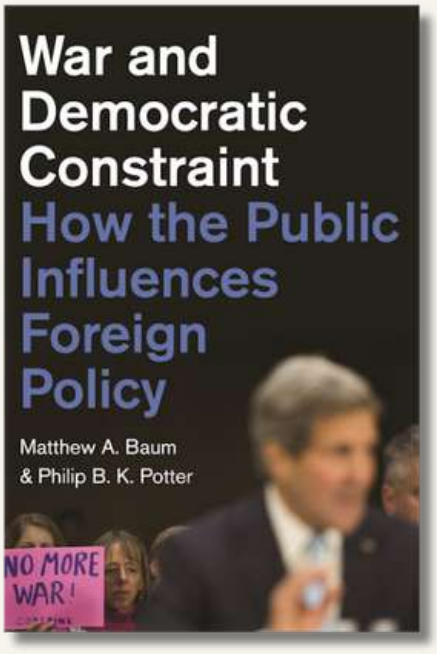
In 2025, they are more vital than ever as the world once again confronts war and war crimes across the globe. Without them, where and how would we preserve our shared sense of humanity? Though often entangled in politics, international justice mechanisms remain essential for holding both states and non-state actors accountable. History offers powerful reminders of their necessity. Without the Nuremberg Trials, countless Nazi perpetrators would have escaped justice for committing some of humanity's darkest crimes. Without the International Criminal Tribunal for the former



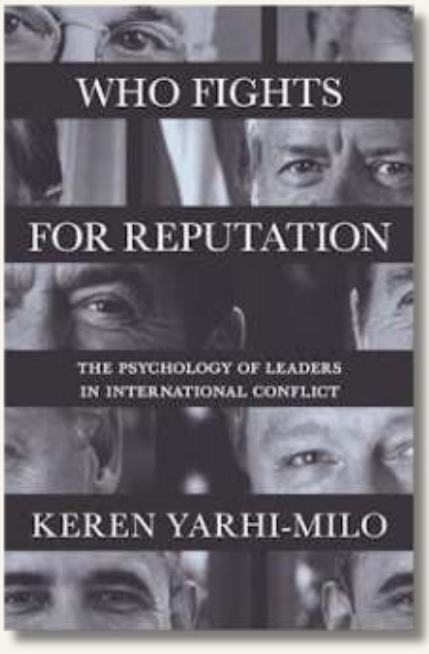
"*A Theory of Foreign Policy* is a major book that advances our knowledge of foreign policy generally and of alliances in particular. Its authors develop an innovative formal theory of foreign policy that goes beyond realism and liberalism and pushes the field toward new and fruitful directions."—John Vasquez, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, author of *The Power of Power Politics*



"Milner and Tingley provide a thorough examination of how presidential power in foreign policy is contingent on relations with domestic actors (Congress, interest groups, and the public). Their book is a welcome addition to the literature as the dominant assumption is that presidents are impervious to domestic pressure."—*Choice*



"A very thoughtful study about war initiation which can be the start for a true sociology of democratic institutions and their impact on war and peace."—Thomas Lindemann, *European Review of International Studies*



“Who Fights for Reputation is a compelling and significant contribution to one of the most lively debates in security studies: whether and how individual leaders shake loose from system- and state-level constraints to shape international outcomes.”—Peter Feaver, Duke University

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Yugoslavia (ICTY), many victims of genocide in Bosnia and Herzegovina would never have known the fate of their children, spouses, siblings, or parents.

American leadership depends on defending, not bypassing, these institutions, for they embody the very ideals of justice, dignity, and the rule of law that the United States claims to champion. The U.S. played a central role in shaping this global architecture of accountability, from leading the Nuremberg and Tokyo Trials to supporting the establishment of the ICTY and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), both precursors to the International Criminal Court (ICC). While Washington has yet to fully embrace ICC membership, its historical commitment to justice helped lay the groundwork for the Court's creation under the Rome Statute in 2002.

When accountability becomes selective, justice devolves into political theater.

However, in recent years, the United States has backtracked on many of these efforts, at times even undermining the very institutions it helped build. By rejecting the authority of international courts, sanctioning ICC officials, and applying double standards in accountability, America risks eroding the credibility of the global justice system it once championed. After all, why should perpetrators of war crimes in Sudan, such as Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti) and other Rapid Support Forces commanders accused of orchestrating atrocities in Darfur and across Sudan, be held accountable if U.S. allies like Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and senior Israeli defense officials are not? When accountability becomes selective, justice devolves into political theater. Justice that is uneven or lopsided is not justice at all. Delegitimizing these institutions weakens the very international order that Wilsonians sought to sustain, an order rooted in law, moral leadership, and shared responsibility. To preserve that order, nations must recommit to universal principles of justice and accountability, ensuring that international law applies not only to the weak, but to the powerful as well. That is global primacy, not selective application.

THE CRISIS OF WILSONIANISM

After the Cold War, the United States embarked on what became known as the freedom agenda, a sweeping vision to promote democracy, free markets, and human rights as the cornerstones of a stable world order. Rooted in the belief that democratic governance would naturally lead to peace and prosperity, it reflected America's conviction that its model could and should be replicated globally. In theory, it was a moral mission; in practice, it often blurred the line between idealism and interventionism. In the wake of 9/11, this agenda took on a militant edge, manifesting most visibly in Iraq and Afghanistan. The effort to implant democracy in societies fractured by conflict, colonial legacies, and sectarian divides proved both ill-timed and ill-prepared. What followed was not the triumph of liberty, but a sobering lesson in overreach.

Washington's vision became clouded by arrogance and moral hegemony, the assumption that democracy could be imposed from above and would automatically take hold once authoritarian regimes were removed. The U.S. congressional reports that followed the Iraq invasion exposed these failures in stark detail: faulty intelligence, poor post-war planning, and a deep misunderstanding of Iraq's political and social fabric. Toppling Saddam Hussein did not bring democracy; it unleashed chaos, sectarianism, and widespread disillusionment with the very ideals America sought to promote.

The tragic return of the Taliban in Afghanistan stands as an equally harsh reminder of what happens when democracy is imposed rather than cultivated. After two decades of war, nation-building, and promises of freedom, Afghanistan reverted to authoritarian rule almost overnight, revealing the fragility of institutions built on foreign scaffolding rather than local legitimacy.

After all, democracy is not an exportable commodity but a lived conviction, one that can only endure when people themselves desire it, nurture it, and fight for it. This truth is evident in the Arab Spring, when citizens across the Middle East and North Africa rose up to demand dignity, justice, and reform. Their courage proved that the yearning for freedom must come from within, yet their struggles also showed how fragile democracy remains when hope outpaces institutions. This tension is often at the heart of criticism directed at U.S. democracy and governance programs. Skeptics argue that initiatives funded by USAID, the State Department's DRL Bureau, and other Western donors can cross the line into social engineering or political interference. These critiques gain traction in places where local histories are marked by colonialism, foreign interventions, or Cold War proxy battles. But the deeper truth is that no external actor can impose democracy where people do not want it, and no external actor can extinguish it where they do.

This lesson is deeply germane to the American experience, born of struggle, dissent, and a collective insistence on self-governance. Even with a Constitution in place, women's rights and civil rights for all were not granted easily; they had to be fought for, won through persistence, protest, and sacrifice. The enduring truth is clear. Democracy cannot be delivered by drone or decree. It must be demanded, defended, and defined by the people themselves.

This question lies at the heart of America's modern identity crisis. The United States has long defined its leadership through the language of freedom, human rights, and democracy, yet its credibility gap has widened as it grapples with internal divisions and authoritarian impulses that mirror the very forces it claims to oppose abroad. The January 6th insurrection, rising corruption, deep racial and partisan polarization, and persistent voter suppression have exposed cracks in America's democratic foundation. These are not isolated issues but signs of institutional fragility and moral drift. The attack on the Capitol was more than an assault on a building. It was an assault on the peaceful transfer of power, revealing how disinformation, extremism, and populist rage can erode democracy from within. Even more alarming, efforts to pardon or glorify January 6th insurrectionists further normalize political violence and contempt for democratic accountability. When acts of sedition are recast as patriotism, the rule of law is not merely weakened; it is inverted.

Meanwhile, the influence of money in politics, gerrymandering, and restrictive voting laws has further undermined public trust, as once-neutral institutions like the courts, press, and electoral system have become partisan battlegrounds. This climate of division and fear has created fertile ground for authoritarian tendencies to take root, replacing dialogue with resentment and democratic compromise with contempt.

This erosion of integrity underscores the danger of performative moralism, a foreign policy that preaches justice abroad while failing to uphold it at home. When moral rhetoric is not matched by institutional consistency, it becomes hollow, a performance rather than a principle. The defunding of USAID and the U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP), the downgrading of the State Department's Human Rights Report, and politically motivated claims of genocide, such as those leveled against South Africa while ignoring actual genocides elsewhere, only deepen this hypocrisy. When ideals are wielded for convenience, values become slogans, and leadership turns into theater. To reclaim credibility, America must restore institutional integrity and live by the same moral standards it demands of others, leading not by proclamation, but through principled example.

Predictably, this double standard and erosion of moral credibility have not gone unnoticed. Russia, China, and Iran have emerged as the loudest critics of Western hypocrisy, exploiting America's contradictions to expand their global influence. They cast the West's promotion of democracy and human rights as selective and self-serving, and too often, that narrative resonates. Having served in a country like Nicaragua, I witnessed firsthand how governments isolated by U.S. and EU sanctions sought political and economic refuge through alliances with Moscow and Beijing. For illiberal regimes, such partnerships provide both survival and legitimacy, filling the moral vacuum left by Western inconsistency.

America's challenge is no longer simply to outspend or outmaneuver its rivals; it is to reclaim the moral credibility that once made its leadership aspirational.

China, in particular, has seized this opening through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which now involves over 150 countries, representing nearly two-thirds of the world's population and about 40 percent of global GDP. Since 2013, China has poured more than one trillion dollars into infrastructure and energy projects, often financed through opaque and high-interest loans that have driven countries like Sri Lanka, Zambia, and Pakistan to the brink of default. Across Africa alone, Chinese lending has exceeded 160 billion dollars since 2000, while Russia has expanded its reach in Latin America through arms deals, energy projects, and disinformation networks, reviving Cold War-era alignments in Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua. The result is clear. The moral advantage that once distinguished the United States and its allies has eroded. As Washington dismantles key instruments of soft power, from development aid and public diplomacy to democracy promotion programs, authoritarian powers are filling the void. America's challenge is no longer simply to outspend or outmaneuver its rivals. It is to reclaim the moral credibility that once made its leadership aspirational.

POWER IS NOT ENOUGH

As I noted earlier, the United States has won more friends with soft-power tools than with military might, and that strength rests on moral leadership. Moral leadership draws friends through cooperation and partnership. Global health initiatives have strengthened health systems, reduced child mortality, and expanded access to vaccines in some of the world's most vulnerable regions. Educational and cultural exchange programs like Fulbright, International Visitor Leadership, and English-language learning initiatives have fostered generations of leaders who understand and engage with democratic norms. Development efforts that support independent media, civil society, and electoral integrity have helped communities build accountable institutions. Humanitarian assistance and disaster-relief missions have saved lives and built trust long after the crisis fades. Even public-diplomacy programs, from libraries to digital-literacy workshops, have opened doors where formal diplomacy falters. And these investments do not simply support communities in the moment; they multiply.

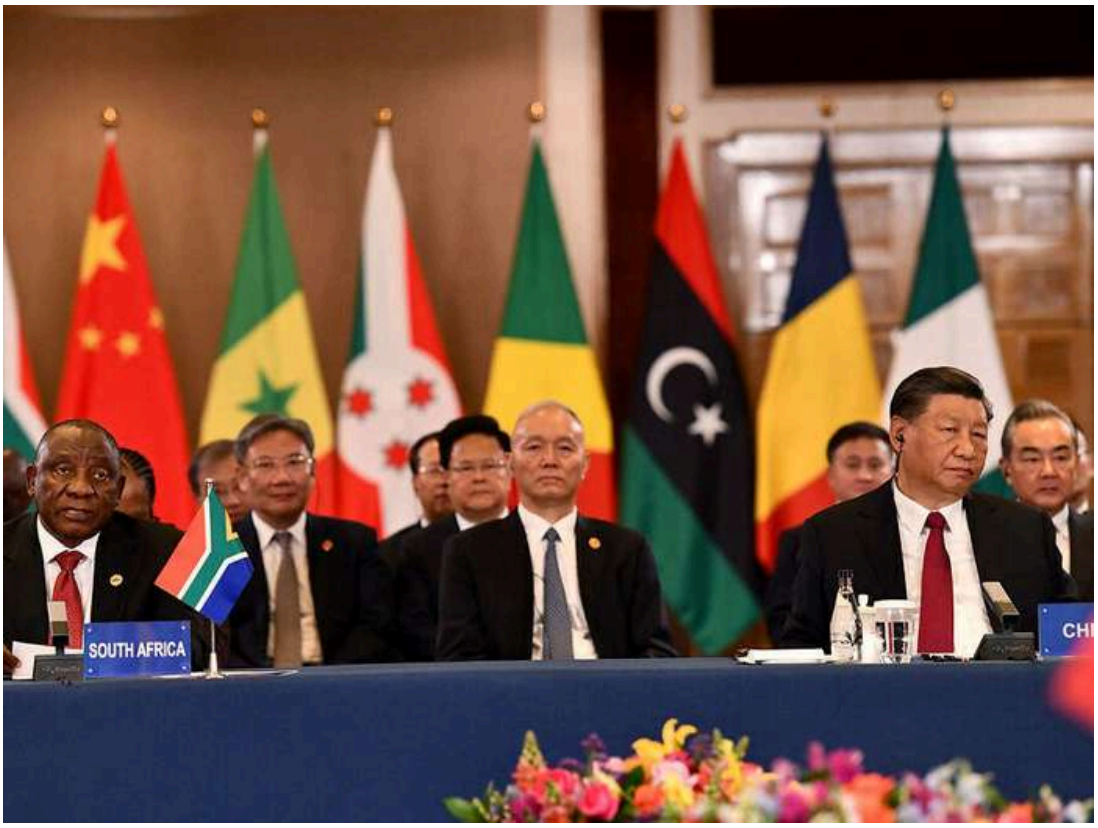
For instance, when a girl learns to read, she grows into a woman who votes, earns, leads, and ultimately reshapes the future of her family and her society. Around the world, programs that expand girls' access to education have raised literacy, lowered child marriage, strengthened public health, and opened economic doors where none previously existed. Even in Afghanistan, despite the Taliban's return, there remains a generation of educated women determined to carry the torch forward. They have built underground classrooms, community tutoring circles, and quiet learning networks that keep the promise of education alive for the next generation of girls. These are the kinds of investments that reflect the best of American soft power, answering the enduring global demand for justice, dignity, and democratic accountability.

And the influence of these values runs deeper than many realize. Even America's fiercest critics still appeal to the very moral and legal standards rooted in the international norms the United States helped shape. This is why authoritarian regimes from North Korea to Iran to Venezuela stage carefully managed "elections" to claim legitimacy. They know the global system now expects governments to present themselves as democratic, even when they are not. Even the world's most repressive states feel pressure to project compliance with the expectations of a rules-based order, one still shaped in no small part by the Wilsonian principles that elevated democracy, law, and legitimacy as global standards.

But as powerful as these tools are, soft power alone cannot meet a world reshaped by new grievances, new technological disruptions, and new doubts about Western sincerity. To endure, moral leadership must be matched by institutions and policies that are visibly fair, consistent, and accountable. If the United States hopes to retain even a measure of moral leadership in this century, it must recognize that the old playbook can no longer guide a world in upheaval. A new brand of liberalism must be reimagined for a fragmented world, one that trades old certainties for a more inclusive, justice-centered vision of global leadership. In an era defined by ruptures and realignments,

moral authority flows not from power, but from the courage to imagine something fairer than what came before. It requires listening before prescribing, partnering rather than dictating, and treating dignity itself as a geopolitical force.

The world is no longer organized around Cold War binaries of democracy versus authoritarianism. It is multipolar, entangled, and shaken by overlapping crises that no ideology can contain. The divide between the Global North and Global South has widened, not because their values are incompatible, but because too many partnerships have been transactional, conditional, or paternalistic. Countries increasingly want relationships that acknowledge their agency and complexity instead of sorting them into ideological camps.



PRESIDENT OF CHINA XI JINPING (R) AND SOUTH AFRICAN PRESIDENT CYRIL RAMAPHOSA (L) ATTEND THE CHINA-AFRICA LEADERS' ROUNDTABLE DIALOGUE ON THE LAST DAY OF THE 2023 BRICS SUMMIT IN JOHANNESBURG ON AUGUST 24, 2023

Within this reimagined liberalism, true equality will only be reached when we no longer need "Global North" and "Global South" as descriptors at all, when partnership, dignity, and justice erase the hierarchies those terms imply. This moment calls for a pluralist values diplomacy anchored in fairness, inclusion, and humility. Pluralist values diplomacy respects cultural difference without surrendering universal rights, insisting that diversity of context is compatible with universality of dignity.

That means building coalitions around justice, not just democracy. While political systems differ, people everywhere share a desire for honest governance, fair courts, women's rights, safe communities, and accountable institutions. These universal aspirations offer a more durable foundation for partnership than any narrow focus on electoral models. When the United

States collaborates on anti-corruption, gender equality, labor protections, climate resilience, or ending impunity, it forms alliances rooted in shared moral purpose rather than political alignment, alliances that endure because they are built on justice, not coercion.

And the pillars of moral leadership have evolved. Human rights, climate justice, and digital ethics now define the frontier of global influence. Defending activists, supporting climate-impacted communities, particularly those in the Global South who bear the greatest burdens with the fewest resources, and shaping fair rules for artificial intelligence and data privacy are not peripheral concerns. They are the arenas where legitimacy is earned. The nations that approach these challenges with integrity, rather than expediency, will shape the moral architecture of this century.

The United States can still lead. But doing so requires humility, partnership, strategic clarity, and the kind of foresight that looks beyond immediate wins to long-term legitimacy. In a fractured world, moral authority belongs to those willing to reimagine it and to lead with purpose rather than the reflexes of power. To move toward this new liberalism, as outlined above, we need less triumphalism and more listening. And that listening must be universal, across societies, across political systems, and across histories. Countries everywhere deserve to be heard, but the responsibility is especially great for nations like the United States and the European Union, which so often claim to champion human rights, democracy, and justice. Moral leadership begins at home, and we cannot export values we have not secured for our own people.

This means addressing systemic economic and social inequality, from the chronic underfunding of marginalized communities in the United States to the widening wealth gap and austerity backlash seen across parts of Europe. It means confronting racism and reckoning honestly with the legacies of slavery and colonialism, whether in debates about reparations in the U.S. or rising demands for historical accountability in former European empires like France, Belgium, and the United Kingdom. It means building immigration systems that are humane, just, and fair, especially as countries grapple with crises like the U.S.–Mexico border, the Mediterranean migrant tragedies, and increasingly militarized responses to refugees fleeing conflict or climate disaster. And it means ensuring that no one is above the law, whether that is American elites evading accountability during financial scandals or European leaders excusing corruption in the name of national security.

To build a global order capable of sustaining this reimagined liberalism, we need leadership rooted in empathy, not paternalism, not the old habit of "do as I say, not as I do." That approach has never worked, and it will not work now. And, crucially, it requires strengthening global mechanisms of accountability and upholding international norms so that no state receives a free pass for human rights violations, regardless of its strategic value or political alliance. Whether it is overlooking abuses committed by close allies in the Middle East, excusing democratic backsliding in countries like Hungary and India, or selectively invoking human rights against geopolitical rivals, the world sees the double standards. And as we allow those double standards to persist, we erode the very Wilsonian-inspired global order we claim to defend, even in its imperfect form.

THE MISSION NEVER ENDS

Maybe I am naïve, but even as Wilsonian ideals falter, we cannot let them disappear. Because when we lose them, we lose the best of what we aspire to be, not just as nations, but as a global community. The belief in freedom, justice, stability, and rights for all is not a pipe dream. It is the lifeblood of hope for millions. Whether it is citizens casting ballots in fragile democracies, women and girls gaining access to education, or people free to love whom they choose, these are not abstractions. They are the lived expressions of a vision that insists peace and progress flow from dignity, participation, and the rule of law. Yes, these principles may be bruised, inconsistently applied, or mocked by cynics who see only power, not purpose, but they remain the closest thing we have to a moral compass in a fractured world. If we abandon them, we surrender the very horizon that once allowed us to imagine something bigger than borders, stronger than alliances, and more enduring than any single nation's interests.

Yet the call to make the world more just remains central to the American identity in global affairs. When that voice goes silent, we lose more than moral authority. We lose our capacity to inspire, to innovate, and to shape a world that reflects both our interests and our ideals. I often reflect on my work with USAID and as an implementer of U.S. Government programs, and I remember how gratifying it was to see our efforts give people second chances, or a first chance altogether. I have seen these ideals not in textbooks but in the faces of the people we served. Whether it was meeting women entrepreneurs in Central Asia who sought to empower other women to escape cycles of domestic violence through entrepreneurship, training Supreme Court judges in Kazakhstan to strengthen the rule of law, fostering peace and reconciliation in Bosnia and Herzegovina by supporting efforts to locate the missing from the wars of the 1990s, or helping Nicaraguan civil society hold the Ortega-Murillo regime accountable for human rights abuses, Americans were there, hand in hand, standing for something larger than ourselves.

That is the America the world still wants to believe in, and the one we must fight to be again. In a time of cynicism, the choice is not between idealism and realism. It is between leading with meaning or fading into irrelevance. An "America First" agenda should never mean isolating ourselves from the world, cutting aid programs, or ceding influence to China and Russia. It must mean the opposite, putting the United States in a position to lead, to engage, and to shape the global future at every conceivable opportunity. Unless the United States chooses that course, the American empire will become a hollow echo of its former self, remembered only in the pages of history, alongside other once-glorious empires that mistook power for purpose.

Reputation is Strategy

The Jacksonian Doctrine

JORDAN TOVAR MIRANDA

Power without fear is fragile. In the Jacksonian tradition of statecraft, strength is not just the size of a military or economy; it is what others will believe the state will do when provoked. For Jacksonians, reputation is not an ornament that decorates policy but is the policy itself: there must be a public expectation that the United States will retaliate swiftly, unilaterally if necessary, and refuse to be humiliated.

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Illustration by Artificial Intelligence

This is more than a preference for bold gestures, however. It is a way of reading the world. Where other traditions weigh international institutions, alliances, and long-term results, Jacksonians emphasize dignity. It is through this logic that a visible and decisive act of punishment restores deterrence, and a single image of weakness can erode it. The question that the doctrine seeks to answer is simple, yet enduring in today's geopolitical landscape: Can a country maintain power without being feared?

This essay explores that question. It traces the Jacksonian ethos, from its frontier origins to its modern revival in American foreign policy. Jacksonian logic examines how reputation functions as deterrence, explores the costs of honoring pride above prudence, and argues how a state might steward prestige without letting that same sense of honor become a trap.

THE JACKSONIAN ETHOS

The Jacksonian ethos originates in a time period when institutions offered little protection and communities enforced their own security. On the frontier of a nascent America, the ability to defend oneself and retaliate swiftly created both safety and standing within the community. The family known for answering provocations with overwhelming force was less likely to be challenged. Honor was not ornamental for people like Andrew Jackson. It was a matter of life or death.

This frontier mindset shaped early American political culture. Leaders who projected toughness and refused to be slighted won admiration. Andrew Jackson embodied these characteristics. He viewed insults, threats, and challenges as matters that demanded responses. His willingness to duel, confront rivals, and defy legal constraints when he believed national dignity was at stake left an imprint on the American population. For many citizens, Jackson's instincts felt familiar because they echoed community norms of the frontiersmen: one protects what one loves, not by words, but by assertive action.

This ethos evolved into a form of populist nationalism that is conjured when one thinks of the 7th American president. It is rooted in an emotional understanding of patriotism, one that emphasizes loyalty to the homeland. It celebrates perceived common sense over elite calculation, toughness over prudence, and instinct over processes. Michael Walzer observes that a community defines itself by the boundaries it is willing to defend. Jacksonianism extends that idea: a nation proves its worth not by defending borders alone, but by defending the dignity of the United States.

Under this lens, diplomacy is often viewed with suspicion. Negotiations and legal codes appear as attempts to limit American autonomy and capacities. International courts and treaties seem distant from the daily realities of citizens who do not interact with them. Institutions that mediate conflict can look like instruments that erode sovereignty rather than tools that enhance it. Thus, the Jacksonian attachment to national pride is inseparable from skepticism towards external restraints that threaten sovereignty.

Jacksonian loyalty is directed toward the country itself rather than institutions that claim to represent it. Institutions are inherently judged by

whether they amplify national strength, not by their procedural virtues. When institutions appear to weaken sovereignty or require compromise, they lose legitimacy in Jacksonian eyes.

This perspective ultimately creates tension with elite conceptions of foreign policy. Diplomats trust rules, agreements, and use multilateral structures to stabilize international norms. Jacksonians instead put trust in direct action rooted in national sentiment. Experts emphasize long-term commitments to international law, whereas Jacksonians emphasize immediate honor. This results in a natural conflict where experts fear escalation and Jacksonians fear weakness, creating divergent responses as a result.

This tension becomes more pronounced in periods of global instability. When adversaries rise, alliances strain, or when domestic politics fragment, citizens grow skeptical of any slow or cautious process. They gravitate towards leaders who speak plainly, act boldly, and resist external pressure to act with restraint. As Samuel Huntington once wrote, when people feel that elites have compromised their dignity for personal benefit, they look for leaders who promise to restore that lost dignity. The Jacksonian tradition promises exactly that.Strategy as Retaliation

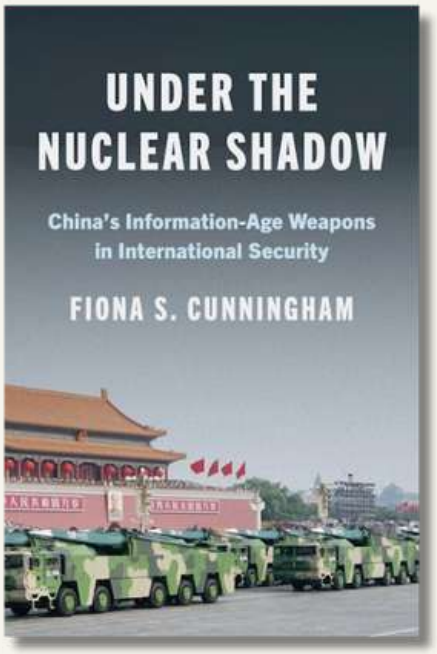
Conventional strategic doctrines focus on stability. They seek to make intentions predictable, thresholds clear, and escalation manageable. Jacksonian strategy rejects this, as predictability invites testing. If an adversary knows the limits of American response, that adversary might calculate how far it can go without provoking real consequences. Russian, Chinese, and North Korean cyber attacks are the perfect example of this; American adversaries know non-Jacksonians will reply weakly to hybrid attacks on critical infrastructure. Jacksonians will argue that these exact exploits to conventional doctrines are why American adversaries can walk away while Americans reap the damage.

Thus, deterrence rests on fear rather than on stability. Effective deterrence requires an image of decisiveness and, at times, controlled volatility. Rival leaders should believe that a provocation might unleash a reaction beyond what they can anticipate. The aim is simple: preserve a sense of danger around American resolve. This uncertainty alone makes adversaries think twice before engaging America.

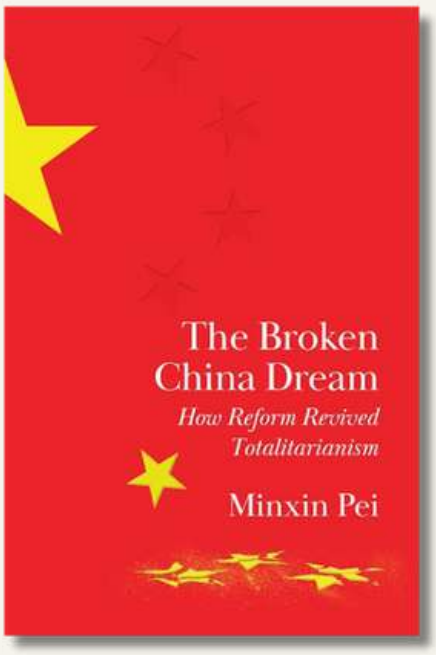
This is why Jacksonian strategy sometimes favors dramatic signals. Limited military strikes, public threats, or abrupt shifts in posture are not mistakes or contradictory in this tradition. They are deliberate signals that communicate willingness to retaliate. Something contemporary that proves this is the American strikes on Iranian nuclear sites in spite of many policymakers warning against it and calling it "irrational." The point is to keep rivals uncertain and cautious of the United States.

Humiliation is ultimately treated as an existential threat because it undermines deterrence.

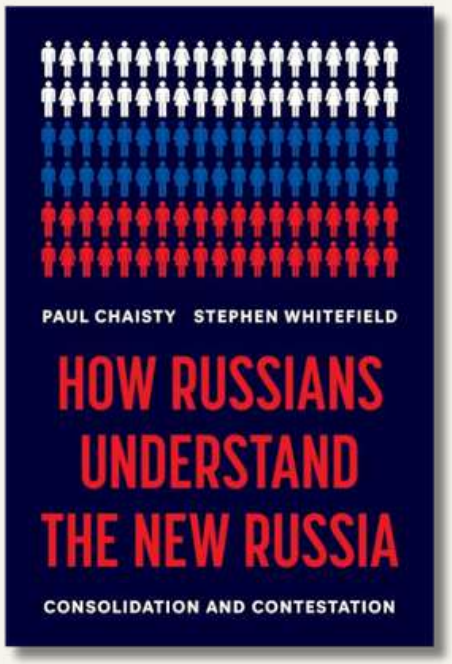
For Jacksonians, humiliation is the most dangerous of defeat. It is not measured in lost territory or squandered resources, but in the perception that the nation was treated with contempt. Humiliation spreads rapidly because it



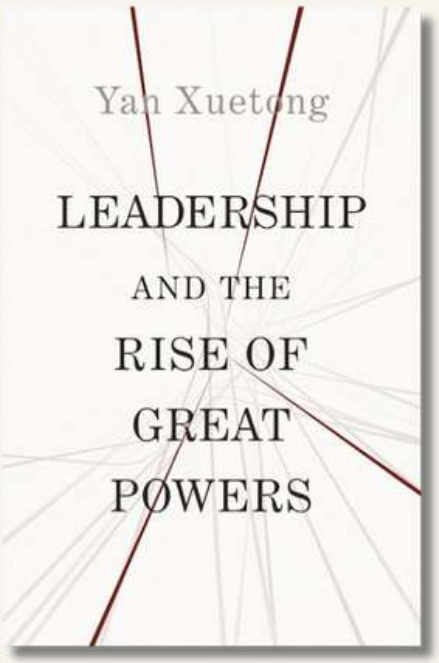
"*Under the Nuclear Shadow* is a critical contribution to understanding the rationales informing China's military force posture and evolving approach to deterrence. . . . [T]his work raises critical questions as the Chinese military looks to the future of power and warfare."—Elsa B. Kania, *Arms Control Today*



"Minxin Pei remains one of the most prescient analysts of modern China's economic and political development. With *The Broken China Dream*, he once again offers an indispensable guide to China's rise—and to the self-imposed weaknesses and contradictions of the path Xi Jinping has chosen."—James Fallows, author of *China Airborne*



"Chaisty and Whitefield provide a detailed and systematic account of the dynamics of Russian public opinion from the 1990s to the 2020s. Based on an in-depth analysis of mass survey data, their book uncovers the formation of the social bases of support for the current political and economic order in Russia."—Vladimir Gel'man, Aleksanteri Institute, University of Helsinki



"[Ther's] central thesis demands serious consideration. He argues that a 'neoliberal train,' put on track in Margaret Thatcher's Britain and Ronald Reagan's United States, began 'to cross Europe in 1989.' He says he uses neoliberalism 'as a neutral, analytical term,' and rightly distinguishes between its intellectual history and the specific social and political circumstances of its implementation."—Timothy Garton Ash, *New York Review of Books*

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is easily displayed in a media environment. An insult, unpunished attack, broken promise, or an ally's ingratitude circulates widely, which erodes prestige and invites more aggression.

Humiliation is ultimately treated as an existential threat because it undermines deterrence. If rivals conclude that the United States lacks resolve, they may push boundaries more boldly. Once the perception of weakness takes hold, it becomes difficult to reverse adversarial calculations. It is because of this logic that Jacksonians insist that challenges, even if they may be symbolic, must never go unanswered. A nation that allows humiliation risks further danger.

This explains why Jacksonians place enormous weight on responses to what may otherwise be brushed aside as small provocations. The issue is not the scale of the immediate threat but the message it sends. If a foreign power mocks American warnings, Jacksonians see not rhetoric but a shift in the global hierarchy of powers. If an ally appears ungrateful, Jacksonians see a signal that American generosity is being taken for granted. In each case, the response must restore the sense that the United States will not tolerate disrespect.

The emphasis on preventing humiliation helps explain the Jacksonian preference for swift retaliatory strikes, economic punishment, and powerful rhetoric. These actions are less about resolving the source of disputes and more about restoring perception. In an era when images and news spread instantly, the urgency of restoring and upholding dignity becomes even greater.

JACKSONIANISM AND THE PEOPLE

Jacksonian foreign policy operates as much on the domestic stage as it does on the international one. Leaders who adopt this posture understand that external challenges are used to cultivate internal unity around the nation. When rivals are framed as bullies who disdain America, the people are invited to rally around the flag. Foreign policy becomes a means of reinforcing national identity and unity.

This performance is not superficial. It reflects a belief that America's strength is derived from a unified public willing to defend the homeland's honor. Thus, leaders who dramatize threats or highlight insults are not simply manipulating sentiment; they are practicing a form of political mobilization that Jacksonians deem essential to national resilience in the face of danger.

The emotional clarity of this approach is a sharp contrast with the ambiguity often found in technocratic policy-making. Experts speak of risks and long-term trade-offs, but Jacksonian leaders speak of pride, betrayal, and resolve. In moments of uncertainty, the clarity Jacksonians demonstrate is appealing. It offers citizens a simple story that they can understand and a role they can play in forging America's international standing.

Another defining feature of Jacksonianism is distrust of elites and complex institutions. Diplomats, scholars, and global organizations are often portrayed as barriers to common-sense action. Elites are believed to prioritize international stability, professional norms, or foreign interests above national pride. Jacksonians see this as an inherent betrayal of the people's instincts.

This anti-elite sentiment is not just something Jackson decided to enact while president; it was born in his family's contributions in the American War of Independence. Jackson's brother and mother died helping the Continental Army, and Jackson himself faced the British Redcoats, who demanded he polish their boots. This was an insult to the nascent nation he admired, and he would grow up with a deep contempt for the elites who disregarded the desires Americans held during the war. He invited the common American to participate electorally in the American system, something for which he is applauded for this to this day.

Anti-elitism also extends to attitudes about complexity. Jacksonians prefer simple goals: protect the nation, punish threats, and prevail over rivals. Complex explanations about structural and long-term positioning can seem evasive. The preference for clarity creates tension with the intricacies of global politics, but it also produces messages that resonate quickly and deeply with parts of the American population who feel alienated by bureaucratic language.

This element of the Jacksonian tradition explains why populist foreign policy movements often gain momentum during periods of economic dislocation, cultural polarization, or perceived elite failure. When the public senses that traditional leaders have mishandled crises, Jacksonian voices rise and vow to restore honor quickly and decisively. It is no wonder that Jacksonianism re-entered political circles after the failures in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Great Recession. American citizens saw a wounded America, not in resources, but in national honor despite being the most powerful nation.

THE TRUMP ERA AND THE JACKSONIAN REVIVAL

The Trump presidency did not give birth to Jacksonianism, but it revived it in its most visible form. "America First" echoed many pillars of the tradition: skepticism toward long-lasting alliances, disdain for international institutions, celebration of sovereignty, and emphasis on unilateral capabilities. Many journalists and political scientists agree, which is why there are recent attempts to understand Andrew Jackson's personality and foreign policy.

Under this approach, trade became a tool of national leverage and punishment. Tariffs have been used to discipline rivals and pressure allies. Both Trump administrations have deployed public threats as diplomatic signals, making the spectacle part of the message. Foreign policy was cast as a negotiation in which America had been cheated by partners who no longer respected it.

This resonated with many citizens who felt globalization had diminished America's standing. It tapped into the belief that elites had allowed the nation to be humiliated through "forever wars," porous borders, and economic concessions while adversaries continue to rise. "America First" promised to restore dignity through blunt force in place of careful management of interstate relationships.

However, this approach has also exposed strategic challenges. The emphasis on transactionalism strains alliances that had provided stability for decades. Unpredictable threats created openings for rivals to test American commitments. Actions meant to restore prestige sometimes produced uncertainty among partners who preferred reliability, which is a key topic of constant public debate in the last few months. Yet the political power of the message remains undeniable. It showed that Jacksonian instincts, once dormant, remain potent and relevant in foreign policy discussions today.

The Trump era demonstrated how Jacksonianism evolves in the age of digital media. Foreign policy has become increasingly visual and accessible to billions of people. Military strikes are televised. Diplomatic confrontations are broadcast. Presidential tweets signal shifts in posture instantly. Reputation became as much about images as about actions.

Success is measured not through traditional metrics but through moments that convey dominance or resolve. Whether a confrontation with a rival at a summit or calling an ally out for insufficient contributions, the Trump administration seeks to manage global perception through dramatic gestures. From striking Iran to demanding NATO to increase its defense spending, America First strengthens the national image of the United States as a nation to be respected, one way or another.

The risks of this approach also become clear. When policy becomes performance, outcomes may be subordinated to optics games. Rivals learn to provoke symbolic reactions rather than substantive ones. Allies may, and have, questioned whether dramatic displays mask strategic inconsistencies. American tariffs have resulted in some concessions, and in other instances have prompted regional responses to American unpredictability. The EU and Mexico retaliated, and Japan and South Korea were willing to engage in economic talks with China as a counterweight to American threats. Still, these instances and qualities reveal how deeply the logic of reputation shapes American politics. It shows that foreign policy can become a form of image warfare in which perception is both the battlefield and the weapon.

ENDURING APPEAL

Jacksonianism thrives when the country experiences periods of fear or disillusionment. Economic insecurity, demographic changes, and rising global competition have generated a sense of vulnerability across various voting blocs in the United States. When citizens feel that elites have mismanaged crises or ceded national pride, as is being perceived in contemporary American politics, they turn towards leaders who promise immediate restoration.

This appeal also lies in the emotional clarity that the doctrine presents. It offers direction when politics seem chaotic, strength when people feel weak, and a sense of collective purpose when institutions are incapable of solving problems immediately. It transforms foreign policy into a moral drama that is more comprehensible than the labyrinth of global economics or diplomatic negotiations.

A foreign policy that is guided wholly by emotions and vibes risks drifting from strategic goals.

Many Americans would agree with the sentiment that the United States is in decline. The average American feels neglected and poor while China is on the cusp of prosperity; the average American has trusted too much in "experts" to deliver an immediate resolution to global catastrophes; and the average American feels modern leadership fails to deliver a win against foes and respect among allies.

During periods like this, Jacksonian rhetoric provides a comforting and simple narrative: the nation has lost its standing after the Cold War because it has been too restrained, too polite, and too trusting. The solution is not better diplomacy, but bolder action that is concise in aim and execution. This message resonates most powerfully during times of perceived national decline.

The tradition also persists because the strategic nature of it is simplistic in how it is portrayed. It divides the world into defenders and offenders, loyal friends and opportunistic states. Jacksonian prescriptions are straightforward in grand strategy: punish betrayal, reward loyalty, and instill fear in adversaries. This simplicity is energizing in a world that has become increasingly complex. Why agonize over decision-making when the framing is not that difficult to make out who is friend from foe?

The clarity can come at a price, however. Simple narratives that focus on short-term results obscure the nuances that long-term strategy requires. You can't tariff China into submission or hope that the Israel-Palestine conflict is resolved overnight; these issues require multifaceted solutions. A simplified strategic narrative encourages erratic behavior from the state enacting it, isolating the nation from allies and creating unnecessary escalation in the process. Can anyone really confirm that the airstrikes on Iranian nuclear sites worked? Did killing Soleimani resolve the fact that Iran still remains a source of state-sponsored terrorism? Have we gotten any closer to normalizing relations with North Korea? A foreign policy that is guided wholly by emotions and vibes risks drifting from strategic goals.

The narrative nonetheless endures because it scratches a psychological itch. It tells citizens that the nation's problems originate not from structural or complex forces but from insufficient resolve alone. It reassures Americans that renewal is possible through willpower alone. When that message is repeated often enough, it becomes a force in its own right, blinding citizens to other instruments of statecraft needed to conduct successful foreign policy.

THE ENDURING LOGIC OF JACKSONIANISM

The Jacksonian tradition reframes statecraft as a global contest of will in which perception is central. Reputation is a currency that requires attention, signaling, and sometimes forceful demonstration. To those who hold the tradition, the world is a hierarchy maintained with clear consequences; to Jacksonians, humiliation is the gravest strategic risk, and fear is the greatest reward to national honor.

Yet, stewardship of reputation is not the same as reflexive punishment. The modern world, which is interdependent, technologically and economically connected, and multipolar, penalizes rash escalation more severely than the early frontiers of America ever did. A strategy that treats honor as an end must also build mechanisms to translate visible acts into sustainable security. That requires institutions that can signal resolve without obligating endless commitments, narrative framing that renders measured steps decisive, and alliance frameworks that allow collective displays of resolve and strategic partnerships.

A nation that refuses to be humiliated becomes a nation others hesitate to test. The Jacksonian Doctrine reminds leaders that reputation matters just as much as available resources and numerical metrics. The harder task is to practice the Jacksonian Doctrine with prudence so dignity becomes a shield and not a shackle. Questioning whether this worldview can navigate a multipolar and complicated world is essential, yet its emotional force is undeniable. Jacksonianism will continue to shape American politics whenever citizens feel ignored, endangered, or disrespected. The doctrine endures because it speaks to a primal instinct that embodied Andrew Jackson's personal life and presidency: the belief that a nation that refuses humiliation cannot be ruled by fear. And the world remembers and respects nations that refuse to be humiliated.

The Autocrats Alliance

Why Putin and Xi Need Each Other And How the U.S. Should Respond

TIBOR NAGY

On the sidelines of the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing, Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping proudly announced a "no limits" partnership, stating in part that the "friendship between the two States has no limits, [and] there are no 'forbidden' areas of cooperation." A few weeks later, Russia would launch its massive attack on Ukraine, almost immediately testing the foundations of that "no limits" partnership.

TIBOR NAGY most recently served as acting Under Secretary of State for Management in the second President Donald Trump administration. He also served as Assistant Secretary of State for Africa in the first Trump administration after serving as Texas Tech's Vice Provost for International Affairs following a 30-year career as a U.S. Diplomat.

Illustration by Artificial Intelligence

How different this sentiment from 1969 when then Chinese leader Mao Zedong had to answer a difficult question regarding China's fundamental security: was China's major enemy the United States or the Soviet Union? That year Chinese and Soviet forces had fought bloody encounters on their 7,500 km border, and more Soviet troops were aligned against China than Western Europe. Mao decided then, that despite the two Communist giants' common stated ideology and hostility towards the West, the Soviets were the greater enemy. This led to Nixon's dramatic 1971 visit and 1979 normalization between China and the U.S., followed by a period of positive mutual engagement until the mid-2010s.

As for Russia, a great Winston Churchill quote offers true insight: "I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia. It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma: but perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interests." And how Russia's leaders, from the earliest Tsars to today's Putin, have defined "national interest" has been most consistent and disruptive to global peace and stability. Since Ivan the Terrible declared the "Tsardom of Russia" in 1547, its rulers have pursued three major goals to safeguard the nation and advance its interests: territorial expansion; seeking after warm water ports; and keeping its population under strict control. Russia's historic symbol is the two headed eagle – one looking West to Europe and the other East toward Asia. And while the majority of its people live on the European side, its rulers have always favored the autocratic practices of the East.

Today, we continue to see these historic trends play out in Russia's xenophobic policies. Armed with the world's largest nuclear arsenal, and blessed with unbounded natural resources, Putin's Russia nevertheless still lacks the self-confidence to be comfortable in its own skin. Its two plus year aggression against Ukraine is just the most recent example. What a difference it could have made if, after President Yeltsin opened the door to closer ties with the West, Putin had taken the nation through it, instead of slamming it shut, afraid that neighbors were coming to break in. Beyond saving hundreds of thousands of lives in Ukraine and Russia and preventing billions of dollars of damaged infrastructure, there would be no frozen conflicts in Georgia and Moldova, and the Baltic nations would not be fearing that they are the next victims of Russia's insatiable territorial appetite.

China's road to its present geopolitical ambitions is quite different from Russia's. In 1800, it is estimated that China had the world's largest economy, with about 33% of global GDP. This quickly diminished during China's "Century of Humiliation" (1839-1949), when it was exploited and invaded by Western powers and Japan. From the 1949 Communist takeover to its gradual opening to the world in the 1970s, China was insular, politically isolated and an economic disaster. Its chaotic policies like the "great leap forward" and cultural revolution induced famine, poverty, and social chaos, and its per capita GDP (1971) was a low $115.

How that has changed! With its spectacular industrialization, China now accounts for about 30% of global manufacturing – more than the next four nations combined – and is the largest trading partner for at least 120 nations. Rapid economic growth has also raised per capita GDP to almost $14,000 (2025 estimate). Military power has grown in parallel to its economic might,

with China expanding its navy and nuclear arsenal, and developing advanced capabilities in missiles, cyberwarfare, and space technology. Through careful planning and implementing, China has gained unparalleled control of strategic minerals vital for today's technology and dominates today's green economy through global leadership in producing solar cells, batteries, and electric vehicles. It has spent about $2.2 trillion on its global Belt and Road (BRI) in over 150 countries, tying ports, airports, and other infrastructure to Beijing. Overall, China now closely rivals the U.S. in its economic and military power and global influence.

While China's strategic objectives are quite different from Russia's, both are following the same approach: replacing the current post-World War II U.S.-built rules based global order with one which gives large and medium powers the freedom to exert their will in proportion to their capabilities. China's end goal is quite straightforward: to replace the U.S. as the world's 'hegemon' (a word China frequently uses) by dominating every global organization, global trade and finance, becoming the premiere military, space, and technology power, using its own currency as the world's reserve, and exercising its will however it wants. But, equally important for China is to preserve the power of the Communist Party; and by achieving global dominance, Xi believes the Party is secure.

Russia's end goal, meanwhile, is more limited in scope. Putin believes the dissolution of the Soviet Union was one of the 20th Century's greatest tragedies, and his intent is to return Russia to its rightful geostrategic role of dominating its periphery and having unhindered freedom of action in Europe. China and Russia also share a deep sense of historical grievances. China's goes back to the Century of Humiliation, while Russia blames the United States for the collapse of the Soviet Union and bringing NATO forces to Russia's doorstep. And both see the U.S. as standing in the way of achieving their goals.

CHINA'S PRESIDENT XI JINPING POSES AFTER DELIVERING HIS SPEECH AT THE UNESCO HEADQUARTERS IN PARIS ON MARCH 27, 2014. AFTER A DAY DEVOTED TO MULTI-BILLION-DOLLAR BUSINESS DEALS, CHINESE LEADER XI JINPING TRAINED HIS SIGHTS ON CULTURE AND HISTORY TODAY ON THE LAST DAY OF HIS LAVISH VISIT TO FRANCE. AFP PHOTO / POOL / CHRISTIAN HARTMANN (PHOTO CREDIT SHOULD READ CHRISTIAN HARTMANN/AFP/GETTY IMAGES)

But even their methods of bumping the U.S. off its pinnacle are quite different. China is fundamentally a status quo power, because it benefits tremendously from the current global system. It prefers to operate in a stable world since it controls most global supply chains which operate much better in a conflict-free environment. So, its approach is twofold: use current international institutions to its advantage, while also building parallel systems that it dominates. This means placing Chinese nationals in key positions in international organizations and using its influence to press other nations to advance Chinese goals through those institutions (and whenever possible block U.S. candidates and goals).

At the same time China has been energetically promoting the development of new organizations/institutions where it can play a dominant role. A prime example is the BRICS – a collection of major emerging economies – which has grown from its 2009 founding by five nations, to 11 countries representing about 40% of the global economy. Others include the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (for Eurasian nations), the Asian Infrastructure Development Bank, and the New Development Bank (for the BRICS). More recently, China established the International Organization of Mediation to serve as a competitor to the long-established Hague-based International Court of Justice and Permanent Court of Arbitration.

A clear advantage China has over the West is the ability to direct its trade, investment, and commerce to serve the national interest, not what makes business sense for individual firms. I saw this first-hand when I served as Assistant Secretary of State for Africa (2018-2021) and saw Chinese companies everywhere engaged in activities which made little business sense but advanced China's overall interests. I was constantly frustrated when people pointed to new Chinese-built stadiums and asked, "so what has America built?" It's difficult to explain that there would be many fewer people to fill the stadium if not for America's generosity in providing HIV/AIDS medicines. In Uganda, while meeting with the leadership, I was told: "Uganda has the perfect arrangement, China builds our infrastructure while America takes care of our health." I pointed out that Uganda pays China to build infrastructure, while America's taxpayers provide $600 million annually to support Uganda's health system!

While China is a status quo power carefully advancing its goal of global domination but avoiding direct conflicts, uncertain situations, and unpredictable outcomes, Russia is just the opposite. Moscow ignores global norms and is willing to stir up trouble wherever and whenever opportunities arise. This is evident with its brazen invasion of Ukraine and willingness to conduct hybrid warfare against the West, its maintaining frozen conflicts around the former Soviet sphere, and is unhesitant in getting involved in various African conflicts where it can block U.S. and other western interests. Death, destruction, and horrifying violence matter little to Putin as long as he perceives a positive outcome for Russia or wealth for his cronies.

Given the different interests of each power, one has to ask how truly solid is the "no limits" partnership. For now, unfortunately it is quite firm, based on the principle of the "enemy of my enemy is my friend," as well as their common embrace of autocratic governance, antipathy toward democracy, and the fact that they have few other allies. In practical terms, beyond China

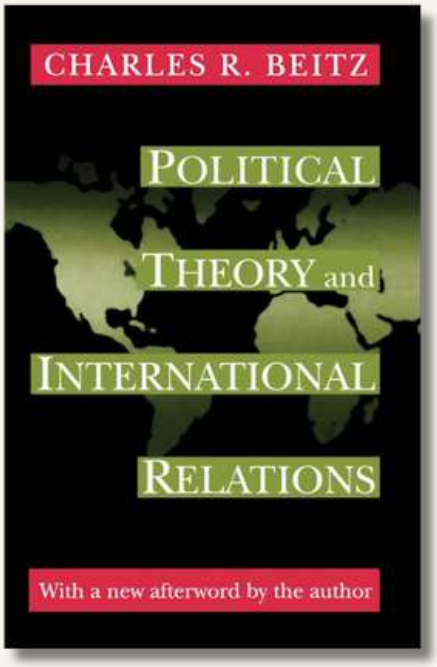
and Russia's close alliance, there is only North Korea as a sidekick, with a few additional "fellow travelers" – Iran, Yemen, Venezuela, Cuba, Nicaragua – who are more of a hindrance than benefit. And even with North Korea, China and Russia have very different approaches. China needs North Korea as a stable buffer and is horrified at the possibility of a nuclear conflagration on the Korean peninsula, while Russia doesn't care about North Korean provocations as long as it distracts the U.S.

Meanwhile, the U.S. has an elaborate system of alliances cultivated over 80 years, with new ones added in recent years specifically in response to Chinese adventurism, i.e., Australia/United Kingdom/U.S. (AUKUS); India, Australia, Japan, U.S. (The Quad); and Japan, South Korea, U.S. As far as non-allied nations are concerned, especially those in the vicinity of China, most prefer stable relations with both China and the U.S. While China is the major trading partner for most, and can exert the greatest economic pressure, these nations are also keen to have the U.S. as a counterbalance to prevent being totally dominated by Beijing.

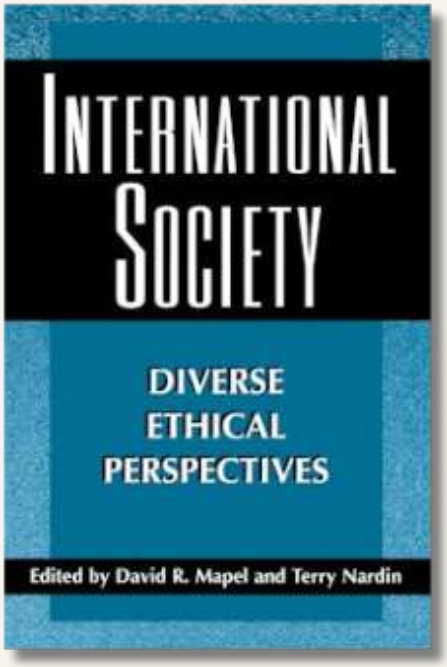
Another factor which is obvious is that Russia is now very much the junior partner in the Moscow-Beijing axis and has less and less to offer China.

Another important and proven maxim in this equation: "geography is history." Russia and China can't do anything about their location – with Russia stretching over 11 time zones and bordering 14 countries and China also bordering 14. And every neighbor has, is, or can in the future, present problems. As mentioned above, China and Russia even have competing interests in North Korea, their closest common ally. At some point in the not-too-distant future, they will no doubt have a falling-out over Central Asia, once firmly in Russia's sphere of influence, but now rapidly shifting toward Beijing. Given Russia's worldview, it is difficult to imagine Russia placidly allowing itself to be displaced in countries once part of the Soviet Union. Another factor which is obvious is that Russia is now very much the junior partner in the Moscow-Beijing axis and has less and less to offer China. China's geopolitical moves are not abrupt or haphazard but carefully calculated. And who knows at what point President Xi may decide that it's no longer in China's interest to have a "no limits" partnership with Putin.

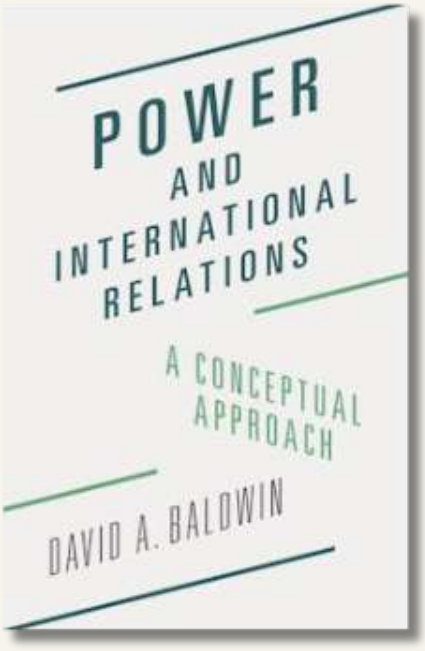
But any fraying is in the future, and the U.S. cannot simply wait for the eventual falling-out. Even without Russia at its side, China presents a long-term formidable global challenge to America's safety, security, and economic well-being. So, in calculating a geostrategic response, the U.S. needs to consider Russia's adventurism as a shorter-term threat, while focusing on China as the single global power competitor for future decades. It's a complicated equation because the U.S. needs to act preventively and reactively in foreign and domestic policy. But America's weakness here is that with its separation of powers and capitalist system, U.S. leaders cannot simply and quickly command the resources of the nation and direct how to face our adversaries' threats. And the policies of one U.S. administration can be quickly changed when a new President is elected.



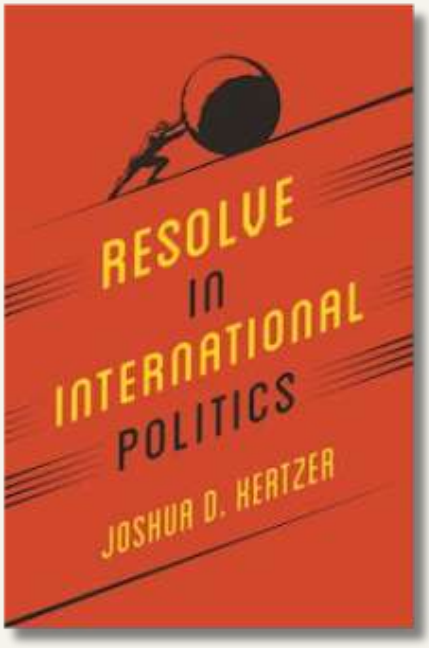
"*Political Theory and International Relations* is a fine piece of philosophical criticism and reconstruction that few established philosophers could have written.... This is a first-rate book on an issue as fundamental as it is neglected."—Henry Shue, *Ethics*



"The work edited by Mapel and Nardin comprises sophisticated philosophical and legal analyses of the concept of 'international society' that is often associated with 'the English school' in International Relations.... A useful and highly topical corrective to the 'rogue states doctrine' promulgated by the United States!"—*NOD and Conversion*



"For the last forty-five years, David Baldwin has been one of the leading theorists of the concept of power in international relations. His many contributions are brought together in this important book. Magically, this is not old wine offered in a new bottle but a precious Spätlese that will delight all oeno- and bibliophiles."—Peter J. Katzenstein, Cornell University



"Resolve is central to much international relations theorizing, but all too often is underanalyzed. Not in this book. Kertzer develops and tests the foundations of resolve by combining the characteristics of the actor and the situation. Using experiments and historical data, *Resolve in International Politics* moves us a big step forward."—Robert Jervis, Columbia University

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Over the past several years—beginning with the first Trump administration, continuing through Biden, and now entering Trump 2.0—the United States has finally grasped the full scale of China's global ambitions. Russia's assault on Ukraine similarly exposed Putin's willingness to overturn the rules-based order, forcing Washington and its allies to confront a harsher strategic reality. In this environment, the U.S. needs a renewed national consensus on how to meet the challenge posed by the China–Russia axis. That requires not a list of disconnected initiatives, but a coherent strategy: revitalizing alliances that drifted into complacency after the Cold War, pushing European partners to rebuild atrophied militaries, and engaging far more assertively in international institutions where Beijing and Moscow have sought to accumulate influence. It also means working closely with allies to restructure global supply chains that China has long monopolized—especially in critical minerals—and using diplomatic weight to prevent Russia and China from weaponizing global commerce and multilateral governance.

Yet meeting this dual challenge will also demand a different kind of competition—economic, technological, and informational at once. Washington and its partners must coordinate with the private sector to compete in global energy and mineral development, enforce strict controls on advanced technologies with military applications, and defend freedom of navigation and overflight wherever Beijing or Moscow test the boundaries of international law. At the same time, the U.S. must regain the public-diplomacy instincts it honed during the Cold War: exposing China's and Russia's coercive practices, countering hybrid-warfare tactics, and presenting a more compelling vision of what the West offers to the developing world. Ultimately, confronting the China–Russia axis will require not only sharper policies but also the revival of the industrial and strategic foundations—shipbuilding among them—that once underwrote Western power.

Today, the world is literally at a crossroads with several divergent paths. The rockiest path leads to a world where China becomes the world's global power and exerts control over global economics, sets all the rules, and dominates future technologies, including space exploration. The U.S. would be relegated to a position akin to what Britain or France occupy today. Another road would lead to the type of multipolar world order China and Russia favor – with the major powers, including the U.S., dominating their regions, and middle powers, such as Türkiye or Brazil, also having significant leverage in their immediate neighborhoods. This would mimic the pre-World War One global order and would be characterized by constant instability and tensions as powers rub up against each other. The best outcome would be the evolution of the post-World War Two rules-based international order, updated to reflect today's geopolitical and technological realities. It would require major reforms to international organizations and treaties, and consensus from major powers and blocs (e.g., EU, AU) in the process and outcome – unfortunately not a realistic scenario. So, the most practical approach to dealing with the autocrats is to apply the suggested steps above until there is a dramatic internal change in China and Russia, or the two "no limit" partners figure out that their true interests lie elsewhere.

The Ways China Wins

China's Post-Ideological Strategy of Power

CHRISTOPHER JINHE YANG

For three decades after the Cold War, the liberal imagination rested on a deceptively simple narrative: modernization would yield prosperity; prosperity would generate a middle class; and the middle class, armed with education and rising expectations, would inevitably demand democratic institutions. Markets would liberalize politics, globalization would universalize norms, and history itself would bend toward freedom. This teleology shaped Western strategy long after its assumptions had begun to fray. Integrating China into global markets was expected not only to enrich it but to liberalize it. Economic openness was presumed to be incompatible with one-party rule.

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Illustration by Artificial Intelligence

China's rise has shattered that storyline. Four decades of rapid development—lifting hundreds of millions from poverty, building world-class infrastructure, and becoming a central node in global supply chains—have produced neither political liberalization nor ideological convergence with the West. Instead, China has demonstrated that a modern economy can flourish under an adaptive, technocratic, and increasingly centralized authoritarian state. Its middle class has expanded without demanding systemic reform; its civil society has grown without crystallizing into organized opposition; and its governance capacity has strengthened without diluting the primacy of the Party. China is not simply an exception to modernization theory—it is its refutation.

The consequence is not just an empirical surprise but an ideological rupture. If economic development does not require democratization, then liberalism loses its claim to historical inevitability. If a state can integrate deeply into global markets while rejecting the normative architecture of the liberal order, then Western leadership becomes contingent rather than self-evident. And if China continues to rise without internalizing liberal norms, the central question of the twenty-first century becomes unavoidable: What does power look like after ideology?

China's answer is subtle but profound. It does not seek global domination in the Cold War sense, nor does it promote a universal doctrine meant to supplant liberalism. Instead, China advances a vision of world order where legitimacy is measured not by values but by performance; where sovereignty eclipses rights; where stability outweighs participation; and where states are judged by their capacity to deliver outcomes rather than conform to moral standards set elsewhere. In this emerging landscape, compliance replaces conversion as the currency of influence.

China wins, in other words, not by persuading the world to become more like itself, but by demonstrating that the world does not need to be like the West. It wins by making Western leadership unnecessary—by constructing a global environment in which liberal norms no longer command automatic deference, and in which alternative models of governance can coexist without apology. In the post-liberal international order now taking shape, victory is no longer defined by the spread of values—it is defined by the erosion of their gravitational pull.

THE MYTH OF UNIVERSAL DEMOCRACY

China's challenge to the liberal order does not take the form of an ideological crusade or a revolutionary blueprint; instead, it advances a more fundamental proposition: that governance is culturally embedded and historically contingent, not a universal science with a single normative destination. Against the liberal assumption that democracy represents the culmination of political development, China asserts the legitimacy of "plural modernities"—multiple pathways to prosperity, each shaped by civilizational heritage, institutional memory, and developmental priorities. In this view, liberalism is not the telos of modernization but one option among many, and not necessarily the most effective for all societies.

At Beijing's 2019 Conference on Dialogue of Asian Civilizations, Xi Jinping called for "civilization self-confidence" and rejected the notion that one political system or cultural model should become the sole benchmark of progress. The invocation of China as a "civilizational state" serves a dual purpose: it elevates Chinese governance as the product of millennia of administrative tradition—meritocracy, hierarchy, and moral authority—while simultaneously insulating it from external judgment. If China embodies a distinct civilizational logic, then evaluations grounded in Western political theory are not merely misplaced; they are epistemologically invalid.

Crucially, China wields this civilizational narrative with strategic ambiguity. It speaks the language of globalization—championing trade openness, South–South cooperation, and climate collaboration—yet its political discourse remains firmly sovereignty-first, positioning China as a non-aligned counterweight to Western interventionism. This dual posture allows Beijing to appear constructive in global governance while resisting any pressure to internalize liberal norms. China is therefore both globalist and anti-universalist, outward-facing but normatively insulated—a combination that gives it extraordinary room to maneuver.

At the core of this post-liberal vision lies the primacy of regime security. The legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party is built not on electoral representation but on the delivery of tangible outcomes: growth, order, predictability, and national rejuvenation. Since the turbulence of the late twentieth century—from the Cultural Revolution to the 1989 protests—the CCP has reconstituted itself as an adaptive authoritarian state. Administrative reforms professionalized governance, technocratic meritocracy elevated expertise, and the post-2013 anti-corruption campaign recentralized authority under a disciplined political hierarchy. Rather than liberalizing, China innovated within authoritarianism, creating a system that is simultaneously flexible and controlled.

Within this framework, rights become conditional upon stability, not inherent constraints on state power. Political participation is not a mechanism for contesting authority but a channel for expressing grievances that the state, in turn, manages. Conflict is preempted, not aggregated through elections. Social harmony is a political objective, not a byproduct of pluralism. What emerges is a performance-based model of legitimacy that claims superiority not on ideological grounds but on administrative efficacy. Liberalism may prioritize rights; China prioritizes results.

This governance logic, once viewed as peculiar to China, increasingly resonates across the Global South. In countries grappling with inequality, polarization, urban insecurity, or chronic institutional weakness, the appeal of "normless stability" has grown. Leaders facing legitimacy crises or governance gridlock often see in China a model that promises order without the unpredictability of electoral politics. China does not ask its partners to adopt its ideology; it offers a template for "effective modernity" in which development can proceed without political liberalization.

The COVID-19 pandemic amplified this dynamic. In the early months, when China mobilized its administrative machinery with dramatic speed while the United States and parts of Europe struggled to contain the virus, Beijing

promoted a narrative of systemic competence. State media contrasted China's coordinated response with what it portrayed as Western disarray—partisan conflict, institutional paralysis, and inconsistent public health measures. Though this narrative later encountered challenges as China faced its own pandemic complications, the initial contrast left a lasting impression in many capitals: Chinese governance might be restrictive, but it delivers.

TRAVELERS WALK PAST AN ALIBABA CLOUD ADVERTISEMENT AT SHENZHEN BAO'AN INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT IN SHENZHEN, CHINA, ON TUESDAY, OCT. 7, 2025. IN THE MOST RECENT QUARTER, ALIBABA GROUP HOLDING LTD. REPORTED TRIPLE-DIGIT GROWTH IN ITS AI-RELATED PRODUCTS. PHOTOGRAPHER: QILAI SHEN/BLOOMBERG VIA GETTY IMAGES

Countries such as Rwanda, Ethiopia (prior to the civil war), Singapore, and several Gulf states have openly praised aspects of China's governance capacity: long-term planning horizons, infrastructure-driven development, rapid administrative mobilization, and the insulation of policy from electoral volatility. Even in some Western democracies, think tanks and policymakers have scrutinized elements of Chinese state capacity—from industrial policy to technological deployment—as potential correctives to their own governance shortcomings.

The global diffusion of admiration for China's administrative model does not imply convergence toward authoritarianism. Rather, it demonstrates a broader erosion of confidence in liberal democracy's ability to solve contemporary problems. As political gridlock, populism, and social fragmentation challenge the functionality of democratic systems, China positions itself as the exemplar of an alternative: a government that promises competence without contestation, development without disorder, modernity without liberalism.

In this post-liberal vision, sovereignty and stability replace rights and representation as the cornerstones of political legitimacy. China does not seek to universalize its model, but it does seek to delegitimize the presumption that liberalism is universal. That shift—philosophical, gradual, and deeply consequential—forms the ideological foundation for China's rise as a post-liberal superpower.

China's rise has not relied on territorial expansion or ideological proselytizing. Instead, it grows through a quieter set of instruments that reshape incentives, dependencies, and institutional environments far beyond its borders. Beijing's approach is best understood not as an attempt to impose a new world order, but to reconfigure the architecture of globalization so that states increasingly operate within systems China finances, builds, or influences. These tools allow China to win without commanding, to steer outcomes without issuing directives, and to make alignment with its interests a structural condition rather than a political choice.

This strategy is most visible in the transformation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Initially branded as an ambitious connectivity project linking Asia, Africa, and Europe, BRI has entered a second phase—one marked less by rapid expansion and more by strategic entrenchment. More than 150 countries have joined, but the significance today lies not in the number of participants, but in the durability of the ties the initiative creates. Chinese firms design, finance, and build infrastructure that many developing economies desperately need; yet these projects also embed long-term leverage in ways that outlast political cycles.

Sri Lanka illustrates how this leverage evolves over time. After the country's 2022 sovereign default, Colombo's economic survival depended on the cooperation of its major creditors, especially China Exim Bank and China Development Bank. Throughout 2023 and 2024, debt restructuring negotiations unfolded in parallel with IMF talks, underscoring China's pivotal position in determining the pace and shape of Sri Lanka's recovery. By 2025, Sri Lanka had renegotiated key obligations with Japan and other lenders, but China's restructuring terms remained the linchpin for restoring macroeconomic stability. The process revealed not a predatory "trap," as Western commentators sometimes claim, but a more nuanced reality: China becomes indispensable because the alternatives are limited, and because BRI loans are often intertwined with critical national assets.

The symbolic center of this entanglement remains Hambantota Port, leased to China for 99 years after Sri Lanka struggled to service its loans. Hambantota is less a military outpost than a geopolitical reminder: infrastructure is not merely concrete and steel, but a channel of influence that endures long after construction ends. The risks of such dependence were amplified in 2025, when Cyclone Ditwah caused severe flooding along the southern coast. Engineers and environmental groups argued that a Chinese-built expressway segment—constructed by filling wetlands rather than elevating the roadway—had worsened the disaster by obstructing natural drainage routes. Whether or not this design choice was solely responsible, the episode highlighted how infrastructure decisions made under conditions of financial pressure or limited oversight can impose long-term externalities on recipient states, while insulating lenders and builders from accountability.

Infrastructure is not merely concrete and steel, but a channel of influence that endures long after construction ends.

These dynamics reveal a broader truth: BRI works not because China coerces governments, but because the infrastructure it provides becomes too embedded to unwind. Highways require Chinese maintenance; ports run on Chinese standards; energy grids depend on Chinese parts. Refinancing becomes a recurring negotiation, one in which Beijing holds both technical knowledge and financial leverage. China is not just a creditor; it is simultaneously planner, builder, operator, and data custodian. In this way, connectivity becomes a form of power—quiet, cumulative, and difficult to escape.

A similar logic governs China's digital influence. If physical infrastructure locks countries into China's economic orbit, digital infrastructure binds them into its governance ecosystem. Under the Digital Silk Road, Chinese firms such as Huawei and ZTE have built 5G networks, fiber-optic cables, data centers, and "smart city" platforms across Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. These systems promise efficiency and modernization, but they also reshape relationships between state authorities and their populations. And Serbia provides one of the most striking examples.

Over the past decade, Belgrade has installed thousands of Huawei high-definition cameras equipped with facial recognition technologies as part of a "Safe City" initiative. What began as a public security project has expanded into a national surveillance infrastructure deeply enmeshed with the country's internal security apparatus. Chinese cloud services and engineers continue to maintain the system, making Serbia reliant not just on Chinese hardware but on Chinese-administered data architecture. Similar arrangements exist in Kenya, Ecuador, Pakistan, Laos, and the Gulf states. In each case, the technology arrives bundled with an implicit philosophy: that effective governance is inseparable from pervasive monitoring and algorithmic management.

This export of digital authoritarianism is often subtle. China does not demand that other governments adopt its political model; rather, it provides tools that make certain governance choices easier and others unnecessary. Leaders facing rising crime, protest movements, or political fragmentation find in Chinese technologies an expedient solution—one that enhances control without requiring institutional reform. As these systems spread, they normalize the idea that state power should be data-driven, preventive, and unencumbered by the privacy norms that define liberal democracies. The technology embeds the logic; the logic reshapes the state.

China's influence also extends into the realm of international institutions, where Beijing has mastered the art of participating without conforming. In organizations like the UN Human Rights Council, China has championed language emphasizing "mutually beneficial cooperation," "development rights," and the de-politicization of human rights critique. These formulations do not reject human rights outright; they redefine them in ways that privilege sovereignty and economic development over individual protections. In doing so, China shifts the normative baseline from liberal universalism to a flexible, context-bound framework more compatible with authoritarian governance. At the World Health Organization and World Trade Organization, Beijing's strategy is more procedural than doctrinal. China rarely confronts institutions

directly; instead, it works to dilute norms, reinterpret rules, and navigate regulatory gaps that allow state-led capitalism and opaque governance to coexist with formal commitments to multilateralism. The goal is not to dismantle these institutions but to de-center Western influence within them.

Simultaneously, China has constructed alternative institutions that offer states options beyond the Western-led order. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, now with more than 100 members, provides development financing with fewer political conditions than the World Bank or IMF. The transformation of BRICS into BRICS+ in 2023–2024 expanded the grouping to include Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates, while Argentina's withdrawal and Saudi Arabia's hesitation revealed the geopolitical calculations states must make when choosing between competing frameworks of international cooperation. The addition of "partnership countries" such as Indonesia, Nigeria, Türkiye, and Vietnam widened BRICS into a multi-layered constellation where China's economic gravity is often decisive.

These institutional strategies are reinforced by a sophisticated narrative engine. Beijing consistently portrays liberalism as chaotic, self-undermining, and hypocritical. The polarization of American politics, the turmoil of Brexit, and the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol serve as recurring symbols of democratic dysfunction. China's tightly coordinated pandemic response—especially in the early months—was contrasted with Western institutional paralysis to argue that liberal systems are ill-suited for crises requiring discipline and centralized action. In this narrative, sovereignty becomes a moral principle, and criticism from the West becomes a form of imperial presumption.

Nothing exemplifies this narrative confidence more vividly than the 2023 Saudi–Iran rapprochement brokered in Beijing. The agreement did not resolve deep structural tensions in the region, but it signaled that China could mediate outcomes where the United States lacked credibility, bandwidth, or leverage. By facilitating dialogue between two longstanding rivals, China presented itself as a stabilizing force—a state capable of shaping regional security dynamics without military alliances or coercive power.

Across these domains, China's influence is cumulative and systemic. Infrastructure binds, technology governs, institutions legitimize, and narratives persuade. None of these tools alone remake the international order. But together, they cultivate a world increasingly shaped by Chinese preferences—not through conquest, but through the quiet consolidation of interdependence and the normalization of a post-liberal political logic.

AMERICA'S CRISIS, CHINA'S OPENING

China's rise has been driven by its own strategic creativity, but it has also been made easier by something more basic: the liberal order is suffering a crisis of confidence. For decades, the strength of that order rested not only on American power but on a shared belief that the United States offered a compelling vision of political and economic modernity. That belief has thinned. As China has steadily refined its tools of influence, the United States

has struggled to project a version of governance that looks stable, functional, or morally coherent to much of the world. China's ascent, in other words, is as much about American retreat as it is about Chinese ambition.

Nothing exposed this vulnerability more starkly than the deepening fracture within the United States itself. Political divisions that once simmered have boiled over into open hostility, making bipartisan governance rare and long-term policymaking almost impossible. The 2020 election—and the shocking scenes of January 6 that followed—showed foreign audiences something they had never expected to see from the world's self-proclaimed model of democracy: institutions buckling under the weight of domestic mistrust. For China, this was more than a propaganda victory. It allowed Beijing to point, with growing confidence, to the instability of liberal democracy and present its own system as steadier and more reliable. For leaders abroad grappling with unrest or stagnation at home, America's turmoil made China's emphasis on continuity and control appear newly compelling.

Infrastructure is not merely concrete and steel, but a channel of influence that endures long after construction ends.

Europe's struggles have deepened this impression. The European Union—once celebrated as the world's most ambitious political experiment—has spent the last decade wrestling with crises that exposed its internal fragility. The migration surge, disputes over austerity and fiscal governance, and high-profile cases of democratic backsliding have all chipped away at Europe's moral authority. Brexit made the tension between national sovereignty and supranational governance painfully visible. Meanwhile, the rise of far-right and illiberal parties across the continent has caused many outside observers to wonder whether the West can still uphold the democratic ideals it claims to defend. If the guardians of the liberal order seem unable to keep their own houses in order, how can they claim the right to set global standards?

This erosion of domestic credibility has created a parallel crisis in foreign policy. For generations, Washington justified its global role by invoking the defense of democracy and human rights. Yet the United States has long maintained close partnerships with authoritarian states—Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE—whose practices run directly counter to the values America espouses. During the Cold War, such contradictions were tolerated. In today's world of social media transparency and a more assertive Global South, they are harder to explain away. When U.S. officials criticize China's governance model, many governments quietly ask: Why should we accept lectures from a country that does not apply its own principles consistently?

China has learned to turn this skepticism into a diplomatic advantage. By positioning itself as a champion of sovereignty and non-interference, Beijing offers something Western powers often do not: political respect without political conditions. For leaders facing domestic insecurity—whether from protests, corruption scandals, or economic stagnation—Western demands for reform can feel like existential threats. China offers a different deal: support without judgment, investment without strings. Even when Chinese financing carries long-term risks, the short-term relief can be irresistible. Beijing steps in

where Western governments hesitate or impose conditions, and in doing so fills a vacuum the United States helped create.

This pattern is most visible in the Global South. Instead of choosing sides between Beijing and Washington, many states—India, Brazil, South Africa, Indonesia, Mexico—have embraced strategic non-alignment. They do not necessarily want China to lead, but they value China's presence as leverage. The simple fact that a second major power exists gives them bargaining power they lacked in the unipolar era. The United States, accustomed to being the default partner, now finds that its influence must be earned.

Compounding this shift are America's own strategic inconsistencies. U.S. administrations oscillate between labeling China a competitor, a rival, or a potential partner. Allies and adversaries alike struggle to understand Washington's long-term intentions. The result is a foreign policy that often seems reactive, moralizing in language but transactional in practice. Against this backdrop, China's slower, steadier, and more predictable diplomacy can appear, to many developing nations, less volatile and more dependable.

Taken together, these trends create a geopolitical landscape in which China does not need to defeat the United States; it only needs to outlast the liberal order's growing incoherence. Beijing advances not because it is omnipotent, but because the West repeatedly retreats from the principles and responsibilities that once anchored its global leadership. Where the United States hesitates, China steps forward. Where the liberal order fractures, China offers an alternative. In that space, China's model of post-liberal governance becomes not a universal aspiration, but a workable option.

A STAFF MEMBER ADJUSTS AN AMERICAN FLAG BEFORE THE OPENING SESSION OF THE US AND CHINA STRATEGIC AND ECONOMIC DIALOGUE AT THE US DEPARTMENT OF STATE JULY 10, 2013 IN WASHINGTON, DC. OFFICIALS FROM THE UNITED STATES AND CHINA ARE MEETING IN WASHINGTON FOR THE 5TH US AND CHINA STRATEGIC AND ECONOMIC DIALOGUE. AFP PHOTO/BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI (PHOTO BY BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI / AFP) (PHOTO BY BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES)

China's rise, then, cannot be separated from the West's crisis of identity and purpose. As the United States and Europe wrestle with internal polarization, strategic drift, and eroding moral authority, China gains more room to shape the norms and expectations of international life. It wins not because America is defeated, but because America has—for now—lost the clarity, confidence, and coherence that once made its leadership seem inevitable.

WHAT VICTORY LOOKS LIKE FOR CHINA

China's rise is often described as a challenge to the liberal international order, but its ambition is not to replace that order with a fully articulated alternative. Beijing is not constructing a new ideological blueprint, nor does it seek global conversion to a Chinese political model. Rather, China is engaged in something more subtle and transformative: the gradual redefinition of the rules, norms, and expectations that govern international behavior. It does not ask the world to admire it—only to accept a world in which Beijing's preferences must be considered. Victory, in China's view, lies not in dominance but in normalization: a world that no longer presumes liberalism to be the default measure of legitimacy.

This shift begins with a reorientation of what constitutes political authority. In the liberal tradition, legitimacy rests on procedural foundations—free elections, individual rights, and adherence to universal norms. China offers a starkly different premise: that legitimacy derives from effective governance, national stability, and developmental delivery. In this framework, sovereignty becomes not only a legal shield but a moral imperative. States must be free to govern according to their historical conditions and cultural preferences, unencumbered by external judgment. When Beijing promotes the language of "mutual respect," "non-interference," or "win-win cooperation," it is not uttering diplomatic bromides; it is advancing a paradigm in which political diversity is accepted and liberal convergence is neither expected nor desirable.

The institutional implications of this vision reverberate far beyond Beijing. China does not oppose multilateral institutions; it reinterprets them. At the United Nations, Chinese diplomats have worked diligently to insert concepts such as "development-centered human rights" and "mutually beneficial cooperation" into official resolutions. These terms do not dismantle the human rights framework outright, but they decouple it from liberal assumptions by elevating economic development and state sovereignty as equally valid metrics of political progress. In effect, China shifts the axis of legitimacy from universal rights to context-dependent performance—an adjustment that resonates with many governments in the Global South, where the liberal rights agenda is often viewed as intrusive or politically destabilizing.

The economic domain reflects a similar pattern of reframing. The Bretton Woods institutions, born of a 20th-century American vision, once epitomized a world in which development was inseparable from governance reform. China's initiatives present an alternative. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank offers development financing without political conditions; the Belt and Road Initiative provides long-term economic partnerships without governance oversight. Even China's trade diplomacy—whether through the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership or bilateral agreements across Africa and Latin America—advances the idea that global integration can proceed without liberalization. Through these mechanisms, China normalizes a form of globalization that is open commercially but closed politically.

The evolution of BRICS into a broader geopolitical grouping demonstrates how this normalization manifests in practice. The expansion of BRICS in 2023–2024 brought Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the UAE into a consortium that already included some of the world's largest emerging economies. Although the bloc remains heterogeneous and its internal cohesion uneven, its very growth signals a quiet rebellion against Western institutional dominance. BRICS does not seek to become a unified alternative to the G7; it seeks to dilute the idea that any single set of norms or institutions should define global governance. Countries like Indonesia, Nigeria, Türkiye, and Vietnam—now recognized as "partner states"—find in BRICS a space where they can negotiate economic cooperation and political coordination without the normative constraints attached to Western alliances. What emerges is not a rival order, but a pluralized order—one in which China's institutional presence is unavoidable.

China's vision extends beyond institutions to the broader concept of multipolarity. In Western discourse, multipolarity connotes a redistribution of power among several major states. But for Beijing, multipolarity is not simply about balancing the United States; it is about diffusing authority across regions and platforms in ways that reduce the ability of any single actor to impose universal standards. A fragmented system benefits China by elevating the value of bilateral ties, economic dependency, and issue-specific cooperation. In such an environment, China does not need to lead every institution or dominate every domain; it only needs to ensure that no system exists in which it must conform to norms it did not help define.

The consequences of this shift are far-reaching. In a world where sovereignty and performance outweigh rights and representation, criticism of authoritarian practices becomes diplomatically costly. Countries deeply embedded in Chinese supply chains—whether through solar panels, electric vehicles, telecommunications equipment, or rare-earth minerals—are reluctant to jeopardize these dependencies for the sake of abstract principles. States that rely on Chinese financing or digital infrastructure may face implicit constraints on foreign policy choices. Even U.S. allies find themselves subtly adjusting their positions to avoid unnecessary friction with Beijing. China does not demand alignment; the structure of global interconnectedness nudges it into being.

This is what Chinese victory looks like: not ideological conversion, territorial expansion, or global hegemony, but the erosion of liberalism's gravitational pull. As China embeds itself in the material, digital, institutional, and normative systems that shape global behavior, it ensures that its preferences must always be considered—whether or not they are embraced. The world does not have to become Chinese; it only has to become less liberal for China to succeed.

In this sense, victory is not a destination but a condition: a world in which China can rise unconstrained, govern on its own terms, and engage internationally without ideological scrutiny. That victory is already taking shape—not because China has overtaken the West, but because the West's capacity to define the terms of global order is steadily diminishing.

POWER WITHOUT LEADERSHIP

China's rise marks a profound shift in the architecture of global order—one that cannot be understood through the familiar lexicon of competition, containment, or ideological struggle. Beijing has not sought to replace liberalism with a new universal doctrine. It has not attempted to export revolution or impose its model on unwilling states. Its ambition has been quieter and, in many ways, more transformative: to build a world in which its system can thrive without external pressure, moral judgment, or structural disadvantage. In doing so, China has redefined what it means to win in international politics.

The tools of this victory—connectivity, technology, institutional reinterpretation, and narrative discipline—work not by conquering territory but by shaping the pathways through which states pursue development and security. Infrastructure binds economies to Beijing; digital networks entangle political authority with Chinese technology; multilateral participation dilutes norms the West once considered universal; and diplomatic storytelling recasts stability as a higher virtue than freedom. China's success lies not in overturning the liberal order but in making it increasingly irrelevant to those seeking growth without political upheaval.

Yet the deeper reason for China's ascendancy is not found in Beijing, but in Washington and Brussels. As Western democracies grapple with polarization, incoherent strategies, and eroding faith in their own institutions, the normative confidence that once animated the liberal project has weakened. The world has not turned against liberalism; it has simply watched the West lose faith in the narrative that sustained its global leadership. Into that vacuum, China offers not a superior ideology, but a workable alternative at a moment when many states feel unserved by the existing order.

If the twenty-first century represents a new ideological moment, it is one defined by the retreat of ideology itself. China's rise does not herald the triumph of authoritarianism; it heralds the normalization of political pluralism in which liberalism is no longer the assumed horizon of modernity. The quiet triumph of post-ideological power lies precisely in this shift: a world where China does not need to lead for the West to lose its monopoly on what leadership means.

The question is no longer whether China can reshape global order. It is whether the West can rediscover the conviction that once allowed it to define that order at all.

Putin's Unfinished Business with America

Why the Cold War Never Ended in the Kremlin

JACOB BOSEN

The fall of the Soviet Union still lingers as a disaster in the minds of the Russian elite. The vast communist empire sought to spread its influence and power throughout the world. Creating an ideological battle against the free world, the Soviets used coercion and manipulation to achieve their goals. Comprehensive measures taken by the United States and the West to speed up the collapse of the Soviet system led to its ultimate demise. 1991 saw a world of transformation—the fall of what President Reagan described as the "Evil Empire." Along with its fall, embarrassment and the yearning for revenge soon followed as a goal of the Russian leadership.

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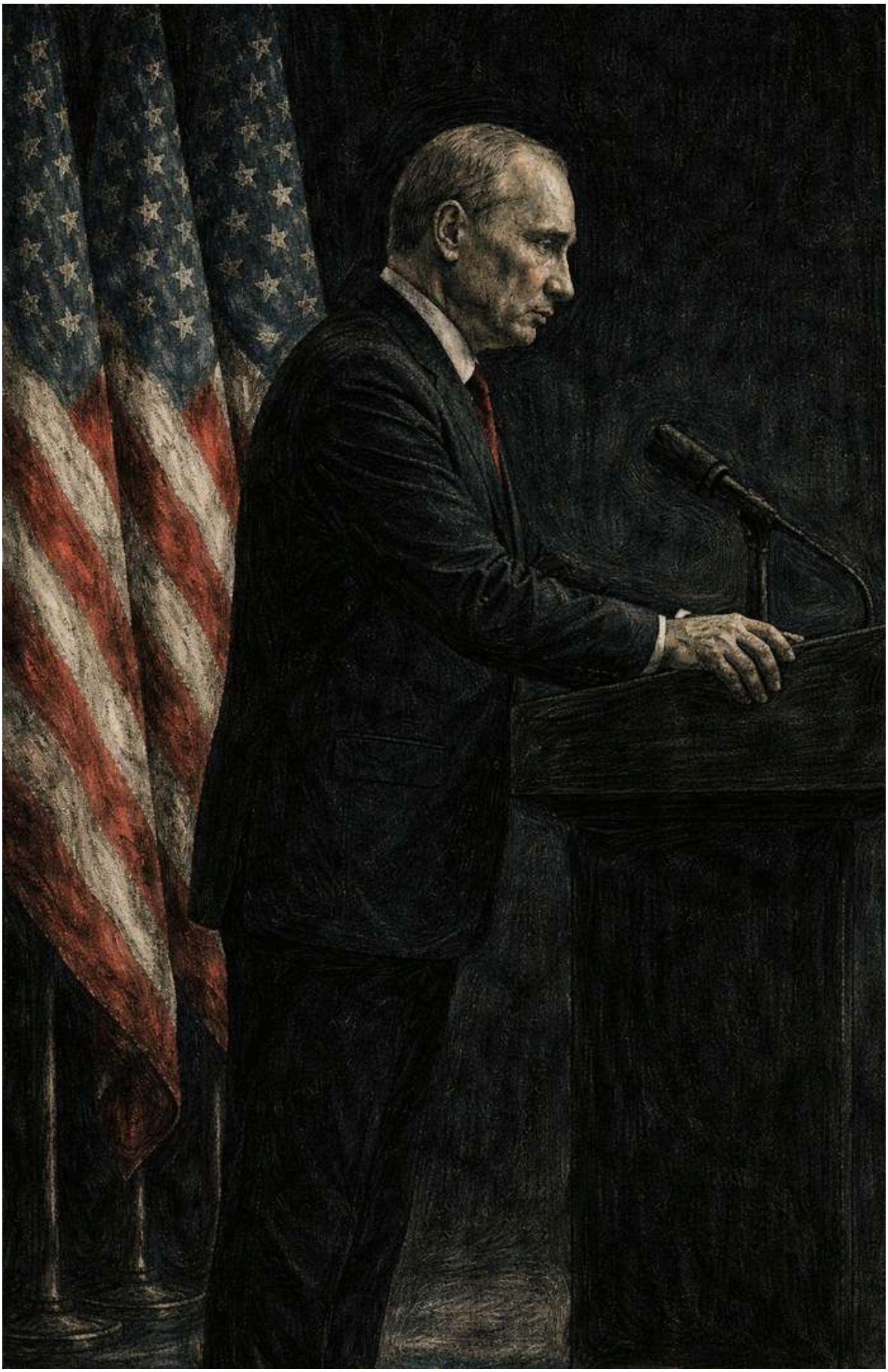

Illustration by Artificial Intelligence

As the Soviet flag flew for the last time above the Kremlin, a figure yet to be well known was making his way onto the political scene in Saint Petersburg. Vladimir Putin witnessed the chaos that unorganized decentralization and lack of political legitimacy brought to Russia. Entire nations were lost, markets struggled, and political instability followed. Putin viewed the collapse of the Soviet state as a geopolitical disaster and a historical marker to be corrected. Slowly working his way up the political ladder in Russia, Putin's true intentions and goals have shown themselves gradually.

Russia's war in Ukraine, campaigns targeted at eroding American global leadership, cyberattacks, disinformation and misinformation campaigns, energy coercion, and the amplification of political polarization are all ways Russia is trying to get its revenge. The perceived humiliation of the Russian nation by the United States and its Western partners has shaped Russia's foreign policy under President Putin.

AFTER THE FALL

The 1990s brought sudden irrelevance to Russia on the global stage. The United States and its Western partners came out of the Cold War as victors, while Russia quickly became a downgraded world power. How the West attempted to help Russia only made matters worse and helped cement the grudge held by the Russian leadership, including Putin. Russia was forced into a vulnerable position where it was told what to do and how to do it.

For many within Russia's military, intelligence, and political circles, this sudden loss of status was not merely a geopolitical setback but a personal humiliation. Officials who had once commanded global respect now watched their country struggle for relevance, dependent on Western loans and advice. The psychological shock of going from a fearsome superpower to a struggling state fueled a deep resentment toward the new world order dominated by the United States. This resentment became a formative experience for the rising generation of Russian leaders, shaping a conviction that the West had taken advantage of Russia's weakness and that restoring lost prestige would require confronting, not cooperating with, the United States.

The fall of the communist system in Russia was quickly met with the liberalization of markets and institutions. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) instituted shock therapy with the hope of taking the once centrally planned economy to a free market. As well-intentioned as it may have been, Russia lacked institutions protecting property rights, contracts, and investments. The mass and swift privatizations took the unprepared culture and society by surprise and allowed corrupt individuals to take advantage. The rise of oligarchs in Russia was soon set to the new normal.

Western governments did not do enough to assist Russia in covering budget deficits. This caused the Russian government to dramatically increase the money supply to cover debts. In conjunction, the reduction of price controls set off hyperinflation because the fake and centralized economy was no longer reducing actual demand. The West pushed for reform but did not do enough to ensure Russia had the capacity and institutions required for a flourishing free market. All the while, U.S. and Western media portrayed the entirety of

Russia as a "defeated empire." Instead of taking direct aim at the former communist government, the West lumped the people of Russia in with the actual enemy. The idea and reality of defeat continued to conjure feelings of revenge among the new and upcoming Russian leadership.

President Boris Yeltsin sought closer ties with the United States and the West despite the economic hardships that reform was causing. Russia soon entered into a subordinate relationship with the West, where Russia was in the position of being a junior partner. IMF shock therapy threw millions into poverty and helped create the rise of oligarchs who took advantage of the regular Russian. To solve these problems, the Russian people looked for new leadership and answers. They wanted someone who could bring strength to the nation's leadership.

Vladimir Putin rose to reject the Western alignment of the Yeltsin era. Promising to counter corruption and chaos, Putin assured the Russian people that he could bring the nation stability. Taking firmer positions than Yeltsin, Putin diminished the political power of oligarchs and sought foreign policies that were viewed to be better aligned with Russian national interests. These actions put Russia once again at odds with the United States and its Western partners. Putin capitalized on the yearning among the Russian people to once again be a nation that captured global importance and prestige. This reconstruction of national identity saw the United States and the West as the principal architects of the Russian struggle to regain a footing.

THE NATO QUESTION

U.S. Secretary of State James Baker assured the Soviet leaders in 1990 that NATO would not expand an inch east of Germany after the conclusion of the Cold War. Having confidence in his word, Mikhail Gorbachev trusted his Western counterpart and continued in negotiations with the West. After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, its satellite states gained independence. The United States and its European partners saw the opportunity to guarantee security for the rest of Europe. NATO has expanded eastward seven times since 1999. This consistent expansion over a few decades has conjured anxiety and mistrust among the Russian elite in their view of the United States and its European partners. Russia has been outspoken in its objections.

Despite Russian opposition to NATO expansion, NATO leadership has stressed its open-door policy. Additionally, the alliance's leadership has tried to assure that NATO is solely a defensive alliance with the purpose of deterring an aggressor from attacking its member states.

Whether or not NATO is a threat to Russia in reality, it does not matter. The Russian leadership views NATO as a threat. Defensive measures taken by an enemy can appear to be offensive in nature. Perceptions are everything. President Putin has viewed the many rounds of NATO expansion towards the borders of Russia as a military provocation. Talks of expanding NATO to Georgia and Ukraine have certainly hit a nerve among Russian leadership. Despite many other factors and the roots of causation, Russia has largely used the possibility of NATO membership as a reason to invade both countries.

LOCALS WALK ALONG KHRESHCHATYK STREET PAST DISPLAYED RUSSIAN MILITARY EQUIPMENT DESTROYED BY THE UKRAINIAN ARMY ON AUGUST 21, 2023 IN KYIV, UKRAINE. DEDICATED TO THE INDEPENDENCE DAY OF UKRAINE, AN EXHIBITION OF DESTROYED RUSSIAN MILITARY EQUIPMENT BEGAN TO ARRANGE ON THE CENTRAL STREET OF KYIV. (PHOTO BY YAN DOBRONOSOV/GLOBAL IMAGES UKRAINE VIA GETTY IMAGES)

Tsarist and Soviet nostalgia in Russia has strong roots. Russia's invasion of Ukraine is trying to establish a new Great Mother Russia. Ukraine is a land that many Russians consider to be theirs on historical and cultural levels. Russia considers Ukraine to be in the near abroad—a land that once was a part of the Soviet empire.

In Putin's mind, Ukrainian identity has also been an artificial product of the Austrians in the 19th century, the Poles and the British in the 20th century, and the United States more recently. President Putin does not view Ukraine as a legitimate and separate nation from Russia. To President Putin, Russians and Ukrainians are the same people, despite constant attacks on Ukrainian civilians by the Russian military. Russian leadership has described Ukraine as Russia's "little brother." Starting in 2001, Putin has been concerned that Russia was losing Ukraine and that it must do something to prevent the United States and Europe from pulling Ukraine out of Russia's influence. Color Revolutions rocked Ukraine, making it politically unstable all the way up to 2014.

In 2014, a pro-Western government was established in Ukraine after the Revolution of Dignity. This new government took harsh stances against Russia and oriented itself to EU and NATO membership. Because of this, Russia viewed losing its Sevastopol naval base in Crimea as a possibility. Taking action to prevent this, Russia invaded and annexed Crimea; Putin asserted that if Russia did nothing, NATO warships would have been docking in a geostrategic city once part of the Russian Empire. Additionally, Russia backed separatists in Eastern Ukraine who opposed policies that pulled Ukraine closer to the West. Weeks after initial separatist movements gained momentum, Russia moved its own troops into Ukraine to fight the new government.

What can be seen as an initial civil war turned into Russia waging war directly against Ukraine starting in 2014. Since then, two peace agreements have been instituted, and both have failed to stop the fighting. Putin's

decision to do a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was a culmination of centuries-long held viewpoints and an attempt to test the cohesion of the West.

Russia's efforts at cementing these viewpoints among its political elite and average citizens are paramount. Anti-Americanism has been institutionalized in Russian media, education, and military doctrine. President Putin views the Russian Empire as having been taken, and it is to be reestablished under his leadership. Not only reestablishing the Russian Empire, Putin seeks to destroy the United States and the West from within. Russia has advanced its tools of statecraft and has been gradually gaining ground in pursuit of a long-game victory. In his mind, this is the ultimate piece of revenge that can be taken against the United States and the West.

This sense of perpetual betrayal has become the ideological glue binding Russia's political elite together. Within Kremlin circles, every Western action is filtered through a narrative of deceit and encirclement. The collapse of the Soviet Union is framed not as an internal failure, but as the result of Western sabotage. NATO expansion is portrayed not as voluntary alignment by sovereign states, but as a deliberate plot to suffocate Russia. Economic sanctions are depicted as proof that the West fears Russia's resurgence. This worldview leaves no room for compromise or trust, because any concession is interpreted as weakness and any negotiation as a trap. By institutionalizing betrayal as a core doctrine, the Kremlin ensures that hostility toward the United States is not merely a policy preference but a foundational pillar of the modern Russian state.

> Russia's aim is not victory against the United States, but to cause its erosion.

WEAKENING AMERICA FROM WITHIN

The Russian state and its intelligence services seek to destroy the United States from within. In its strategic mind, taking divisive issues that already exist and amplifying them is a paramount opportunity. Harboring distrust of government, pushing ethnic conflict, supporting extremist groups, and creating disinformation campaigns are all operations that the Russian government has directed. The main goal of its efforts is to cause polarization on a political and cultural level to the point of creating another civil war.

Russia carefully chooses events that have a wide political and cultural impact in the United States to pursue. The spread of disinformation and the creation of conspiracy theories are the goal in order to cause division and mistrust. Issues like the attacks of September 11, 2001, foreign interference in the 2016 election, the birthplace of President Obama, the Black Lives Matter riots, and the assassination of Charlie Kirk are only a few examples that the Russian state has latched onto to promote contention and disinformation.

Russia seeks to exploit perceived American hypocrisy around the world. Whether the hypocrisy is real or not, Russia takes advantage of it. Russia amplifies the actions of the United States in Iraq, in Guantanamo, and the armed exportation of democracy around the world. The perception is painted

that America does not practice what it preaches to other countries. Russia's aim is to undermine the credibility of liberal democracy around the world.

Domestically, the decrease in the quality of life, ethnic tensions, government oversight, financial turmoil, and political divisiveness are points of target. The openness of the United States through free media and an open society allows it to be vulnerable to outside influence. Russian influence operations penetrate American society by sneaking through the cracks of some of its greatest strengths.

Russia's aim is not victory against the United States, but to cause its erosion. It wants to erode the United States quickly enough to see if the Russian state can outlast it. The steadiness of the Russian state and its form of authoritarian government is prepared to play the long-game against the United States. The options to meet those priorities are in its focus.

Russia's strategy is rooted in the belief that democratic societies are inherently impatient, fractured, and vulnerable to exhaustion, while authoritarian regimes can endure sustained pressure with fewer political consequences. The Kremlin is betting that time itself is a weapon. The longer conflicts drag on, the more Western unity will erode as elections shift priorities, economies tighten, and publics lose interest in distant struggles. By contrast, Putin calculates that his own political system can absorb economic pain, international isolation, and even battlefield losses so long as the state maintains tight control over information and dissent. This asymmetry of endurance is central to Russia's long-game approach: Moscow does not need decisive victories, only incremental advantages and moments of Western indecision. Over the span of years or decades, Russia hopes that this slow grind will weaken the institutions, alliances, and democracies that form the backbone of U.S. power.

WHAT PUTIN WANTS

As poetic justice for the collapse of the Soviet Empire in 1991, Putin seeks the collapse of U.S. hegemony. Russia does not seek Western approval, but wants to see its decline. Attempts by President Trump to use business opportunities and trade as leverage in mending relations with Russia and stopping the war in Ukraine have been shortsighted. Russia does not want partnership with the United States. Partnership opens Russian society to penetration from the United States, and that is a threat to the authoritarian nature of its state.

Operating as another trigger for the decline in U.S. hegemony, Russia seeks to create a multipolar world. In the effort for revenge, not vision, Russia wants to create a world where it is more difficult for the United States to exert its influence. The more major powers that there are in the world, independent of Western values, the harder that it will be for the United States.

The success of the Russian state relies on the destruction of the current world order. The nature of the state restricts it from fully engaging in the established world order and places pressure on it from the outside. In the effort of overthrowing the existing order, Russia is looking toward China, Iran, North Korea, and other BRICS partners to counter the United States and the West.

The pursuit of relationships with BRICS members seems to be more aimed at taking influence away from the United States rather than developing lasting relationships and systems with those members. For example, despite claiming to have an outstanding friendship with China, Russian and Chinese intelligence services treat one another as enemies. The artificial core of these efforts still threatens the United States. The United States has retrenched from the world and has taken more isolationist positions. These actions have created a vacuum that is being filled by Russia and its partners.

The Russian government engages the established system with constant provocation and denial of provocation. Russia's actions taken in Ukraine are twisted to fit the narrative of defense. In the minds of the Russian leadership, that may be true, but there is a method to the madness. This cycle of confrontation helps create domestic legitimacy in Russia because there is always a monster to destroy. State-run media portray Ukraine as a Nazi-led, totalitarian state that threatens the very existence of Russia. Once the narrative is created, Russia is able to justify anything to its people.

Beyond justifying its foreign policy, the Kremlin's construction of an all-powerful external enemy has also become a critical tool for maintaining control inside Russia. By portraying the United States and its allies as relentless aggressors seeking to dismantle Russia from within, the government creates a permanent state of national emergency—one in which dissent can be dismissed as treason, opposition figures can be branded as foreign agents, and economic hardship can be reframed as the necessary price of survival. This narrative gives Putin the political space to consolidate power, suppress civil liberties, and silence critics while claiming to defend the homeland. In this environment, any failure is blamed on Western sabotage rather than domestic dysfunction. The existence of a hostile West thus becomes essential to sustaining Putin's legitimacy, allowing the Kremlin to depict its authoritarianism not as a choice, but as a patriotic duty in the face of an existential threat.

YESTERDAY'S HUMILIATION, TODAY'S WAR

President Putin's foreign policy is built on memory, not foresight. The turmoil of the 1990s left a stain on the Russian psyche and leadership is determined to wash it off. The humiliation that the Russian nation faced after the collapse of the Soviet Union drives its foreign policy objectives. World and regional domination were in its sights and it is returning to that goal. Until the trauma is addressed, Russia will continue to spread conflict throughout the world. The West must understand that in Putin's mind, the Cold War never truly ended—and the real enemy has always been the United States. It's time to increase pressure on the Russian state, not do the opposite.

Can Washington Still Champion Democracy Abroad?

The Exhaustion of Democracy Promotion

KRITTIYANNE MALAI

When rioters stormed the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, the world watched in disbelief. For decades, Washington had lectured others about free elections, peaceful transfers of power, and the sanctity of democratic institutions. Yet that day, it was America's own democracy under siege—beamed live into living rooms from Bangkok to Berlin. That moment did more than trigger a political crisis; it shattered a myth. The self-proclaimed "arsenal of democracy" suddenly looked fragile, even fallible. For much of the past century, promoting democracy abroad had been central to American foreign policy—from Ronald Reagan's "freedom agenda" to George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq to Joe Biden's Summit for Democracy. It was not just idealism—it was anchored in the nation's strategic DNA.

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Illustration by Artificial Intelligence

During the Cold War, democracy promotion served as a counterweight to Soviet authoritarianism, embodied by the Marshall Plan, NATO, and Radio Free Europe. Even in the chaotic aftermath of 9/11, the rhetoric persisted, though increasingly hollow. But after two decades of costly wars, rising populism, and moral fatigue, the machinery of democracy promotion looks threadbare. The uncomfortable question now looms: Can the United States still export democracy when it struggles to sustain it at home? Or has democracy promotion become a relic—too exhausted, too compromised, and too expensive to survive in an era when authoritarian rivals now offer alternative models with increasing confidence?

WHEN FREEDOM WAS STRATEGY

From the beginning, Washington's democracy project was never pure idealism—it was strategy. American policymakers framed democracy promotion as a moral duty, but its real purpose was geopolitical containment. The Marshall Plan rebuilt Europe not only to relieve postwar suffering but to block Soviet influence. Radio Free Europe broadcasted liberal ideals not simply to educate, but to challenge communist control. "Freedom" functioned as the brand; containment was the strategy.

The post–Cold War era amplified this confidence. In the 1990s, with the Soviet Union gone and China still cautiously opening to global markets, America stood alone at the height of its power. Francis Fukuyama's The End of History captured the prevailing conviction that liberal democracy was not just ascendant—it was inevitable. It described a world that felt settled. But history did not settle. It reasserted itself with force. Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Myanmar's democratic collapse, and the rise of illiberalism in Hungary, India, and the Philippines reveal a global landscape moving in the opposite direction from the 1990s' optimism. Democracy's future is no longer presumed; it is actively contested. At the same time, America's own actions have weakened the credibility of its message. Iraq, once sold as a mission of liberation, became a lesson in overreach. Afghanistan, held up as the model of postwar reconstruction, collapsed in mere days after U.S. withdrawal. These failures did not spread democratic ideals—they spread skepticism.

This credibility deficit shapes how Washington is received around the world. In the Middle East, democracy rhetoric is overshadowed by military occupations and partnerships with autocratic regimes. In Southeast Asia, talk of "good governance" often signals conditional aid or external intrusion. Even among European allies, questions persist about the consistency of America's principles. The gap between Washington's ideals and its actions has become impossible to ignore. The result is a freedom agenda that no longer inspires as it once did. Instead, it serves as a reminder of broken states, displaced populations, and unfulfilled promises. A project born from strategic clarity now struggles under the weight of its own contradictions—and this is the challenge the United States must confront before it can credibly speak of democracy again.

THE COSTS OF EXPORTING DEMOCRACY

Few policy projects have been as costly—or as demoralizing—as America's effort to export democracy through military and economic intervention. The financial burden alone is staggering. Economists Joseph Stiglitz and Linda Bilmes estimate that the Iraq and Afghanistan wars cost between $4.4 and $6 trillion once long-term care for veterans and interest payments are included.

The Watson Institute at Brown University places the figure near $4.8 trillion. Yet these enormous expenditures produced little more than fragile states, hollow parliaments, and elected governments that collapsed the moment U.S. protection was withdrawn. Inside Washington, this legacy has produced a different kind of exhaustion. The issue is not only war fatigue but institutional fatigue. Defense budgets have been stretched to their limits. Diplomats are routinely expected to defend the indefensible. Think tanks continue to publish democratic transition blueprints that even their authors no longer believe will work. The machinery of democracy promotion is running, but with no conviction left behind it.

At the same time, America's domestic foundation has grown increasingly unstable. The financial crisis, rising inequality, opioid addiction, and political radicalization eroded confidence in the country's own governance. Even as Americans faced housing foreclosures, mass shootings, and widening social fractures, Washington continued to lecture other nations about stability, rule of law, and public order. The contradiction between domestic turmoil and global preaching became impossible to reconcile.

This disconnect culminated in a simple, unavoidable question: How can a nation unable to mend its own wounds claim the authority to heal others? The tension between U.S. self-perception and U.S. reality began to hollow out the moral basis of its foreign policy, raising doubts not only abroad but within American society itself. The moral toll of the war years deepened this crisis further. Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo Bay, errant drone strikes, and civilian deaths written off as "collateral damage" became symbols of democratic hypocrisy. Authoritarian powers like China and Russia were quick to weaponize these images, pointing to them as evidence that American-style democracy was neither principled nor humane. The narrative of liberal superiority became harder to sustain.

Yet the most profound damage was internal. As trillions of dollars flowed to distant theaters of war, Americans questioned the cost. Why rebuild Kabul's parliament, they asked, while Detroit's democracy buckled under water crises, municipal collapse, and voter suppression? The perception that Washington cared more about nation-building abroad than nation-healing at home fed a deep sense of abandonment. This sense of betrayal has had lasting consequences. Trust in U.S. institutions has fallen to historic lows. What was once framed as a noble mission—promoting democracy abroad—is now widely seen as an elite-driven overreach. The tragic irony is unmistakable: America's crusade to

America's crusade to spread democracy did not strengthen faith in democratic ideals. It eroded them, both globally and at home.

spread democracy did not strengthen faith in democratic ideals. It eroded them, both globally and at home.

DEMOCRACY'S GLOBAL DECLINE

America's crisis of credibility unfolded just as a deeper global shift was taking place: the realization that elections alone do not guarantee democracy. For decades, policymakers treated ballots, parliaments, and constitutions as automatic indicators of legitimacy. But the 21st century has shown how easily these democratic symbols can mask undemocratic realities.

In several major states, elected leaders used democratic mandates not to strengthen institutions but to erode them. In Hungary, Viktor Orbán dismantles judicial independence under the banner of national sovereignty. In Türkiye, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan holds elections while imprisoning opposition figures. In India, Narendra Modi advances Hindu nationalism behind the legitimacy of the ballot box. Citizens continue to vote, and parliaments continue to meet. But the core elements of democracy—pluralism, checks on power, and protections of rights—are steadily stripped away.

This pattern has a name: competitive authoritarianism. It preserves democratic form while hollowing out democratic function. Leaders maintain elections, constitutions, and legislatures, but use them as instruments of control rather than vehicles of accountability. The façade remains. The substance disappears. At the same time, fully consolidated autocracies have moved from defense to offense. China promotes the so-called "Beijing Consensus," arguing that economic growth without democratic accountability is not a compromise but a superior alternative. Russia pushes "managed democracy," where elections are performative, opposition is choreographed, and disinformation is weaponized to portray liberal democracy as hypocrisy. Authoritarianism is no longer embarrassed—it is confident and global.

This shift has reshaped the geopolitical balance. The United States once claimed to make the world "safe for democracy." Today, authoritarian powers work to make the world safe from democracy, using tools Washington once relied on: infrastructure financing, strategic loans, media influence, and expanding digital surveillance networks. Power flows not through ideals but through connectivity, capital, and control. The result is a new global narrative: the future of governance is no longer predetermined. Democracy is not the default setting of modern politics—it is one contender among many. And in the emerging competition of models, its outcomes are anything but guaranteed.

THE CRISIS AT HOME

America's democratic crisis can no longer be described as an external concern. What began as a foreign-policy dilemma has become an internal unraveling. The erosion of democratic norms is happening inside the United States itself —and it is accelerating. The most visible dimension of this decline is the weakening of electoral integrity. Voting rights are under attack,

gerrymandering distorts representation, disinformation floods public debate, and extremist candidates increasingly appear on mainstream ballots. Behaviors once considered impossible—election denial, armed groups near polling sites, and lawmakers openly challenging peaceful transfers of power—have become part of the country's political reality.

This internal deterioration has transformed America's global image. A nation that once presented itself as the standard bearer of democratic governance is now viewed as a cautionary tale. The United States no longer symbolizes democratic strength; it symbolizes democratic fragility. Economic inequality deepens that fragility. For millions of Americans, the freedom Washington claims to defend internationally is overshadowed by medical debt, stagnant wages, and housing insecurity. When economic precarity defines daily life, democratic participation feels disconnected from material outcomes, and disenchantment quickly turns to resentment.

That resentment is now shaping the country's political culture. Grievance, identity politics, and nationalist rhetoric fill the vacuum left by declining institutional trust. Slogans like "Make America Great Again" or "Defund the FBI" thrive not because they offer solutions, but because they speak to the sense that institutions are failing to serve the people they claim to represent. America's democratic breakdown has also become a geopolitical narrative. Authoritarian governments in Beijing, Moscow, and Tehran broadcast images from the January 6 attack to discredit U.S. democracy. They no longer need to wage an information war against the United States—the evidence of dysfunction is supplied from inside America's own borders.

DEMOCRACY IN PRACTICE

America's internal democratic crisis now shapes the way the world sees its power. A nation once regarded as the guardian of democratic norms is increasingly viewed as uncertain about its own purpose. That ambiguity has weakened Washington's ability to lead at a moment when global authoritarianism is gaining confidence—yet it has not erased the possibility of renewed leadership. The danger is that U.S. foreign policy drifts toward pure transaction. When realism becomes detached from democratic ideals, diplomacy reduces to bargaining: tariffs exchanged for alliances, troops for minerals, sanctions for influence. Allies recognize this shift, and adversaries exploit it. Without principle, even power loses its meaning.

To prevent this slide, the United States must move beyond the doctrines of the past. The old playbook—exporting elections, funding NGOs, issuing democracy statements—no longer persuades. If Washington wants democracy to remain a credible global idea, it must reinvent rather than recycle. Reinvention is possible; what is missing is the political will to articulate a new vision. That reinvention starts at home. A country cannot defend democracy abroad while deferring it at home. Voting rights, institutional trust, and constitutional stability are not domestic issues isolated from foreign policy—they are its foundation. No global strategy can compensate for a democracy that is weakening at its core.

The next U.S. president will inherit this credibility crisis. Kyiv and Taipei question America's reliability, but so do Atlanta and Phoenix. An "America First" turn toward isolationism would retire democracy promotion to the museum of Cold War artifacts. Another misguided attempt at military intervention would destroy what remains of its legitimacy. Yet neither outcome is inevitable; the direction depends on political choices, not fate. A different path remains open: reframing democracy for the twenty-first century. The goal is not to export election procedures but to defend the freedoms that define modern life. This approach positions Washington not as a lecturer but as a partner—and it restores the possibility of U.S. leadership through relevance, not nostalgia.

Those freedoms now include digital rights—privacy, AI regulation, and protection from state and corporate surveillance. They include climate justice—transitions to clean energy shaped by democratic oversight rather than authoritarian efficiency. They include economic equity—fair taxation, anti-corruption, and shared prosperity. And they include civic empowerment—youth participation, community governance, and open data that rebuilds trust. These are not optional reforms; they are the contemporary pillars of democratic life. Such a vision moves beyond the "freedom agenda" of 1983. It imagines a democracy project built on dignity rather than dominance, on lived rights rather than imposed institutions. Success is measured not by how many elections the United States funds, but by how many human possibilities it helps expand at home and abroad.

The world no longer needs an American sermon about democracy. It needs evidence.

The stakes for U.S. leadership could not be higher. A second Trump presidency may push Washington fully into transactional geopolitics, where alliances become commodities and human rights negotiable. A Democratic victory will matter only if it rejects nostalgia and commits to a democratic vision anchored in global realities rather than American exceptionalism. Either path is still open—and the world is watching. Ultimately, the decisive question is not whether the United States can promote democracy. It is whether it can practice it credibly enough for others to believe again. The answer is not predetermined. Washington retains the capacity to lead—if it chooses renewal over retreat, reinvention over repetition, and democracy not as a slogan, but as proof.

THE BURDEN OF PROOF

The question of Washington's future role leads to a larger truth: the world no longer needs an American sermon about democracy. It needs evidence. Evidence that democracy can still function in an age of fragmentation, polarization, and accelerating crisis. Proof that democratic systems can repair themselves without collapsing into chaos, that they can deliver security without repression and justice without rage. What matters now is not proclamations of democratic virtue, but demonstrations of democratic competence.

This is the heart of Washington's dilemma. For decades, American leadership rested on a wager: that free societies, despite their flaws, could solve problems more effectively—and more humanely—than strongmen or empires. That wager powered the Marshall Plan, sustained U.S. alliances, and inspired movements far beyond American borders. Today, it is under strain from two directions: a domestic political system fighting to maintain its own coherence, and a global arena where autocratic models openly compete for legitimacy.

The test, therefore, begins at home. A country that cannot protect its own institutions—its voting rights, its rule of law, its basic economic fairness—cannot credibly defend those principles abroad. If Americans choose leaders who treat power as a commodity, who reduce governance to transaction, who mistake grievance for strategy, the democracy project will not collapse because authoritarians defeated it. It will collapse because Americans abandoned it.

Yet decline is not destiny. The United States still holds the capacity to reinvent what democracy means in the twenty-first century. A leadership willing to confront new realities—climate disruption, digital surveillance, economic dislocation, and social fragmentation—could redefine democracy not as nostalgia, but as futurism. A model built on dignity rather than dominance; on rights that extend into the digital sphere; on economic fairness as a democratic requirement, not a policy option; on civic empowerment that makes democracy feel lived rather than symbolic. If the United States embraces that reinvention, then the story of democracy is not over. It is unfinished—and potentially on the verge of a new chapter. And so the dare returns to us—readers, voters, citizens: Can Washington still lead—and are we still willing to believe?

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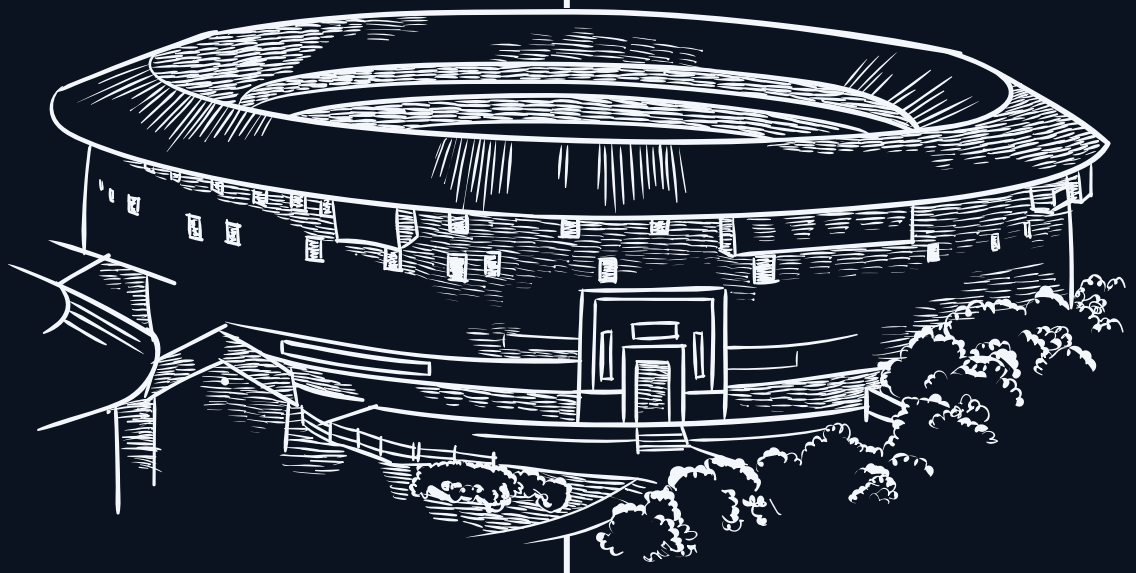

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