The Perils of Isolationism

The World Still Needs America—and America Still Needs the World

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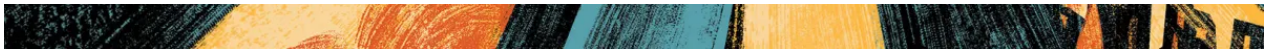

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In times of uncertainty, people reach for historical analogies. After 9/11, George W. Bush administration officials invoked Pearl Harbor as a standard comparison in processing the intelligence failure that led to the attack. Secretary of State Colin Powell referred to Imperial Japan's attack in making the case that Washington should deliver an ultimatum to the Taliban, saying, "Decent countries don't launch surprise attacks." And as officials in the Situation Room tried to assess progress in Afghanistan and, later, Iraq, another analogy came up more than a few times: U.S. President Lyndon Johnson's disastrous reliance on body counts in Vietnam. Even if history doesn't repeat itself, it sometimes rhymes.

Today's favorite analogy is the Cold War. The United States again faces an adversary that has global reach and insatiable ambition, with China taking the place of the Soviet Union. This is a particularly attractive comparison, of course, because the United States and its allies won the Cold War. But the current period is not a Cold War redux. It is more dangerous.

China is not the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union was self-isolating, preferring autarky to integration, whereas China ended its isolation in the late 1970s. A second difference between the Soviet Union and China is the role of ideology. Under the Brezhnev Doctrine that governed Eastern Europe, an ally had to be a carbon copy of Soviet-style communism. China, by contrast, is largely agnostic about the internal composition of other states. It fiercely defends the primacy and superiority of the Chinese Communist Party but does not insist that others do the equivalent, even if it is happy to support authoritarian states by exporting its surveillance technology and social media services.

So if the current competition is not Cold War 2.0, then what is it? Giving in to the impulse to find historical references, if not analogies, one may find more food for thought in the imperialism of the late nineteenth century and the zero-sum economies of the interwar period. Now, as then, revisionist powers are acquiring territory through force, and the international order is breaking down. But perhaps the most striking and worrying similarity is that today, as in the previous eras, the United States is tempted to turn inward.

THE REVENGE OF GEOPOLITICS

While previous eras of competition were characterized by great-power clashes, during the Cold War, territorial conflict was fought largely through proxies, as in Angola and Nicaragua. Moscow mostly confined its use of military force to its own sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, as when it crushed uprisings in Hungary and Czechoslovakia. The 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan crossed a new line, but the move did not fundamentally challenge U.S. interests, and the conflict eventually became a proxy war. Where Soviet and U.S. forces did face each other directly, across the German divide, the extreme danger of the two Berlin crises gave way to a kind of tense stability thanks to nuclear deterrence.

Today's security landscape features the danger of direct military conflict between great powers. China's territorial claims challenge U.S. allies from Japan to the Philippines

and other U.S. partners in the region, such as India and Vietnam. Long-held U.S. interests such as freedom of navigation run into direct conflict with China's maritime ambitions.

Then there is Taiwan. An attack on Taiwan would require a U.S. military response, even if the policy of "strategic ambiguity" created uncertainty about the exact nature of it. For years, the United States has acted as a kind of rheostat in the Taiwan Strait, with the goal of preserving the status quo. Since 1979, administrations from both parties have sold arms to Taiwan. President Bill Clinton deployed the USS *Independence* to the strait in 1996 in response to Beijing's aggressive activity. In 2003, the Bush administration publicly chastised Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian when he proposed a referendum that sounded very much like a vote on independence. All along, the goal was to maintain—or occasionally, restore—what had become a relatively stable status quo.

Xi has turned out to be a true Marxist.

In recent years, Beijing's aggressive military activities around Taiwan have challenged that equilibrium. In Washington, strategic ambiguity has largely given way to open discussion of how to deter and, if necessary, repel a Chinese invasion. But Beijing could threaten Taiwan in other ways. It could blockade the island, as Chinese forces have practiced in exercises. Or it could seize small, uninhabited Taiwanese islands, cut underwater cables, or launch large-scale cyberattacks. These strategies might be smarter than a risky and difficult assault on Taiwan and would complicate a U.S. response.

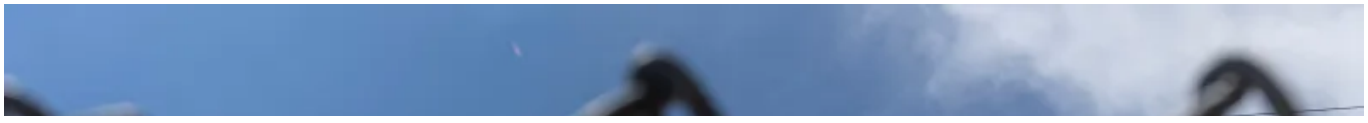
The overarching point is that Beijing has Taiwan in its sights. Chinese leader Xi Jinping, who views the island as a rogue province, wants to complete the restoration of China and take his place in the pantheon of leaders next to Mao Zedong. Hong Kong is now effectively a province of China, and bringing Taiwan to heel would fulfill Xi's ambition. That risks open conflict between U.S. and Chinese forces.

Alarmingly, the United States and China still have none of the deconfliction measures in place that the United States and Russia do. During the 2008 war in Georgia, for

instance, Michael Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, had ongoing contact with his Russian counterpart, Nikolai Makarov, so as to avoid an incident as the U.S. Air Force flew Georgian troops home from Iraq to join the fight. Compare that with 2001, when a hot-dogging Chinese pilot hit a U.S. reconnaissance plane and forced it to the ground. The crew was detained on Hainan Island, and for three days, Washington was unable to make high-level contact with the Chinese leadership. I was national security adviser at the time. Finally, I located my Chinese counterpart, who was on a trip in Argentina, and got the Argentines to take a phone to him at a barbecue. "Tell your leaders to take our call," I implored. Only then were we able to defuse the crisis and free the crew. The reopening of military-to-military contacts with China earlier this year, after a four-year freeze, was a welcome development. But it is a far cry from the types of procedures and lines of communication needed to prevent accidental catastrophe.

China's conventional military modernization is impressive and accelerating. The country now has the largest navy in the world, with over 370 ships and submarines. The growth in China's nuclear arsenal is also alarming. While the United States and the Soviet Union came to a more or less common understanding of how to maintain the nuclear equilibrium during the Cold War, that was a two-player game. If China's nuclear modernization continues, the world will face a more complicated, multiplayer scenario—and without the safety net that Moscow and Washington developed.

The potential for conflict comes against the backdrop of an arms race in revolutionary technologies: artificial intelligence, quantum computing, synthetic biology, robotics, advances in space, and others. In 2017, Xi gave a speech in which he declared that China would surpass the United States in these frontier technologies by 2035. Although he was undoubtedly trying to rally China's scientists and engineers, it may be a speech he has come to regret. Just as it was after the Soviet Union launched the Sputnik satellite, the United States was forced to confront the possibility that it could lose a technological race to its main adversary—a realization that has spurred a concerted pushback from Washington.



Shipping containers in Oakland, California, July 2022
CARLOS BARRIA / REUTERS

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020, the United States suddenly understood further vulnerabilities. The supply chain for everything from pharmacological inputs to rare-earth minerals depended on China. Beijing had taken the lead in industries that the United States once dominated, such as the production of batteries. Access to high-end semiconductors, an industry created by American giants such as Intel, turned out to depend on the security of Taiwan, where 90 percent of advanced chip making takes place.

It is hard to overstate the shock and sense of betrayal that gripped U.S. leaders. U.S. policy toward China was always something of an experiment, with proponents of economic engagement betting that it would induce political reform. For decades, the benefits flowing from the bet seemed to outweigh the downsides. Even if there were problems with intellectual property protection and market access (and there were), Chinese domestic growth fueled international economic growth. China was a hot market, a good place to invest, and a valued supplier of low-cost labor. Supply chains stretched from China across the world. By the time China joined the World Trade Organization, in 2001, the total trade volume between the United States and China

had increased roughly fivefold over the previous decade, reaching $120 billion. It seemed inevitable that China would change internally, since economic liberalization and political control were ultimately incompatible. Xi came to power agreeing with this maxim, but not in the way the West had hoped: instead of economic liberalization, he chose political control.

Not surprisingly, the United States eventually reversed course, beginning with the Trump administration and continuing through the Biden administration. A bipartisan agreement emerged that China's behavior was unacceptable. As a result, the United States' technological decoupling from China is now well underway, and a labyrinth of restrictions impedes outbound and inbound investment. For now, American universities remain open to training Chinese graduate students and to international collaboration, both of which have significant benefits for the U.S. scientific community. But there is far more awareness of the challenge that these activities can pose for national security.

So far, however, decoupling does not extend to the full range of commercial activity. The international economy will still be well served by trade and investment between the world's two largest economies. The dream of seamless integration may be dead, but there are benefits—including to global stability—if Beijing continues to have a stake in the international system. Some problems, such as climate change, will be difficult to address without China's involvement. Washington and Beijing will need to find a new basis for a workable relationship.

THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE REBORN

In the final 2012 presidential debate, U.S. President Barack Obama argued that his opponent, Mitt Romney, was overhyping the danger from Russia, suggesting that the country was no longer a geopolitical threat. With the 2014 annexation of Crimea, it became clear that Russian President Vladimir Putin begged to differ.

The next step, Putin's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, has brought his ambition to restore the Russian Empire face to face with the redlines of Article 5 of NATO's founding treaty, which stipulates that an attack on one member is treated as an attack on all.

Early in the war, NATO worried that Moscow might attack supply lines in Poland and Romania, both members of the alliance. So far, Putin has shown no appetite for triggering Article 5, but the Black Sea (which the tsars considered a Russian lake) has again become a source of conflict and tension. Remarkably, Ukraine, a country that barely has a navy, has successfully challenged Russian naval power and can now move grain along its own coastline. Even more devastating for Putin, his gambit has produced a strategic alignment among Europe, the United States, and much of the rest of the world, leading to extensive sanctions against Russia. It is now an isolated and heavily militarized state.

Putin surely never thought it would turn out this way. Moscow initially predicted Ukraine would fall within days of the invasion. Russian forces were carrying three days' worth of provisions and dress uniforms for the parade they expected to hold in Kyiv. The embarrassing first year of the war exposed the weaknesses of the Russian armed forces, which turned out to be riddled with corruption and incompetence. But as it has done throughout its history, Russia has stabilized the front, relying on old-fashioned tactics such as human wave attacks, trenches, and land mines. The incremental way in which the United States and its allies supplied weapons to Ukraine —first debating whether to send tanks, then doing so, and so on—gave Moscow breathing room to mobilize its defense industrial base and throw its huge manpower advantage at the Ukrainians.

Great-power DNA is still very much in the American genome.

Still, the economic toll will haunt Moscow for years to come. An estimated one million Russians fled their country in response to Putin's war, many of them young and well educated. Russia's oil and gas industry has been crippled by the loss of important markets and the withdrawal of the multinational oil giants BP, Exxon, and Shell. Russia's talented central banker, Elvira Nabiullina, has covered up many of the economy's vulnerabilities, walking a tightrope without access to the $300 billion in frozen Russian assets held in the West, and China has stepped in to take off some of the pressure. But the cracks in the Russian economy are showing. According to a

report commissioned for Gazprom, the majority-state-owned energy giant, the company's revenue will stay below its pre-war level for at least ten years thanks to the effects of the invasion.

Thoughtful economic players in Moscow are worried. But Putin cannot lose this war, and he is willing to sacrifice everything to stave off disaster. As Germany's experience in the interwar period suggests, an isolated, militarized, declining power is exceedingly dangerous.

The challenge is complicated by Russia's growing cooperation with China, Iran, and North Korea. The four countries have a common cause: to undermine and replace the U.S.-led international system that they detest. Still, it is worth noting that their strategic interests are not easy to harmonize. Beijing cannot let Putin lose but likely has no real enthusiasm for his adventurism on behalf of a new Russian empire—particularly if it puts China in the cross hairs for secondary sanctions on its own struggling economy.

Meanwhile, the growth of Chinese power in Central Asia and beyond is not likely to warm the hearts of the xenophobes in the Kremlin. China's ambitions complicate Russia's relations with India, a long-standing military partner that is now turning more toward the United States. Russia's dalliance with North Korea complicates its own relationship with South Korea—and China's, as well. Iran terrifies both Russia and China as it moves closer to developing a nuclear weapon. Tehran's proxies are a constant source of trouble in the Middle East: the Houthis endanger shipping in the Red Sea, Hamas recklessly launched a war with Israel, Hezbollah in Lebanon threatens to widen that war into a regional conflagration, and militias in Iraq and Syria that Tehran does not always seem to control have carried out attacks on U.S. military personnel. A nasty and unstable Middle East is not good for Russia or China. And none of the three powers really trusts North Korea's erratic leader, Kim Jong Un.

That said, international politics has always made for strange bedfellows when revisionist powers seek to undo the status quo. And they can do a lot of collective damage despite their differences.

THE CRUMBLING ORDER

The post–World War II liberal order was a direct response to the horrors of the interwar period. The United States and its allies looked back on the economic depression and international aggression of the 1920s and 1930s and located the cause in beggar-thy-neighbor protectionism, currency manipulation, and violent quests for resources—for example, leading to the aggressive behavior by Imperial Japan in the Pacific. The absence of the United States as a kind of offshore mediator also contributed to the breakdown of order. The one effort to build a moderating institution after World War I, the League of Nations, proved to be a pathetic disgrace, covering aggression rather than confronting it. Asian and European powers, left to their own devices, fell into catastrophic conflict.

After World War II, the United States and its allies built an economic order that was no longer zero-sum. At the Bretton Woods conference, they laid the groundwork for the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (the predecessor of the World Trade Organization), which together promoted the free movement of goods and services and stimulated international economic growth. For the most part, it was a wildly successful strategy. Global GDP grew and grew, surpassing the $100 trillion mark in 2022.

The companion to this "economic commons" was a "security commons" that was also led by the United States. Washington committed to the defense of Europe through NATO's Article 5, which, after the Soviet Union's successful nuclear test in 1949, essentially meant pledging to trade New York for London or Washington for Bonn. A similar U.S. commitment to Japan allowed that country to replace the legacy of its hated imperial military with self-defense forces and a "peace constitution," easing relations with its neighbors. By 1953, South Korea also had a U.S. security guarantee, ensuring peace on the Korean Peninsula. As the United Kingdom and France stepped back from the Middle East after the 1956 Suez crisis, the United States became the guarantor of freedom of navigation in the region and, in time, its major stabilizing force.

U.S. and British troops near Nurmsi, Estonia, May 2024
INTS KALNINS / REUTERS

Today's international system is not yet a throwback to the early twentieth century. The death of globalization is often overstated, but the rush to pursue onshoring, near-shoring, and "friend shoring," largely in reaction to China, does portend a weakening of integration. The United States has been largely absent from negotiations on trade for almost a decade now. It's hard to recall the last time that an American politician gave a spirited defense of free trade. The new consensus raises the question: Can the aspiration for the freer movement of goods and services survive the United States' absence from the game?

Globalization will continue in some form. But the sense that it is a positive force has lost steam. Consider the way countries acted in response to 9/11 versus how they acted in response to the pandemic. After 9/11, the world united in tackling terrorism, a problem that almost every country was experiencing in some form. Within a few weeks of the attack, the UN Security Council unanimously passed a resolution allowing the tracking of terrorist financing across borders. Countries quickly harmonized their airport security standards. The United States soon joined with other

countries to create the Proliferation Security Initiative, a forum for sharing information on suspicious cargo that would grow to include over 100 member states. Fast-forward to 2020, and the world saw the revenge of the sovereign state. International institutions were compromised, the chief example being the World Health Organization, which had grown too close to China. Travel restrictions, bans on the export of protective gear, and claims on vaccines complicated the road to recovery.

With the growing chasm between the United States and its allies on one side and China and Russia on the other, it is hard to imagine this trend reversing. Economic integration, which after the collapse of the Soviet Union was thought to be a common project for growth and peace, has given way to a zero-sum quest for territory, markets, and innovation. Still, one would hope that humankind has learned from the disastrous consequences of protectionism and isolationism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. So how can it avoid a repeat of history?

ANOTHER TWILIGHT STRUGGLE

The United States might take the advice that the diplomat George Kennan gave in his famous "Long Telegram" of 1946. Kennan advised Washington to deny the Soviet Union the easy course of external expansion until it was forced to deal with its own internal contradictions. This was prescient, as four decades later, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's attempts to reform a fundamentally rotten system wound up collapsing it instead.

Today, Russia's internal contradictions are obvious. Putin has undone 30-plus years of Russian integration into the international economy and relies on a network of opportunistic states that throw crumbs his way to sustain his regime. No one knows how long this shell of Russian greatness can survive, but it can do a lot of harm before it cracks. Resisting and deterring Russian military aggression is essential until it does.

Putin counts on a cowed and poorly informed population, and his regime indoctrinates young people in ways that are reminiscent of the Hitler Youth. The announcement this June that Russian children will attend summer camps in North

Korea, of all places, is stunning. Russians, once able to travel and study abroad, now face a different future. They must make sacrifices, Putin tells them, in the service of "Mother Russia."

Yet Russia's human potential has always been great, despite what often seems like a deliberate plot by its leaders to destroy it. It is incumbent on the United States, Europe, and others to keep some connection to the Russian people. Russians should be allowed, when possible, to study and work abroad. Efforts, open and covert, should be made to pierce Putin's propaganda, particularly in the cities, where he is neither trusted nor liked. Finally, the Russian opposition cannot be abandoned. The Baltic states house much of the organization built by the activist Alexei Navalny, who died in a Siberian prison in February. He was one of the few leaders who had a real following in much of Russia. His death cannot be the end of his cause.

Isolation has never been the answer to the United States' security or prosperity.

The case of Solidarity, the Polish trade union, provides an important lesson in how to nurture antiauthoritarian movements. When Poland's Soviet-aligned regime declared martial law in 1981, Solidarity's leader, Lech Walesa, went underground with his organization. The group was sustained by an odd troika: the Reagan administration's CIA, the AFL-CIO, and the Vatican (and its Polish-born pope, John Paul II). Solidarity received relatively simple support from abroad, such as cash and printing presses. But when a political opening came in 1989, Walesa and company were ready to step in and lead a relatively smooth transition to democracy. The main lesson is that determined efforts can sustain opposition movements, as hard as that might be in Putin's Russia.

China's future is by no means as bleak as Russia's. Yet China, too, has internal contradictions. The country is experiencing a rapid demographic inversion rarely seen outside of war. Births have declined by more than 50 percent since 2016, such that the total fertility rate is approaching 1.0. The one-child policy, put in place in 1979 and brutally enforced for decades, was the kind of mistake that only an authoritarian

regime could have made, and now, millions of Chinese men don't have mates. Since the policy ended in 2016, the state has tried to browbeat women into having children, turning women's rights into a crusade for childbearing—yet more evidence of the panic in Beijing.

Another contradiction stems from the uneasy coexistence of capitalism and authoritarian communism. Xi has turned out to be a true Marxist. China's golden age of private sector–led growth has slowed in large part because of the Chinese Communist Party's anxiety about alternative sources of power. China used to lead the world in online education startups, but in 2021, the government cracked down on them because it could not reliably monitor their content. A once thriving entrepreneurial culture has withered away. China's aggressive behavior toward foreigners has exposed other contradictions. Xi knows that China needs foreign direct investment, and he courts corporate leaders from across the world. But then, a Western firm's offices are raided or one of its Chinese employees is detained, and, not surprisingly, a trust deficit grows between Beijing and foreign investors.

China is also suffering a trust deficit with its youth. Young Chinese citizens may be proud of their country, but a 20 percent youth unemployment rate has undermined their optimism for the future. Xi's heavy-handed propagation of "Xi Jinping Thought" turns them off. This has led them to adopt an attitude of what is known colloquially as "lying flat," a passive-aggressive stance of going along to get along while harboring no loyalty or enthusiasm for the regime. Now is thus not the time to isolate Chinese youth but the time to welcome them to study in the United States. As Nicholas Burns, the U.S. ambassador to China, has noted, a regime that goes out of its way to intimidate its citizens to discourage them from engaging with Americans is not a confident regime. Indeed, it is a signal for the United States to keep pushing for connections to the Chinese people.

Meanwhile, Washington will need to maintain economic pressure on the revisionist powers. It should continue isolating Russia, with an eye toward arresting Beijing's creeping support for the Kremlin. But it should refrain from imposing blunt sanctions against China, since they would be ineffective and counterproductive, crippling the U.S. economy in the process. Targeted sanctions, by contrast, may slow Beijing's

military and technological progress, at least for a while. Iran is much more vulnerable. Never again should Washington unfreeze Iranian assets, as the Biden administration did as part of a deal to release five imprisoned Americans. Efforts to find moderates among Iran's theocrats are doomed to failure and serve only to allow the mullahs to escape the contradictions of their unpopular, aggressive, and incompetent regime.

WHAT IT TAKES

This strategy will require investment. The United States needs to maintain the defense capabilities sufficient to deny China, Russia, and Iran their strategic goals. The war in Ukraine has revealed weaknesses in the U.S. defense industrial base that must be remedied. Critical reforms need to be made to the defense budgeting process, which is inadequate to this task. Congress must strive to enhance the Defense Department's long-term strategic planning process, as well as its ability to adapt to evolving threats. The Pentagon should also work with Congress to gain greater efficiencies from the amount it already spends. Costs can be reduced in part by speeding up the Pentagon's slow procurement and acquisition processes so that the military can better harness the remarkable technology coming out of the private sector. Beyond military capabilities, the United States must rebuild the other elements of its diplomatic toolkit—such as information operations—that have eroded since the Cold War.

The United States and other democracies must win the technological arms race, since in the future, transformative technologies will be the most important source of national power. The debate about the balance between regulation and innovation is just beginning. But while the possible downsides should be acknowledged, ultimately it is more important to unleash these technologies' potential for societal good and national security. Chinese progress can be slowed but not stopped, and the United States will have to run fast and hard to win this race. Democracies will investigate these technologies, call congressional hearings about them, and debate their impact openly. Authoritarians will not. For this reason, among many others, authoritarians must not triumph.

The good news is that given the behavior of China and Russia, the United States' allies are ready to contribute to the common defense. Many countries in the Asia-

Pacific region, including Australia, the Philippines, and Japan, recognize the threat and appear committed to addressing it. Relations between Japan and South Korea are better than ever. Moscow's recent agreements with Pyongyang have alarmed Seoul and should deepen its cooperation with democratic allies. India, through its membership in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue—also known as the Quad, the strategic partnership that also includes Australia, Japan, and the United States—is cooperating closely with the U.S. military and emerging as a pivotal power in the Indo-Pacific. Vietnam, too, appears willing to contribute, given its own strategic concerns with China. The challenge will be to turn the ambitions of U.S. partners into sustained commitment once the costs of enhanced defense capabilities become clear.

In Europe, the war in Ukraine has mobilized NATO in ways unimaginable a few years ago. The addition of Sweden and Finland to NATO's Arctic flank brings real military capability and helps secure the Baltic states. The question of postwar security arrangements for Ukraine hangs over the continent at this moment. The most straightforward answer would be to admit Ukraine to NATO and simultaneously to the European Union. Both institutions have accession processes that would take some time. The key point is this: Moscow needs to know that the alliance does not intend to leave a vacuum in Europe.

The United States also needs a strategy for dealing with the nonaligned states of the global South. These countries will insist on strategic flexibility, and Washington should resist the urge to issue loyalty tests. Rather, it should develop policies that address their concerns. Above all, the United States needs a meaningful alternative to the Belt and Road Initiative, China's massive global infrastructure program. The BRI is often depicted as helping China win hearts and minds, but in reality it is not winning anything. Recipients are growing frustrated with the corruption, poor safety and labor standards, and fiscal unsustainability associated with its projects. The aid that the United States, Europe, Japan, and others offer is small by comparison, but unlike Chinese aid, it can attract significant foreign direct investment from the private sector, thus dwarfing the amount provided by the BRI. But you can't beat something with nothing. A U.S. strategy that shows no interest in a region until China shows up is not going to succeed. Washington needs to demonstrate sustained engagement with countries in the global South on the issues they care about—namely, economic

development, security, and climate change.

WHICH WAY, AMERICA?

The pre–World War II era was defined not only by great-power conflict and a weak international order but also by a rising tide of populism and isolationism. So is the current era. The main question hanging over the international system today is, Where does America stand?

The biggest difference between the first half of the twentieth century and the second half was the fact of Washington's sustained and purposeful global engagement. After World War II, the United States was a confident country, with a baby boom, a growing middle class, and unbridled optimism about the future. The struggle against communism provided bipartisan unity, even if there were sometimes disagreements over specific policies. Most agreed with President John F. Kennedy that their country was willing to "pay any price, bear any burden" in the defense of freedom.

The United States is a different country now—exhausted by eight decades of international leadership, some of it successful and appreciated, and some of it dismissed as failure. The American people are different, too—less confident in their institutions and in the viability of the American dream. Years of divisive rhetoric, Internet echo chambers, and, even among the best-educated youth, ignorance of the complexity of history have left Americans with a tattered sense of shared values. For the latter problem, elite cultural institutions bear much of the blame. They have rewarded those who tear down the United States and ridiculed those who extol its virtues. To address Americans' lack of faith in their institutions and in one another, schools and colleges must change their curricula to offer a more balanced view of U.S. history. And instead of creating a climate that reinforces one's existing opinions, these and other institutions should encourage a healthy debate in which competing ideas are encouraged.

That said, great-power DNA is still very much in the American genome. Americans carry two contradictory thoughts simultaneously. One side of the brain looks at the world and thinks that the United States has done enough, saying, "It is someone else's

turn." The other side looks abroad and sees a large country trying to extinguish a smaller one, children choking on nerve gas, or a terrorist group beheading a journalist and says, "We must act." The president can appeal to either side.

On the USS *Ronald Reagan* in Danang, Vietnam, June 2023
NHAC NGUYEN / AFP / GETTY IMAGES

The new Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse—populism, nativism, isolationism, and protectionism—tend to ride together, and they are challenging the political center. Only the United States can counter their advance and resist the temptation to go back to the future. But generating support for an internationalist foreign policy requires a president to paint a vivid picture of what that world would be like without an active United States. In such a world, an emboldened Putin and Xi, having defeated Ukraine, would move on to their next conquest. Iran would celebrate the United States' withdrawal from the Middle East and sustain its illegitimate regime by external conquest through its proxies. Hamas and Hezbollah would launch more wars, and hopes that Gulf Arab states would normalize relations with Israel would be dashed.

The international economy would be weaker, sapping U.S. growth. International waters would be contested, with piracy and other incidents at sea stalling the movement of goods. American leaders should remind the public that a reluctant United States has repeatedly been drawn into conflict—in 1917, 1941, and 2001. Isolation has never been the answer to the country's security or prosperity.

Then, a leader must say that the United States is well positioned to design a different future. The country's endlessly creative private sector is capable of continuous innovation. The United States has an unparalleled and secure energy bounty from Canada to Mexico that can sustain it through a reasonable energy transition over the many years it will take. It has more allies than any great power in history and good friends, as well. People around the world seeking a better life still dream of becoming Americans. If the United States can summon the will to deal with its immigration puzzle, it will not suffer the demographic calamity that faces most of the developed world.

The United States' global involvement will not look exactly as it has for the last 80 years. Washington is likely to choose its engagements more carefully. If deterrence is strong, that may be enough. Allies will have to bear more of the cost of defending themselves. Trade agreements will be less ambitious and global but more regional and selective.

Internationalists must admit that they had a blind spot for those Americans, such as the unemployed coal miner and steelworker, who lost out as good jobs fled abroad. And the forgotten did not take kindly to the argument that they should shut up and be happy with cheap Chinese goods. This time, there can be no more platitudes about the advantages of globalization for all. There must be a real effort to give people meaningful education, skills, and job training. The task is even more urgent since technological progress will severely punish those who cannot keep up.

Those who argue for engagement will need to reframe what it means. The 80 years of U.S. internationalism is another analogy that doesn't perfectly fit the circumstances of today. Still, if the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries taught Americans anything, it is this: other great powers don't mind their own business. Instead, they

seek to shape the global order. The future will be determined by the alliance of democratic, free-market states or it will be determined by the revisionist powers, harking back to a day of territorial conquest abroad and authoritarian practices at home. There is simply no other option.

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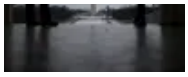
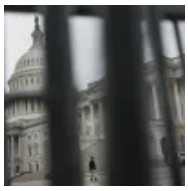


The Age of American Unilateralism

How a Rogue Superpower Will Remake the Global Order

Michael Beckley



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