Innovation and the Future of American Foreign Policy

Introduction

For over seven decades, the Student Conference on U.S. Affairs (SCUSA) has asked participants to focus on a worthwhile task: identify the core values and interests of the United States and propose policies for their advancement. This year’s conference examines the role of innovation as it pertains to this objective. Innovation, defined as the development of a new idea, method, or device to address a problem or need, affects many vital U.S. interests and values. In this sense, innovation encompasses the domains of national and global political economy, liberal democracy, modern technology, and national security. These domains intersect and influence each other in profound ways, often reflecting governmental decision-making, including the formulation of U.S. foreign policy. SCUSA 74 aims to explore how innovation in the fields of technology, democracy, political economy, and national security—driven by Washington but also by non-state actors such as NGOs and corporations—can impact the substance and effectiveness of U.S. policies in support of American power and principles.

This paper begins with a detailed examination of how innovation in the four arenas of technology, democracy, national security, and political economy may strengthen the pursuit of American values and interests. It then applies the concept of innovation and the four arenas to the 15 roundtable topics of SCUSA 74.

Technological Innovation

The benefits of technological innovation, such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), are clear. Historical evidence suggests that U.S. government policies fostering technological advancement have strengthened the capacity of the American state, enhanced the competitiveness of the national economy, and fortified the nation's security infrastructure. For example, U.S. investment in scientific research and development during the Cold War era stimulated the development of cutting-edge technologies. This concerted effort, in turn, bolstered the effectiveness of the state and ensured the international supremacy of the U.S. economy, creating a global superpower. Technological innovation has also played a pivotal role in enhancing the nation's security infrastructure. The development of advanced defense technologies, from missile defense systems to cybersecurity measures, has been essential to safeguarding American national security.

At the same time, technological innovation creates powerful disruptions, including the destabilization of traditional sectors of the U.S. economy and an increase in socio-economic inequality. This problem is exemplified by the widening wealth gap in the United States, where the benefits of technological progress have not been evenly distributed. Innovation, in the form of digital technologies, also has the potential to undermine democracy, both at home and abroad. In the hands of malign actors, these technologies become tools that jeopardize American interests and values. Examples include the manipulation of political discourse and the construction of surveillance systems by authoritarian states using the internet and social media. Even in established democracies, these forces raise concerns about the decaying integrity of the political process. In the United States, the
misuse of social media often cripples the ability of society to engage in rational discourse about the common good. In sum, technology may enhance, but also undermine, the values and interests that U.S. foreign (and domestic) policy is meant to safeguard.

Given these threats, should the U.S. pursue policies that establish a national and possibly global governance framework to regulate AI and other disruptive technologies? An increasing number of experts argue that a democratic state is better able than the market to effectively and intelligently regulate AI and similar technologies.11 If true, questions arise as to exactly how such regulation by the state should be conceptualized and institutionalized.12 Informed observers argue that any regulatory structure, located at the national or international level, should offer a stake to private technology companies as well as components of civil society.13 Determining how much power state and non-state actors should have in the regulation of technology—and how stringent such controls should be—will not be easy. Yet the failure to enact innovative regulations may allow serious threats to political systems, societies, and perhaps humanity itself to develop, as many industry leaders, policy experts, and academics have recently warned.14

National and Global Political Economy

A fundamental purpose of the domestic and foreign policies of the U.S. government is to increase the economic prosperity of the American people. Yet problems in the U.S. economy have left much of society disillusioned with the promise of the American Dream. Many of the innovations of the Biden Administration, in both domestic and foreign policy, are designed to address the economic plight of many Americans and counteract the political appeal of populist extremism for this group. The key components of “Bidenomics” as outlined by Jake Sullivan, President Biden’s National Security Advisor, comprise a “new consensus” to replace “a set of ideas that championed tax cutting and deregulation, privatization over public action and trade liberalization as an end in itself.”15

According to President Biden, capitalism alone is unable to generate consistent economic growth or stem socio-economic inequality. Policies that privilege market forces yield significant but uneven economic growth and also contribute to rising income inequality.16 By contrast, “Bidenomics” encompasses innovative government policies such as the Inflation Reduction Act and the CHIPS and Science Act which are intended to promote domestic production and job creation while reducing social disparities. The President also intends to use industrial subsidies to coax American capital invested abroad to return to the United States, thereby increasing the growth and competitiveness of U.S. companies. Evidence from countries like Germany, where the state actively supports a strong industrial base and a robust export sector, suggests that government policies can enhance economic resilience and job creation.17 Another important component of Bidenomics is the commitment to partially de-couple the American economy from that of China in the interest of both national security and supply chain reliability.

Some of these innovations go against conventional thinking about the sources of economic development, particularly adherence to free trade. Supporters respond that although the benefits of free trade in terms of greater economic efficiency are undeniable, relatively unfettered international trade has also made the U.S. vulnerable to supply chain disruptions and economic dependencies, as evidenced by recent events like the COVID-19 pandemic.18 The U.S. administration and its supporters
maintain that partial deglobalization, or "reshoring," will enhance economic resilience and national security by reducing America’s vulnerabilities to global shocks.

Critics of this approach maintain that it will likely create even greater problems. Partial deglobalization may result in a spiral of trade tensions and disrupt established economic relationships. The concept of "friendshoring" supply chains, while strengthening the security of the nation’s political economy, could strain relations with countries such as China that have long been important trade partners. Further, "de-risking" U.S. economic ties with China may have unforeseen shock effects, including broadly negative implications for global stability due to the intertwined nature of inter-state economics. Whether to favor one of these contending strategies, or to strike a balance between them, is a complex challenge for the United States as it navigates the evolving national and global economic landscape.

Threats to National Security: from Great Power Competition to Climate Change

Great power competition and threats from malign non-state actors represent significant challenges to U.S. national security and global influence. To counter or manage these threats effectively, the United States is likely to consider innovative policies. In the arena of homeland security, the U.S. government has powerful incentives to prioritize innovative approaches to protect domestic infrastructure and global supply chains. As noted by the Department of Homeland Security, critical infrastructure sectors are increasingly vulnerable to cyber threats and physical attacks. Innovations in cybersecurity technologies, threat intelligence sharing, and public-private partnerships are vital for safeguarding these assets and ensuring supply chain resilience. Moreover, the directive of the National Cybersecurity Strategy that the Office of Management and Budget create a 10-year plan to eliminate IT vulnerabilities underscores the need for long-term innovation to secure the nation's digital infrastructure. However, will the frequent occurrence of political paralysis in the U.S. government block the essential investments in research that are necessary to develop innovative cybersecurity defenses at home?

On the international front, innovative policies are essential to strengthen the U.S. system of alliances, particularly NATO (the North Atlantic Treaty Organization). The United States has powerful incentives to explore innovations that would enhance alliance responsiveness to established and emerging threats. Such reforms include: investing in joint military capabilities, fostering cyber defense cooperation, and developing strategies to counter hybrid threats.

Regarding the defense of Ukraine and Taiwan, the United States must draft innovative policies that provide sufficient military, economic, and political support. Innovative political-diplomatic measures and stronger economic engagement can complement military deterrence in protecting the sovereignty of these states, which is essential to the preservation of American power and its reliance on a rules-based international order. Yet such efforts will have to reckon with American domestic politics: will Washington be able to summon sufficient and consistent bi-partisan cooperation to fund Ukraine’s war and then the complex and costly task of reconstruction in a post-war Ukraine?

Climate change has emerged as a major threat to U.S. national security which requires innovative responses to safeguard American interests. Technology and policy innovation have made significant strides in developing effective tools for this fight. Advancements in renewable energy
technologies, carbon capture and storage, and sustainable agriculture hold promise for slowing climate change and reducing its negative impact. Transnational cooperation through treaties, such as a renewed U.S. push for a Paris Agreement, plays a crucial role in addressing this global challenge. However, the effectiveness of such treaties depends on national political will, robust enforcement mechanisms, and ongoing innovation in climate policy, technology, and finance.

Global migration is another profound challenge facing national governments and international institutions. Assuming the U.S. can generate sufficient bi-partisan cooperation, innovations that address the migration crisis must be multi-faceted in approach. Innovative U.S. policies should encompass humanitarian efforts, improved immigration systems, and regional cooperation. This includes identifying and addressing the root causes of migration, investing in regional development aid to reduce socio-economic incentives for illegal immigration, and reforming immigration policies to streamline legal pathways. International collaboration and dialogue, such as the Global Compact on Migration, can provide a framework for addressing migration challenges while respecting human rights and humanitarian principles.22

Democratic Values

The revitalization of the U.S. as a beacon of democracy for other countries requires an effective response to domestic challenges that have eroded faith in American institutions and values. One important reform would enhance the transparency and fairness of the electoral system. Implementing measures such as ranked-choice voting, campaign finance reform, and independent redistricting commissions would bolster public trust and demonstrate a renewed commitment to democratic principles. Evidence from countries like Canada and Germany, which have proportional electoral systems, suggests that such innovations can lead to more representative and effective governance.23

Recognizing that civic education is crucial to a democracy’s well-being, the U.S. should invest in comprehensive civic education programs that promote critical thinking, media literacy, and civic engagement from an early age. Evidence suggests that countries with robust civic education, such as Finland, have more informed, engaged, and tolerant citizens.24 Encouraging civic discourse and fostering a culture of respectful political debate can counteract divisive polarization and inspire other nations. Further, the U.S. must prioritize transparency and accountability. Strengthening ethics and anti-corruption measures within U.S. government institutions can bolster American democracy and serve as a model for other countries. Policies like the Foreign Agents Registration Act and the Lobbying Disclosure Act are important examples.

The U.S. faces a significant challenge in promoting democratic values abroad when much of the “Global South” appears uncertain about the worth of competing political models as represented by the West, China and Russia. The success of the democratic model in such an environment requires bold as well as nuanced strategies; American foreign policy has risen to similar challenges in its past. The U.S. should focus on showcasing the tangible benefits of democracy, including economic prosperity, individual freedoms, and social justice. This can be achieved through diplomatic efforts, cultural exchanges, and strategic partnerships.
The U.S. should strengthen its ties with nations in the “Global South” by expanding programs that provide expertise in democratic governance, capacity-building, and technical assistance that support regional democratic aspirations. Cultural exchanges, such as international educational programs and artistic collaborations, can showcase American values and foster cross-cultural understanding. The Fulbright Program, for instance, has played a significant role in advancing democratic values alongside international cooperation. To counter the appeal of authoritarian political models represented by China and Russia, the U.S. should emphasize the importance of democratic norms and human rights in international forums like the United Nations. By advocating for democratic values in multilateral settings, the U.S. can garner support from like-minded nations and raise awareness about the importance of upholding these principles. In such efforts, Washington must not adopt a superior posture but emphasize that democracy is a universal value whose content is not determined only by the West.

In an era of great power competition, it is particularly important for the U.S. to bolster its store of soft power: the ability to attract other countries to its regional and global leadership through the appeal of its political and economic institutions and values. Given its constrained resources, Washington should devise innovative policies that enable it to balance support for both democratic institutions and economic development. To feel compelled to choose between these two paths may be unwise: the evidence suggests that politics and economics are intertwined arenas that together can either foster or hinder stability and prosperity.

The rule of law, embodied in societal rules of behavior (laws) and adjudicated by an independent legal system, is a particularly important aspect of politics that supports good governance, representative democracy and inclusive economic growth. Countries that enjoy rule of law tend to have stronger democratic institutions, more vibrant and inclusive economies, and better governance. It seems clear that U.S. foreign aid designed to establish or strengthen rule of law (through such institutions as the U.S. Agency for International Development) have a multiplier effect, enhancing the quality of democratic institutions and market economics. Successful projects such as the Marshall Plan, which played a pivotal role in Europe's post-World War II recovery, highlight the foundational nature of rule of law and its positive effect on democracy and the economy.

The U.S. will attract other countries and cultures to its liberal and democratic values if it is perceived as a viable model for political and socio-economic development. If the U.S. is able to put its own political house in order, it will inevitably weaken the influence of China and Russia as alternative paths. Washington can also counter the disinformation campaigns of its adversaries, which ridicule American democracy as beset by chaos and inequality, by promoting fact-based narratives and media literacy. And it can deflect Chinese and Russian accusations of U.S. global hegemony by encouraging economic partnerships that promote transparency, sustainability, and adherence to international norms. In general, the U.S. should lead by example in trade and investment practices, emphasizing fair competition and adherence to global standards. And it should bolster existing alliances while forging new partnerships with countries that share its democratic values and security interests. One recent example is the Quad, comprised of the U.S., Japan, India, and Australia, which serves as a counterbalance to China’s influence in the Indo-Pacific region.
SCUSA 74 Theme Paper

Conclusion

The challenges facing American leadership in the 21st century are highly complex, requiring innovative approaches across various domains and problem sets. To address these challenges effectively, it is essential to recognize the significance of innovation not only as a technological driver but as a fundamental aspect of policy and governance. American institutions, both public and private, should foster appropriate innovations in support of rule of law, democracy, and economic development both at home and abroad. In an increasingly competitive global arena, advancing American interests and values will demand innovative organizations, approaches, and practices. If the United States is to maintain its position as the “indispensable nation” to global stability, freedom, and prosperity, it must continue to rely on successful innovation to advance both its principles and interests. As SCUSA 74’s student delegates debate different policy proposals, it is important to recognize that innovation is not simply a buzzword but a tangible force that can shape the future trajectory of American foreign policy.

Innovation and the SCUSA 74 Roundtable Topics

The 15 roundtables of SCUSA 74 will engage in discussions about why innovation may occur, what determines its substance, and how successful innovation may affect American values and interests. Each roundtable will address the phenomenon of innovation, particularly as it relates to our four arenas—technology, democracy, political economy, and security. SCUSA student delegates should use this Theme Paper and the short “background” paper for their roundtable to support their preparations for SCUSA 74.

Facing the Challenge of Climate Change

Rising global temperatures and turbulent weather patterns are affecting human and state security in the U.S. and abroad in ways that are becoming increasingly difficult to ignore. Drought and famine in East Africa, flooding in South Asia, melting permafrost and collapsing glaciers in the Arctic, and the slow poison of salinization in major river systems from the Mississippi to the Nile are exacting significant and rising costs in human lives and livelihood. Climate change now challenges global political, economic, and social stability in unprecedented ways. As the largest greenhouse gas emitter per capita, the U.S. is under particular pressure at home and abroad to foster innovations that tackle the challenges that stem from carbon-dependence.28

The 2022 Inflation Reduction Act outlines a plan for America to invest $370 billion dollars in clean energy and climate action to achieve the ambitious goal of a net-zero carbon economy by 2050 and also support international efforts to check global warming.29 Along with a focus on domestic R&D and infrastructure investment, the legislation takes aim at addressing some of the downstream human and state security implications of climate change. These include issues of gender and racial equity, community resilience and public health, food and water sustainability, and immigration and border security. For America to maintain its position of leadership in the global order, it must remain committed to providing investments and developing innovations that alleviate the challenge of climate change both at home and abroad.
Authoritarian and Democratic Political Institutions

In several regions of the world authoritarianism is on the rise while democratic values and institutions are often in retreat. The U.S. government must understand the diverse sources of this trend in order to craft effective policy responses. The precipitous collapse of the Soviet Union, with its legacy of totalitarian institutions and political culture, left enormous obstacles to the creation of democracy in most post-Soviet states, including Russia. Further to the West, in countries as diverse as France, Germany, and Hungary, authoritarian right-wing populist movements, fueled by mass economic and cultural grievances, have emerged that threaten representative government. The recent spate of military coups in Africa springs from still different causal factors, including weak democratic institutions, poor state capacity, immiserated societies, and emboldened authoritarian elites. The U.S. must develop innovative policies that address these very different sources of authoritarianism. For example, supporting markets and economic development in Africa will help expand the middle class and hopefully its interest in building legitimate and effective political institutions.

More generally, Western support for democracy in Ukraine and Taiwan will have powerful demonstration effects in authoritarian Russia and China. In its fight against authoritarianism, America must also strengthen its own democratic institutions and political culture. If the U.S. fails to do so, it may falter as a democratic model at a time when examples of successful democracy are increasingly needed.

The Politics and Economics of Space

The term "final frontier" now represents an indispensable foundation for human prosperity. In today's interconnected world, shaped by a ceaseless proliferation of Internet of Things (IoT) technologies, our reliance on satellites orbiting Earth for global commerce and social communication is unparalleled. However, space has also evolved into a crucial field for military power. Satellites play a pivotal role in reconnaissance and precision navigation. Concurrently, the development of anti-satellite (ASAT) and hypersonic weaponry has ushered in an era of unprecedented space militarization. This shift has prompted a race among both state and non-state actors, driven by the quest for either military dominance or economic advantages in space. The rising number of these space actors, coupled with the rapid evolution of space-based technologies and military capabilities, presents a monumental governance challenge.

The United States, as a leader in space, faces the formidable task of preserving both its military power and economic prosperity through the space domain while avoiding conflict escalation with competing states. Striking the proper balance requires a careful, multifaceted approach resting on international cooperation, diplomatic negotiations, and the development of norms and treaties governing activities in space.

International Institutions and the Global Order

The United States is the primary architect of many of the supranational organizations that provide structure to the international arena of states. In the wake of WWII, the U.S. led the push that founded global organizations to regulate and guide state behavior, including the United Nations (UN) and the Global Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT), later to evolve into the World Trade
Organization (WTO). The Bretton Woods Agreement established the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as a supervisory body to regulate currency and trade in the pursuit of global prosperity and institutionalized the dollar as the global currency. Despite the Cold War, the West persisted in its commitment to a liberal international order, supporting a matrix of institutions that provides rules for managing global problems ranging from space and global health to inter-state trade and international justice.

Today, however, this liberal system is under stress. U.S. power is waning in an increasingly multipolar world beset by transnational, nation-state, and non-state actor threats. For the United States, some of these problems may be self-inflicted wounds. Developing states have often levied accusations of neocolonialism and unequal burden-sharing at the U.S. and its partners. In addition to often refusing to ratify international legislation that might constrain its global actions, in recent years the U.S. has withdrawn or threatened to withdraw support for a number of organization, including the Paris Climate Agreement, UN Human Rights Council, UNESCO, NATO, and the WHO; for nearly two decades the U.S. has blocked the appointment of judges to the WTO appellate body, crippling the organization’s adjudication power. Meanwhile, China has become the center of a network of alternative institutions and development initiatives including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Asia Development Bank, the Belt and Road Initiative, and the BRICS. The United States should consider the negative role some of its policies play in weakening the resilience of the U.S.-led international order. To what extent is this behavior justified? How might the United States bolster its legitimacy and effectiveness as the preeminent international actor?

Tackling Human Distress Through Innovation

Human distress, encompassing physical insecurity, poverty, inequality, and other socio-economic challenges, has long been a global concern. Addressing these problems requires innovative strategies that draw on political will, technology, community engagement, and policy reform. For example, telemedicine holds great promise in improving and extending health care, thereby reducing human distress. It utilizes technology to provide healthcare services to remote areas, including mental health support. As treatment has become more accessible to a country’s population, initial studies reveal a reduction in symptoms of depression and anxiety across groups of countries. Community-driven initiatives, such as social impact organizations and grassroots movements, are also essential in empowering communities to identify and respond to their unique challenges. Moreover, policy innovation plays a pivotal role in tackling human distress. Universal Basic Income (UBI), for instance, offers financial stability to individuals and has been piloted in several countries. Addressing the challenges which create human distress through innovative strategies offers a promising path forward. Telemedicine, community engagement, and policy innovation are just a few examples of how to effectively confront these issues, harnessing the power of technology, social empowerment, and forward-thinking policy to create a more secure and equitable world.

Ensuring National and Global Economic Growth Through Innovation

Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and Gross National Product (GNP) stand as the predominant measures of a nation's economic well-being and trajectory. These metrics, along with their associated data on growth and per capita income, serve as consensus tools for assessing a country's prosperity. GDP and GNP often act as proxies for the standard of living and exhibit strong correlations with
changes in life expectancy. This view attributes economic growth primarily to increases in productivity, which, in turn, are driven by technological innovations. However, beneath this seemingly straightforward framework lies a complex web of causality, requiring nations to create the conditions necessary for innovation, technological progress, and productivity gains that propel economic growth. Innovation does not occur in a vacuum; it depends on various factors. These conditions include access to financial capital, both public and private, and to invest in education as well as research and development. Furthermore, the ability to participate in knowledge transfers, both domestically and internationally, plays a pivotal role. Finally, domestic political inclusiveness, stability, and the rule of law are essential prerequisites for fostering innovation and ensuring sustained growth.

Navigating the path to economic growth is not without its challenges. It involves managing various contradictory aims and policies that are often in tension. These include the potential risks of government intervention in free markets, which can lead to perverse outcomes, and the conundrum of governments "picking winners" through industrial policies. Fiscal policy, involving deficit spending and national debt, must also be carefully balanced to avoid inflation. Additionally, concerns about currency valuations, current account balances, and manufacturing employment intersect with debates over liberal free trade agreements versus economic protectionist policies. Nations must carefully consider these interests and trade-offs while striving to maintain a position on the frontier of innovation and achieve sustainable economic growth. The interplay between these complex factors illustrates the intricate nature of economic progress and the need for policymakers and economists to embrace a nuanced, multifaceted approach to measuring, understanding, and fostering economic well-being. In this complex tapestry of economic growth, GDP and GNP are just one thread, and their limitations become evident in light of the multitude of factors that influence a nation's prosperity.

**The Threat and Promise of Innovative Technologies**

For the United States, long the world leader in technological innovation, the challenge is not only in creating a technology, but shaping the policy world in which it is used. The rapid and accelerating evolution of technology no longer allows humans the time to analyze and consider the repercussions for these innovations to our lives and society. Often policy comes as an afterthought following misuse and struggles to establish and enforce guidelines to ensure safe, equitable, ethical, and sustainable adoption of innovative technology. Central questions in this field include not only concerns about how the U.S. stays on the cutting edge of technology, but also how it exerts influence to shape the policy environment around emerging capabilities.

Many scientific breakthroughs, along with their intended constructive application, carry the potential for dual use in ways that challenge security and ethical frameworks. Artificial intelligence (AI) coupled to any number of systems elicits intense debates about the costs and benefits of innovation. For example, lethal autonomous weapon systems (LAWS) seem to remove the arbitrary human element from war but raise significant concerns, from the threat of malign actors hacking into such systems to the moral implications of their use. The genome-editing techniques of clustered regularly interspaced short palindromic repeats (CRISPR), could be used to cure hereditary diseases, eliminate malaria-bearing mosquitos, or increase crop yields and nutrition to feed growing global populations. But such techniques could also be used to engineer custom pathogens for biowarfare. Hypersonic technology might be a step forward in future space exploration and exploitation. At the same time, this technological innovation marks a notable expansion of the arsenals of conventional
and nuclear missiles – bringing with it great potential for destabilizing international security by overturning the deterrent strategies of numerous countries.

Harmful long-term and down-stream effects to social equity and environmental resiliency are also great potential dangers, especially in the increasingly fragile world of climate change. AI-enabled technology will deepen and widen socio-economic fissures within and across societies according to the degree of access to such technology. Blockchain, best known as the ledger for BitCoin but really a decentralized, information-storing technology with applications across sectors, offers appealing transparency while simultaneously generating data privacy worries. Scalability and energy demands are also concerns.

The Role of Innovation in U.S. Military Affairs

Innovation is a cornerstone in the development of American military power. The United States continues to face a dynamic and complex global landscape, where adversaries are harnessing cutting-edge technologies and unconventional strategies. To maintain its military supremacy, the U.S. military continually emphasizes innovation across various dimensions. One key area of innovation is technology. The U.S. military leverages emerging technologies like artificial intelligence, autonomous systems, quantum computing, and cyber capabilities to gain and maintain a competitive edge in areas such as command and control, intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, and precision weaponry. These innovations enhance situational awareness, operational efficiency, and the ability to respond to evolving threats. While the U.S. has enjoyed a technological edge for several decades, it must continue to innovate if it seeks to maintain its military supremacy among rising threats.

Innovation in military doctrine and strategy is equally essential. Concepts like Multi-Domain Operations (MDO) aim to synchronize efforts across all branches of the military and domains to maximize effectiveness and the Department of Defense must continue to explore additional shifts in thinking to match current and future threats. Furthermore, the military must encourage a culture of innovation, fostering collaboration with academia, private industry, and research institutions. Initiatives like the Defense Innovation Unit (DIU) support the integration of groundbreaking technologies into military operations and must remain empowered to force change when needed. Innovation remains a linchpin in modern American military affairs, enabling the U.S. to adapt to evolving challenges, maintain a technological edge, and strengthen its national security posture. By investing in technology, refining military doctrine, and promoting a culture of innovation, the U.S. military can expect to remain at the forefront of military capabilities and strategic thinking.

Latin America (includes Central and South America)

An important focus of the SCUSA roundtable on Latin America will be an assessment of the strength and character of American power and authority among its southern neighbors. Is U.S. influence in decline in the region, and if so, what innovative steps might Washington take to reverse the trend? How might the United States counter the populist slide in Mexico and other states and shore up democratic norms and institutions in the region? How should the United States address the surge of left-wing politics in Chile, Peru, and other countries? Beneath – and helping to explain – these justified concerns with the health of democracy lies the fundamental problem of weak states throughout the region that are often unable to cope with endemic poverty, deliver social services, or
ensure physical security from criminal gangs. These “push factors” contribute to mass migration to the U.S. border, a problem that strongly resonates in American partisan domestic politics. Can the United States develop innovative policies that address the poverty, socio-economic stagnation and inequality, and political polarization that afflicts much of the region, which in turn help cause political instability and weakened state capacity?

Sub-Saharan Africa

The current global interest in Sub-Saharan Africa has often been described as a new "scramble," underscoring the renewed enthusiasm of external actors for this region, given its immense potential. With a youthful but underutilized population, the region also possesses significant resource wealth, underscoring its current and ever-growing significance to both global trade and competition. In this context, it is essential to examine the current U.S. strategy toward Sub-Saharan Africa. Understanding the foreign policy strategies and tools of influence employed by other extra-regional actors is equally crucial. It is hoped that innovative strategies for reshaping engagement with Sub-Saharan Africa will help ensure a prosperous and sustainable future for both the U.S. and African nations.

The United States must actively engage with Sub-Saharan Africa, recognizing the region's dynamism and agency. Collaboration, investment in infrastructure, technology, education, and healthcare, and support for local governance and sustainable development are key components of a mutually beneficial approach. Moreover, fostering partnerships with African states and organizations will be vital in addressing shared challenges, including economic development, regional security, and global issues like climate change. In this ever-evolving geopolitical landscape, it is crucial for the United States to acknowledge the active role of African nations and work in concert with them to chart a path that advances mutual interests while fostering sustainable development. Sub-Saharan Africa's potential is immense, and the future of the region will depend on the ability of all stakeholders to collaborate effectively. Washington’s embrace of this approach would constitute an important innovation in re-conceptualizing America’s relations with the sub-continent.

Russia and Eurasia: Blunting Moscow’s Invasion

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022 poses the greatest threat to European security in decades. The United States and its allies have already adopted a number of innovative policies to counter Russian aggression, including massive economic and military-technical assistance. They have also led the way in freezing Russian assets abroad and creating a stringent and creative system of sanctions with wide-ranging targets. Perhaps as important, the International Criminal Court has issued an arrest warrant for Vladimir Putin regarding alleged war crimes.

Yet the course of the war is still uncertain. Should the United States increase its military and on-lethal aid to Ukraine with the goal of defeating Russia on the battlefield, which might risk the escalation of the conflict, perhaps to include NATO? Or should Washington place more emphasis on diplomacy, even if that leads to suboptimal conditions for Ukraine (e.g., the “freezing” of lines of contact with Russian forces well within Ukraine’s legal borders)? Despite Russia’s aggression, should the United States seek to maintain avenues of dialogue and even cooperation with Russia in arenas such as arms control and space, or should it treat Moscow as an international pariah? Will massive
Western aid to Ukraine weaken the unity of the West as the costs of the war escalate for individual countries and the global economy? Are there innovative ways to help counter “war fatigue” in the West and in Ukraine? And how will the task of re-building a devastated Ukraine be accomplished? How should the United States lead in the reconstruction of Ukraine and the safeguarding of its security in the future? Should Washington adopt innovative ways to enable Ukraine to join the EU or even NATO (once the war is concluded)?

China and the Pacific

U.S. policy regarding China and the Pacific are shaped by a complex web of economic, security, and diplomatic considerations, requiring innovative approaches to navigate this pivotal region. At the core of America’s concerns is China's rapid rise and assertiveness, which challenge U.S. interests and regional stability. Economic worries are also important, including trade imbalances, intellectual property theft, and market access issues – all persistent sources of tension. A key question is how might the U.S. ensure fair and reciprocal economic relations with China while also safeguarding its security interests?

As the primary challenger to American power, China has raised alarm in Washington through its military modernization, territorial disputes in the South China Sea, and overall assertive posture in the region. The U.S. aims to maintain its role as the global hegemon through presence and partnerships in the Indo-Pacific, promoting regional stability and protecting freedom of navigation. Innovative policy approaches are crucial to protect these interests and address both concerns and threats. U.S. policymakers must engage in creative diplomacy, leverage technological advancements, and forge new partnerships in the region. A dynamic, whole-of-government strategy would seem necessary to address the evolving challenges posed by China's ascent in the Pacific.

Europe: Domestic Challenges and External Aggression

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has united much of the West given the strong threat to its shared values and interests. U.S. leadership and the European Union have marshaled billions of dollars in military and economic aid for beleaguered Ukraine. NATO, thought by many to be in terminal decline before the war, is now stronger than ever, with member states pledging higher military budgets. Nevertheless, previous cultural, political, and economic fault lines within the West, including Europe, have not disappeared and often strengthen the spread of war fatigue or even outright opposition to sustained support for Ukraine.

Of central concern is the durability of intra-European cooperation and support for Ukraine in the face of the Russian threat. The socio-economic stress produced by the war (inflation, mass immigration, etc.) as well as the fear of escalation beyond Ukraine has created deep divisions between and within some countries. In Germany, an anchor of support for Ukraine, public opinion is evenly divided over whether to pressures Ukraine to negotiate with Russia to end the war. Across the Atlantic, opinion among Republican voters in the U.S. has been trending against any increase in aid to Ukraine. If Western support for Ukraine declines, Ukrainian resolve could falter and setbacks on the battlefield multiply. Should the EU attempt to head off such an outcome by offering Ukraine a fast-track to membership? Or would the prospect of EU membership for Ukraine deepen disagreements in Europe over the war and post-war conditions? Another danger to European unity is right-wing
authoritarian populism which is on the rise in France, Hungary, Poland, and Italy. What kinds of innovative policies might Washington adopt to buttress the wartime cohesion of the continent as well as its democratic norms and institutions?

Middle East: Framing a Coherent Policy Toward Key Players

The United States faces multifaceted challenges in the Middle East, characterized by strategic competition with adversaries and the need to maintain vital partnerships. To advance its interests in this complex region, the U.S. can leverage innovative approaches, practices, and collaborations. Strategic competition with adversaries, such as China, Russia, and Iran, has evolved into unconventional arenas, creating opportunities for innovation. China's strategy, a mix of political, economic, and military tools of national power, has reshaped regional dynamics and presented evolving dilemmas for the U.S. Meanwhile, Russia has augmented its presence in the region with conventional forces in Syria while Iran has enhanced its state, non-state, and soft power initiatives. To effectively compete with these adversaries, the U.S. must innovate and adopt a hybrid warfare strategy and explore a whole-of-government approach.

Maintaining partnerships in the region is vital. The Abraham Accords, initiated in 2020, exemplify an innovative diplomatic endeavor in the region. This agreement normalized relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, and later incorporated Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan. However, the recent Israel-Hamas war seriously threatens recent gains in regional cooperation as well the prospects for future agreements, particularly with Saudia Arabia. How might the U.S. guard against this? How should the United States prepare for the possibility of a broader regional conflict sparked by the war between Israel and Hamas?

The Arctic: Managing the Scramble for Influence

Great power competition and the increase in human activity in the Arctic as a result of the depletion of Arctic ice have made the vast region a source of growing political, economic, military, and ecological interest as well as concern. Balancing engagement and competition with other powers, particularly Russia and China, is a central challenge for U.S. foreign policy. As the planet warms the age of Arctic exceptionalism—the idea that this inhospitable region was largely beyond the scope of great power competition—is ending. In addition to the eight Arctic states (the U.S., Canada, Iceland, Denmark (through Greenland), Sweden, Finland, Norway, and Russia), China has recently declared itself a “near-Arctic state” and, with its “Polar Silk Road” initiative, joined scramble to exploit the newly accessible territory seeking economic and strategic advantage.

Economically, exploitation of the mineral and fossil fuel wealth found beneath the ice could be essential to help fuel the world’s modern economies as well as provide the resources to transition to a greener future. Science, citing studies from the U.S. Geological Survey, estimates the arctic contains 13% of the world's oil and 30% of its gas. Cobalt, graphite, lithium, and rare earth minerals essential for the manufacture of batteries, semi-conductors and other high-tech products are similarly abundant, an appeal especially for states looking to decrease reliance on China, which has the largest currently accessible deposits. Access to new fisheries could also be a boon for growing populations. Finally, if melting sea ice could clear at least seasonally navigable passages along a northern maritime route, that
could cut transport times. This more open access lies also at the heart of Arctic security concerns. Russia is the current world leader in Arctic exploitation technology and has been aggressively expanding its military footprint north of the Arctic circle.\textsuperscript{32} Denser fortification and more frequent navigation of this region increases the opportunities for miscalculation and possibly conflict between Russia and the U.S. or one of its allies. The Arctic Council seeks to address some of the coordination and cooperation problems that are emerging. But additional policies and institutions are clearly required to manage rising tensions. Which kinds of innovations might Washington propose and implement?

13 Ibid.


28 Center for Climate and Energy Solutions. “Global Emissions.” https://www.c2es.org/content/international-emissions/


