Restoring the Promise of Democracy and Global Order: 
American Foreign Policy in an Era of Polarized Politics and Revisionist Powers

In the conclusion to his book *After Victory*, written roughly 10 years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, John Ikenberry summarized the unique position in which the United States found itself after the Cold War: “No state in the modern era has ever enjoyed such a dominant global position. The decline in rival ideologies and the economic failings of other major states have added to the reach and pervasiveness of American power.”1 This preeminent position brought with it substantial expectations for the future: spreading democracy to corners of the globe previously under authoritarian rule, opening new markets to foster prosperity through increased international trade, and solidifying Western interests and values as the status quo of this new global order. These goals, while ambitious, did not seem out of reach for a coalition of democracies fresh off perhaps the greatest ideological victory in history.

Domestically, America was poised to embrace as well as shape a promising future. The so-called “peace dividend” meant increased spending on domestic and global initiatives at the expense of the US defense budget.2 Inflation and unemployment were at historic lows while America’s GDP grew at roughly 3.5% per annum during the 1990’s.3 Despite party polarization over hot-button domestic policy issues (continuing a trend that began in the 1970’s4), there was a general agreement among elites from both parties that successful American foreign policy meant spreading democracy and Western values to former Soviet and developing nations through international institutions and reducing obstacles to free trade.5

Looking at the world today, we see a drastic shift from Mr. Ikenberry’s turn of the century assessment. While America remains the sole global superpower, this primacy is challenged by regional revisionist powers who desire to change the international status quo. In Europe, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has raised concerns over the role of NATO, the efficacy of sanctions, the impact of a resurgent Russia on European security and the cohesion of the Western community itself. Other regions of the world present formidable problems for American foreign policy. Stability in the Middle East and Southwest Asia remains uncertain amid ongoing American efforts to prevent a nuclear Iran, persistent Israeli-Palestinian conflict, US tensions with the crown prince of Saudi Arabia, domestic political volatility in Iraq, and Washington’s balancing act in Afghanistan between helping a struggling populace while simultaneously refusing to recognize the Taliban as the de jure government. Latin America is buffeted by economic stagnation, inflation, high social inequality, and deep divisions between the political left and right. Sub-Saharan Africa is similarly challenged, and military coups still occur. Looming over these myriad global problems is the specter of China, whose increasingly open and robust willingness to confront American interests and values has understandably preoccupied much of the US foreign policy establishment. Addressing these challenges in the best of times would be daunting. Taken together with economic uncertainty, rising inflation,
A (mostly) Common Consensus

Since the end of World War II, public opinion and party politics have consistently impacted America’s foreign policy approach. For the entirety of the Cold War, containment, introduced to the world in the late 1940’s by George Kennan, was the grand strategy implemented by multiple administrations. This strategy evolved over time to reflect the domestic political situation, most notably in the 1950’s following the Korean War and again leading up to and including the Vietnam War. President Eisenhower, heeding public opinion and his own desire to draw down America’s military, decided on a policy of retrenchment following the Korean War. Nixon would embrace a similar strategy two decades later, both in response to America’s adversaries and to mounting pressure against the war in Vietnam at home. Ronald Reagan’s increased spending in his first term began anew the cycle of what Stephen Sestanovich would call “maximalism and retrenchment.” Though the form changed intermittently throughout the decades of the Cold War, the overarching strategy of containing the spread of Soviet-style Communism guided America’s foreign policy apparatus.

When the Cold War ended, America saw three consecutive two-term presidential administrations, with alternating party control, maintain similar national security strategies. While specific policy initiatives shifted across administrations, parties, and time just as they had during the Cold War, the substantive goals remained the same: “spread democracy, open markets, and other liberal values around the world.” A “Washington Consensus” emerged that prescribed how nations should structure their economies and adjust their foreign and domestic policies, a consensus that conveniently aligned with the new US-led liberal international order. It seemed that American foreign policy would remain a bastion of bipartisanship even while average Americans continued drifting apart politically over domestic issues.

Even the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, did surprisingly little to adjust American grand strategy. Of course, the American public became forcefully aware of the dangers posed by radical Islamic terrorism, and another round of maximalist defense spending
occurred in order to launch the global war on terror. The American electorate was unified in its clamor for war and retaliation unlike any time since Pearl Harbor, and President Bush enjoyed the highest public approval of any modern president. However, the ensuing decades still saw the US continue efforts to spread democracy to the Middle East and Southwest Asia. After initially successful invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the Bush administration went about the business of bolstering democratic processes and institutions, holding elections, and maneuvering to install pro-American leadership in both countries. In his second inaugural address, President Bush declared: “It is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world.”

Though different in its use of hard vs. soft power, the Bush administration still operated under the post-Cold War assumption that the best way to pacify an unstable, violent region was through democratization.

When the onus of leadership fell to President Barack Obama in 2009, long gone was the patriotic fervor Americans felt in 2001. When President Bush left office, he had a 22 percent approval rating, the future stability of Iraq and Afghanistan was uncertain, the economy was reeling from the 2008 recession, and polarization over domestic issues continued to increase. Running a campaign aimed at “change,” President Obama sought to distance himself politically from President Bush, although in many areas of foreign policy and grand strategy there was a surprising degree of continuity. The Obama administration, like the Nixon and Eisenhower administrations before, embarked upon a policy of retrenchment aimed primarily at pulling troops out of Iraq while also looking for solutions to the conflict in Afghanistan. The administration began tackling problems of foreign policy (the Arab Spring, Libya, the continued rise of China, and the emergence of ISIS in Iraq) with an emphasis on leveraging multilateral institutions, a far more internationalist approach than its predecessors, albeit with the United States acting as the preeminent power in each instance. This last point underscored the fact that President Obama, while taking a different approach, still shared at least one core belief as the two presidents before him regarding the global role of the United States: it was still the “indispensable nation” on the world stage.

However “indispensable” the US may have been to the world, domestically the country was showing symptoms of increasing polarization. While President Obama had several major policy accomplishments, they mostly resulted from either party-line votes or executive actions. In Congress, Senator Harry Reid exercised the “nuclear option” for confirming presidential appointments (minus the Supreme Court, which the Republicans later included). Along this same vein, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell refused to have a hearing for President Obama’s Supreme Court nominee, Merrick Garland, in 2016, citing the impending election. Agreements like the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), colloquially the Iran Nuclear Deal, were implemented as executive agreements rather than treaties due to the likelihood of their failure in the divided Senate. This division in government was due to increasing partisanship in both party elites and their electoral bases. While it is unclear whether elites, the public, or a combination of the two were the main drivers of polarization, the result was far less compromise and a lurch toward the extremes of both parties. However, policy impacts and rhetoric also play a role. Toward the end of the Obama administration, many Republicans, along with some working-class
Democrats and Independents, felt that the Democratic Party had become “a bastion of elite progressivism that alienated the working class.” In addition, President Obama’s signature policy accomplishment, the Affordable Care Act, had a myriad of problems during its implementation that frustrated many and was seen as unnecessary government intrusion on the political right. Finally, globalization’s role in the reduction of American wages and presidential speeches disparaging certain sections of American society only furthered the deep divides felt by many Americans. In fact, compared to the rest of the world, the American electorate seemed to be characterized more frequently by partisanship. It was in this political environment that an unlikely presidential contender, and political outsider, stepped onto the world stage.

Donald Trump came into office having made it clear that his administration would seek to revisit the traditional way of thinking about American interests abroad. Candidate Trump appealed to a rapidly growing, disaffected population that felt left behind both economically and culturally in the new, globalized era – the extraordinary rise of economic inequality and the hollowing out of industrial America as well as the liberalization of cultural norms and the perceived threat of unregulated immigration. This burgeoning “nationalist populism” enabled Trump to attack traditional allies and institutions as preventing the American people and their leaders from putting “America first.” He advocated against globalization, “bad” trade deals, the World Trade Organization, and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). America’s allies, he suggested, were not paying their “fair share,” casting doubt on multi-lateral institutions and their effectiveness. For the first time in almost three decades, an American president questioned the efficacy of the liberal international order and the role the United States played in that order. In fairness, President Trump’s criticisms were not without some merit. US foreign policy under the previous administrations had suffered some very stinging, very public setbacks. The lack of resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, costly operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, toppling Muammar Gaddafi, and the revelation of abuses at Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib represented blemishes on the record of US foreign policy. In short, America was not in the same place in terms of relative global power that it was in the early 1990s. Russian expansion in Crimea and eastern Ukraine, Chinese encroachments in the South China Sea, and faltering “nation-building” and democratization in Afghanistan and Iraq lent credibility to the criticisms leveled by Trump at the foreign policy establishment and past administrations. Finally, perhaps fueled by the aforementioned nationalism, the American right was increasingly distrustful of multilateral institutions like the UN.

As president, Donald Trump sought to make good on his campaign promises. In his 2017 National Security Strategy, released near the end of his first year in office, the President outlined the new direction of American foreign policy. One foreign policy expert noted that it “rejects Obama’s internationalism, Bush’s transformational agenda, and Clinton’s embrace of globalization.” He withdrew from many of the trade agreements negotiated by President Obama, renegotiated NAFTA, and pulled the US out of several executive agreements, such as the Paris Climate agreement and the JCPOA. He placed non-establishment personnel, including members of his family, in high-level foreign policy positions. In Europe, President Trump questioned the effectiveness of NATO and strongly suggested America’s allies needed to
increase their contributions to the common defense or potentially lose US support. In short, the 45th president eschewed the traditional consensus of the political, policy, and diplomatic establishments to cater to his electoral base of support, allowing the fervor of nationalist populism to dictate a significant part of America’s foreign policy.

Entering office in a volatile domestic political climate and in the midst of the global coronavirus pandemic, President Biden faced some critical decisions when it came to restructuring America’s foreign policy goals. The Trump administration made a series of what many in the new administration considered policy and diplomatic missteps, such as the haphazard trade war with China, the disorganized federal response to COVID-19, accusations against NATO members of free riding on America’s defense umbrella, restrictive immigration policies, and the peremptory withdrawal of the US from several high-profile bilateral and multilateral agreements. The new administration believed these policies only served to alienate America’s allies, reignite isolationist sentiments, and increase distrust of multilateral institutions. However, President Trump’s foreign policy also met with success in certain areas. NATO members were, on average, contributing more of their GDP to collective security, the “new NAFTA” USMCA helped secure American intellectual property and manufacturing benefits, and Israel and several Arab States normalized diplomatic relations through US mediation. Polarization in the American electorate meant the Biden administration faced the difficult task of building on these successes while also enacting new policies aimed at addressing diplomatic shortcomings, distancing themselves politically from the Trump administration.

During his campaign for the presidency, Joe Biden indicated his intention to return to the foreign policy goals and practices of pre-2016. After President Biden was elected, he took steps to codify these promises in the Interim National Security Strategic Guidance that outlined many of America’s new foreign policy goals. The document states the US will “move swiftly to earn back our position of leadership in international institutions…” It also acknowledged the impact of domestic issues, declaring, “Because traditional distinctions between foreign and domestic policy…are less meaningful than ever before, we will reform and rethink our agencies, departments, interagency processes, and White House organization to reflect this new reality.”

While the Biden administration has not yet released its National Security Strategy (likely due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine), the interim guidance makes it clear that President Biden seeks to renew trust in domestic and international institutions, encourage the spread of democracy and prevent democracies from devolving into authoritarian regimes. These objectives are interlaced with the desire to sustain and project military, economic, and political strength to maintain the US as the hegemon of the liberal world order. Most of these goals align squarely with the post-Cold War administrations prior to President Trump.

Unfortunately, the world today is far removed from the 1990s and the gradual, halting emergence of global multipolarity threatens American hegemony. Russia is no longer a broken former superpower, but a formidable regional power reacting to what it sees as Western attempts to infringe upon its security. China continues its economic and military ascent in East Asia, affirming its desire to upend some international norms, particularly those that favor an American-led order. The withdrawal from Afghanistan, favored by most Americans but also
criticized for how it was handled, left the Taliban back in charge of an economically struggling country and forced other US allies to question American commitments. Partisanship at home continues to limit options for elected members of Congress, reducing the window for forming consensus on any policy area, with foreign policy no exception. Inflation and financial turmoil continue to plague America’s economy and increase uncertainty for future investment. These collective challenges demonstrate that we did not reach a “post-historical” society, as Francis Fukuyama predicted following the Cold War, but instead stand at the precipice of what one author recently called “the beginning of history.” It will take a new generation of public servants, blurring policy and party lines, to solve the various problems facing the country today.

Regional Challenges and Revisionist Obtrusion

America’s global reach necessarily involves assisting struggling nations and confronting hostile and revisionist forces in every region of the world. The Western Hemisphere is no exception. The Biden administration, in their interim NSS guidance, has vowed to help Latin American countries tackle the perpetual poverty, criminal violence, and corruption endemic to much of the area. Failure to address these issues has led to political instability as well as the resurgence of left-wing politicians elected as president in Colombia, Mexico, Peru (and possibly Brazil in the future). These deep problems also contribute to mass migrations of people seeking to escape their current plight, many attempting to enter the US illegally and straining America’s border patrol and immigration agencies. This issue of immigration also continues to divide Americans politically, further driving a wedge into American political discourse. The strained US relationship with the non-democratic regimes of Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua has caused tension with other countries in the region. When the Biden administration excluded the three nations from the Summit of the Americas in Los Angeles earlier this year, several other Latin American countries threatened to boycott the summit altogether. Additionally, many South American states are forging close economic ties with China, which has overtaken the US as the region’s largest trading partner, raising questions about the threat this may pose to America’s security and political and economic cooperation with Latin American nations. Further exacerbating the Chinese challenge is Brazil’s membership in the BRICS and Argentina’s application to join the group in June of this year. Increased Chinese influence in the Western Hemisphere has resurrected calls for a renewed Monroe Doctrine, something that as recently as 2019 was considered “as relevant today, as it was the day it was written” by then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. If the US were to use a strategy similar to the Monroe Doctrine, how should it look? What might be the benefits of multilateral or unilateral enforcement of this doctrine? And would Washington be able to avoid its heavy-handed application of the doctrine in the past which had alienated much of the region?

Africa and the Middle East are two regions that may also require continued US attention. For the Middle East in particular, questions linger about fatigue in the American public’s will to maintain a military presence there. Last year’s withdrawal from Afghanistan also raised many questions about the feasibility of future American efforts in the region and whether it represented a wider US retrenchment from the Middle East. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the
subsequent shift in the world’s attention, added legitimacy to these concerns. However, the US still maintains a number of military installations in the region, notably in Iraq, where US troops continue to train and support the ISF against remnants of ISIS with no withdrawal timeline yet announced.50 Israeli-Palestinian tensions remain high. Earlier this year, the Biden administration reaffirmed the US-Israel Strategic Partnership, committing to the security of Israel, its right to defend itself, and to continued military aid.51 President Biden also took steps to shore up relations with Saudi Arabia, a key Middle Eastern ally, after disagreements involving oil production and supply following the Russian invasion.52 Iran and the Saudis regional proxy conflicts, and their backing by Russia and the US, respectively, shows a clear need for a calculated American approach to diplomacy in the region.

Meanwhile, the continent of Africa is emerging as an economic and political battleground between the US and China (and to a lesser extent, Russia). Debates continue over China’s “Debt Trap Diplomacy” and how the US can counter predatory Chinese lending to poor nations incapable of repayment.53 Additionally, many climate scientists believe that Africa, more than perhaps any other continent, will be most impacted by climate change, creating security threats as resources on the continent become more scarce and the population increases.54 Taken together, these issues require American policymakers to solve several complex and deep-seated problems at once. How can the US serve as a more attractive lender to poorer nations than China, who is willing to trade debt for strategic assets like ports or access to resources? In what ways can the Biden administration support African democracies and reduce sectarian violence on the continent?

While each of the issues raised thus far are pressing, none has dominated the global foreign policy discussion in 2022 like the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Aside from the obvious questions about Russia’s goals for the country, the effectiveness of their military, and who will eventually emerge victorious, the conflict also brought to the fore issues related to both US policy in responding to international conflict and the general relationship between the US and Europe. The former question shows most Americans view the Biden administration’s response through a partisan lens, according to a poll from the Pew Research Center in March. Well over half of Republicans either strongly or somewhat disapproved of the Biden administration’s response to the invasion, while the opposite was true of Democratic views. This disparity epitomizes the difficulty in handling international crises in a way that appeals to the American public writ large. Yet the Pew survey also shows bipartisan support for aiding Ukraine, sanctioning Russia, and cooperating with our allies on the Ukraine crisis, proof that there are still avenues for cooperation on foreign policy across the aisle.55

Regarding the US and Europe, the invasion of Ukraine ushered in an era of trans-Atlantic cooperation and unity that the world has not seen for some time. In the days after the invasion, and even in some cases before the invasion, the United States and the European Union presented a united front in sanctioning Russia for the violence. Package after package of sanctions were issued against Russia in a matter of days. Despite initial disagreement on what to do about Russia’s energy sector, the EU finally reached a decision to almost completely ban imported Russian oil,56 working with the US to make adjustments to the plan in attempts to halt rising
inflation. This is not to say that the US and Europe will constantly agree on all responses to the crises, and disagreements likely will arise as Europe seeks affordable energy production elsewhere in the world. But these instances of cooperation initially seemed to justify the role of multilateral institutions in responding to crises.

Militarily, NATO seems to have a renewed sense of purpose and legitimacy. Returning to its roots, NATO membership now seems like the logical choice for nations who fear they will fall prey to Russia’s renewed territorial ambitions. While some, such as prominent political scientist John Mearsheimer, blame NATO expansion for provoking Vladimir Putin to violence, others, like NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, believe the organization is crucial to collective security and that “NATO enlargement has been an historic success, spreading democracy, freedom, and prosperity across Europe.” Further expansion is now at the forefront of the minds of some nations. After the invasion, both Finland and Sweden applied for NATO membership, which will likely be granted. These additions, both Arctic nations, may also impact NATO involvement in the far north and could assist in arresting “Russia’s Arctic ambitions.” Whether Ukraine successfully repels Putin’s invasion or whether the conflict becomes a grinding stalemate will depend on a number of factors, including the resolve of Ukraine and the West against that of Russia as well as the willingness of China to step up its support for Moscow. As for the region’s post-conflict future, how should NATO and the EU tackle the issues of the reconstruction of Ukraine, the safeguarding of Kyiv’s security, the further expansion of both NATO and EU membership, and the normalization of relations with Russia?

Russia’s flagrant violation of international norms over the past decade is far-reaching, and many countries look to the US for a reaction to such brazen displays of militarism. The Biden administration issued sweeping sanctions, provided Ukraine with arms and aid packages, and continues to push other nations to support Ukraine and reject Vladimir Putin’s designs. While the American public evaluated these efforts along partisan lines, most NATO countries felt President Biden was handling the situation effectively. There remain, however, some key points of concern. Despite the predictions of many Western analysts, Ukraine stymied Russia’s assault, a fact which exposed the intelligence community and foreign policy experts in the West to significant criticism. Further, the fact that the invasion happened at all, and that Russia has managed to weather the sanctions leveled against it raises questions not only about the US response, but about the effectiveness of multilateral and international institutions. An example of the latter was the UN security council’s failure to condemn the invasion due to a sole veto: Russia’s, with China, India, and the UAE abstaining. Currently, Russian president Vladimir Putin’s “special operation” is still ongoing and his desired outcome in Ukraine is unknown. Regardless of the military outcome, Russia is now a pariah to most of the Western world and it is likely that the effects from this war will be felt in Russia, the Ukraine, and the world for decades to come. Yet it is significant that much of the world remains on the fence, unwilling to take the side of the West or Ukraine. An important task of American foreign policy during this dangerous period of great power competition is to devise strategies that work to transform fence-sitters into supporters.
Although the Russo-Ukrainian war has taken center stage this year in terms of foreign affairs, China’s rising power and regional and global ambitions remain the primary concern of America’s foreign policy experts. Not since the end of the Cold War has there been a nation with the potential to challenge US primacy on a global scale. Yet China’s rise has been complicated by a number of recent political, domestic, and global phenomenon that underscores the complexity of assessing a nation’s power. While China is expected to overtake the US as the world’s leading economy by 2030, with a growth rate of roughly 5 percent annually, this fact alone does not necessarily translate directly to parity with the US in terms of military might, wealth, or productivity. Additionally, recent events have called into question the rosy predictions for Chinese growth. President Xi Jinping’s “zero Covid” policy has had a deleterious impact on economic output, potentially dropping growth to under 2 percent, and causing civil unrest in some high-population areas. Furthermore, finding jobs for its millions of young college graduates is also proving a challenge as only 15 percent of recent college graduates were employed, and about one-fifth of its population aged 16-24 is unemployed. Coupled with a mortgage crisis that could cost Chinese banks potentially hundreds of billions of dollars, a 5 percent growth rate seems less certain. Even if one assumes a rate of around 2 or 3 percent annually, the average Chinese citizen would still be “only 40 percent as rich as the average American and about half as productive” by the year 2050.

Despite these pressing economic issues, and the fact that China’s growing prosperity remains entwined with much of the American-led liberal order, Beijing still maintains a defiant global and regional foreign policy approach. Chinese leaders still maintain close connections with Moscow despite its aggression in Ukraine, drawing admonishment from Secretary of State Antony Blinken and straining its relations with the European Union. In response to Speaker of the House Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan earlier in August, China launched live-fire drills around the island to deter formal diplomatic contact between the US and Taiwan since China sees this as “support for its (Taiwan’s) independence from Beijing.” While China has used various initiatives in the past to build friendly relations with other countries, it has also leveraged international gray areas and its growing power in disputes with its neighbors. As of February 2022, China was engaged in land and sea territorial disputes with 17 other nations, most of them neighbors or close maritime powers. China’s international relations presents compelling policy considerations about the rise of China and demonstrates America’s still advantageous position in terms of geography, economy, and political alliances that surround China. Given China’s internal economic issues and cases of civil unrest, should America’s dominant approach to the country be one of confrontation or some degree of engagement? What is the best strategy to reduce or remove China’s support for Russia’s ongoing aggression?

China’s ascent and Russia’s aggression also highlight a pressing international issue: the rise of revisionist powers in the last few decades to challenge aspects of the liberal international order. China and Russia have made no secret of their revisionist aims. As recently as last year, an opinion published in China’s State-run Global Times said that China’s rise is a “people’s war. It will be as vast and mighty as a big river. It will be an unstoppable tide.” In 2014, President Xi expressed regional revisionist sentiments and challenged US dominance in the region when we stated, “It is for the people of Asia to run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of Asia, and
uphold the security of Asia.” For Russia, revisionism has been expressed in both rhetoric and action. Russia’s aggression in Ukraine earlier this year, Crimea in 2014, and Georgia in 2008 highlights their strategy of attacking the “non-vital interests of their great-power rivals,” drawing sanctions and condemnation but not war or crippling economic countermeasures. This strategy also aims to return portions of the world to spheres of influence, rather than allow target countries, like Ukraine, to be members of a global international community. Last year, Russian president Vladimir Putin gave a speech in which he stated that a “new stage in world history” was coming and that the West would no longer dominate the international order. Addressing this revisionism involves a carefully constructed strategy of more effectively confronting these powers as well as engaging with American allies and nations caught between the Western powers, China, and Russia. One nation that highlights the importance of a nuanced approach is India, a nation heavily involved diplomatically with China, Russia, and the US. A recent book argues that India is quickly becoming a “kingmaker,” as both its population and resources make it a desirable ally for both revisionist powers challenging the status quo and for the US to assist in containing China by increasing its role in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue. Using India as an example, how should American policymakers emphasize the benefits of the US-led international order to steer world powers away from revisionism? Are there ways in which the global order could or should change that could benefit all parties? Or are nationalism and great-power ambitions too strong to be overcome by potential mutual benefits?

Global Challenges and Domestic Discord

Since the end of the Cold War, the chance of global military conflict between great powers decreased dramatically, with the American foreign policy establishment focused instead on threats such as terrorism and WMD proliferation. Although, as indicated above, fears persist about what the return of great power competition could mean for the established international order, global challenges remain that require international cooperation among nations. The foremost issue in this regard is climate change. While much has been written on the impacts of climate change, it important to note the role of climate change in national defense. If unchecked, it is believed that “sea-level rise, extreme weather events, workforce health and other direct and indirect impacts of climate change will affect the Nation’s preparedness and national security over the long term,” according to DHS. With an abundance of evidence to suggest that human beings are responsible for a great deal of the warming over the past 70 years, it is imperative that nations work together to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

This cooperation is, however, predicated on the effectiveness of multilateral institutions like the United Nations and NATO. While multilateral agreements and UN resolutions can add legitimacy to a program of action, the reliance on international institutions to enforce agreements can be tricky at best. The Kyoto Protocol, the last major climate agreement prior to the Paris Agreement, stands as a stark reminder of the ineffectiveness of international organizations and agreements. Most of the trouble lies in enforcement mechanisms, as it is almost impossible to force nations to do something against their will. The Paris Agreement asked countries to set their own goals, with no enforcement mechanisms or penalties if nations failed to meet their stated
goals. Additionally, the coronavirus pandemic caused considerable mistrust of other international organizations, notably the World Health Organization. In the US, this mistrust was split decisively down party lines, with the political left viewing the organization more favorably while the right was more distrustful and believed it catered too much to Chinese propaganda surrounding case numbers and the origin of the virus. This is a concerning trend since it is highly likely that the WHO will be instrumental in consolidating lessons learned from this pandemic, the first in over 100 years. Without the trust and cooperation of a significant number of countries, both the US and the world’s ability to react to the next pandemic will be significantly reduced. Why might UN-based groups like the WHO and other multilateral organizations struggle to convince the populations of certain countries they are acting in their best interest? Are there ways that these groups could improve their image and earn back lost trust? Or is polarization so deeply embedded in both American and international communities that it’s less about actions and more about political affiliation and how certain parties feel about institutions?

It would be presumptive to assign causation of American polarization to any one issue, person, or group. There are, however, different theories behind why the US has become so incredibly partisan. One idea, in contrast to the current domestic situation, is that many Americans do want some polarization in society. In the late 1960s, George Wallace, former Alabama governor and presidential candidate, lamented that “there’s not a dime’s worth of difference” between the two major parties, echoing the desire of other Americans for clearer distinctions and choices when they went to the voting booth. Another issue identified in Robert Putnam’s book The Upswing is the coupling of issues to party identification that began with civil rights and then spread to other debates, such as size and scope of government, abortion and religion, the environment, and education. There is also the question of what drives polarization and the role that elites in both parties play in exacerbating the problem. In a 2013 study, researchers found that, absent party endorsement on a particular issue, the strength of an argument most influenced people’s opinion. However, in a polarized environment, they concluded that “elite polarization fundamentally changes the manner in which citizens make decisions.” This influence, coupled with the two-party system to which our electoral structure lends itself, means alternatives to the prevailing opinions of party elites are difficult to find.

The results of this dilemma are that candidates with a more populist and nationalist message resonate more with the American electorate than those seeking moderation. The obvious example appealing to right-wing populism is President Trump. Polarization, Candidate Trump’s message of helping “forgotten” Americans, and the disaffection many in the US felt before the 2016 election were fertile ground for a populist candidate focused on the nationalist promise to “make America great again.” Additionally, shifting demographics as the country became more diverse, and how this might impact future elections, caused considerable consternation among right-wing populists on the question of national identity. On the left, the popularity of a candidate like Bernie Sanders, who railed against the “top 1%” and urged more redistribution and free college to increase economic opportunities, demonstrated that populism was not limited to only one party. Differences in policy preferences between the two parties, however, may prevent populists from both camps uniting to challenge the established parties. In
addition, January 6th, 2021 showed the dangers that populism can pose to democracy when people feel that their voices, and their votes, are taken away from them by “others.” While there are no easy answers, there may be ways to address the dangers of populist tendencies in the American electorate. Because populists tend to be distrustful of traditional institutions, believing them to serve special interests rather than public good, would increased institutional transparency result in more trust from the populace? Would a more regulated and controlled immigration system help address concerns over demographic changes? If inflation abates and economic opportunities improve, will this signal a retreat from nationalistic attitudes? Might government actions that reduce inequalities in income and address racial and gender disparities placate those who might instead seek a single leader as a form of cultural panacea? Finally, how might these solutions address shortcomings in the formation of American foreign policy?

Crafting US foreign policy in an era of domestic political polarization is an unenviable task and one that often weakens international confidence in the United States as a reliable partner. Due to the intense divisions in Congress, passing any legislation, let alone potentially controversial foreign policy decisions, is difficult. Therefore, American commitments have taken on the form of executive agreements for some time. In the past, long-standing institutional norms encouraged rival political parties to honor the agreements and treaties of the previous administrations. Recently, however, it seems that US foreign policy has been a “swinging pendulum” in which agreements made by one president can be quickly broken or altered by the next president, and so on.90 This political disability undermines the crucial goal of building trust at home and abroad in the American political process. Perhaps this is also the reason that, while most nations still seem to feel that the US is a somewhat reliable partner, they believe that democracy in the US “used to be a good example but has not been in recent years.”91 Is it possible to eliminate polarization from American political discourse? Immediately in the aftermath of the Cold War, despite some polarization on domestic issues, American foreign policy generally operated under a consensus between both parties. Is this possible again? Can another nation, like China, serve as an existential threat and create in the US political mindset an enemy worth uniting against?

In solving the crises of polarization, what might be the role of the media and the general public? A study from 2018 showed that significant numbers of Americans were very unfamiliar with the political and socio-cultural identity of the opposing party. For example, Republicans believed that 32% of the Democratic Party were members of the LGBT community, when in reality it was 6%, while Democrats believed that 38% of Republicans made more than $250,000 when this number was closer to 2%. They found that a great deal of this misperception was due to the media and what they chose to cover about each party.92 A more partisan society drives Americans to only consume news with which they already agree. Social media, designed to bring people together on the internet, has done anything but in many cases. According to another study from 2018, not only did increased social media use exacerbate polarization in society, it also caused increased distrust of the government if the leadership was of the opposite party.93 Because of this, leaders of both parties will have to think creatively to win over voters of the opposite party. There may also be hope for the US, as Robert Putnam argues in his most recent book, *Upswing*. He charts a course through American history that begins with a highly polarized
American society in the latter half of the 19th century. Then, starting in about 1905 and continuing until roughly the mid-1960s, American society became less polarized politically and more equal in socio-economic terms. Politically, Putnam identifies rising progressivism in the early 20th century as a challenge to the established parties and a way for disaffected Americans to coalesce around new ideas. He further cites increasing educational opportunities and technological innovation as driving forces behind reducing economic inequality. Culturally, he concludes that it took a realization that Americans needed to be in community with one another, and less fiercely individualistic, to finally break the cycle of polarization. How might these factors influence polarization today? Can Americans resist partisan messaging and support compromise in the age of social media? What does it mean for our society if polarization persists?

Americans will likely need to overcome their polarized environment to address the many challenges facing them in the 21st century. One example is the growing importance of space. Here, as in many areas, China is seeking to overtake the US as the leading nation in outer space. Soon, they will be the only nation on earth with an operational space station. In 2030, the international space station is set to be decommissioned, while the Chinese will launch the Tiangong station later this year. This will hamper American efforts to remain the leader in space research and development. In addition to a space station, China continues to develop offensive technology that could damage or capture American satellites, a key component of our military strength. Another dimension where China and other state and non-state actors are challenging the US is the cyber realm. A recent study showed that despite the commonly held belief that a global and open internet would further American interests and damage those of authoritarians, this has not been the case. In fact, they argue, it may be the opposite. With strong American protections for free speech, the US has been less effective at shaping a consistent message, while other nations utilize censorship or misinformation to drive a particular narrative or only provide part of the context for a story. Considering again the rampant partisanship in our nation, it is likely adversaries will play each side to divide the US while also seeking a military advantage by gaining access to critical information and data through hacking and other intrusive means. How can policymakers seek to reduce cyber threats, compete in space, and tackle other global leadership challenges in an age of polarization? What policy choices should the US make to stay competitive in these arenas?

Conclusion

Since the founding of the United States, Americans have believed strongly that the principles imbued in the Declaration of Independence and Constitution were “the only legitimate ones, destined to cover the globe.” In a speech to the House of Representatives on July 4th, 1821, then-Secretary of State John Quincy Adams said the United States “goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy,” but instead, “She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all.” Americans today see themselves much in the same way: we decry imperialism, espouse diplomacy instead of war, and desire that people should govern themselves with popular democratic governments based on individual liberties and the will of the people.
Though our actions may sometimes be at odds with our rhetoric, these norms and values enable political and social leaders to challenge US domestic and foreign policy when it deviates from established principles.

The modern era has been defined by American global leadership. It is still the “indispensable nation” in many ways: economically, politically, militarily, and culturally. Much of the prosperity of the rest of the world is inextricably linked to American success. It has been the proverbial “rising tide that lifts all boats,” with the desire and diplomatic prowess to help the world flourish. But this privileged place in the global order was hard fought and is now under threat both from within and without. While previous generations dealt with a bipolar world, periods of intense domestic social upheaval, the threat of nuclear annihilation, and the containment of a militant, expansionist ideology, our foremost contemporary challenge is arguably the reform and maintenance of the US-led international order in a period marked by intense domestic polarization and revisionist powers that seek to undermine American international leadership.

Polarization and partisanship are involved in every major political action in the contemporary environment. They serve to kill consensus, highlight the radical elements in each party, push for an “all or nothing” approach to compromise, and make good-faith policymaking nearly impossible. Polarization stalls efforts to combat perennial issues like climate change, physical and cyber security, and public health crises. There are no good answers for how to move past a polarized society, as it will require Americans to find common ground in community instead of in political parties or individualism, as argued by Robert Putnam, or perhaps consensus formed around a common threat, such as the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Crafting a cohesive, bipartisan foreign policy will be critical in fending off challenges from powerful, revisionist states like China and Russia. While China may have a greater stake in the liberal order than does Russia, both Beijing and Moscow have clearly expressed their desire to alter the current rules-based international order, remaking it in their favor to enhance their status as both regional and, potentially for China, a global hegemon.

The world today is not the same as it was 30 years ago. Nor will it be the same 30 years from now. Just as the United States led the liberal international order following the end of the Cold War, America today will continue leading well into the future. But this will take strong, practical, competent individuals who are prepared to make difficult decisions and formulate complex solutions, learn from past mistakes, and accurately identify and evaluate emerging threats and challenges to the US and Western nations. It will require creative, forward-looking solutions that consider American interests and those of our allies. The US will need elected leaders willing to put the well-being of the nation ahead of partisan issues and reelection interests, to look at facts and data rather than polling numbers. If the American foreign policy of the unipolar moment failed to live up to its expectations, what actions can policymakers and practitioners take today to ensure we keep the promise of a free, democratic, rules-based world order intact for future generations?


9 Ibid, 9.


11 Though this consensus was originally applied to Latin American nations in the mid-1980s, it soon became associated with privatization for former Soviet bloc countries. Irwin, “Washington Consensus?”


17 Ibid 301-324.


27 Walt, Hell, 6-7.
28 Ibid 6-9.
29 Ibid 10-11.
32 Walt, Hell, 217-235.
38 Ibid 22.
43 Biden, Interim NSSG, 10.


70 Verrender, “China,” *ABC News*.


94 Putnam, Upswing, 327.
100 Putnam, Upswing, 327.