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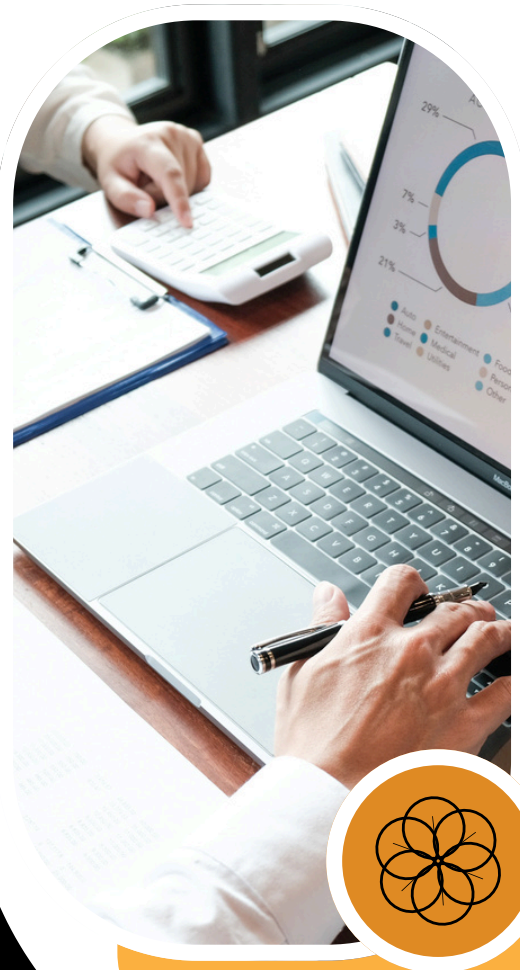
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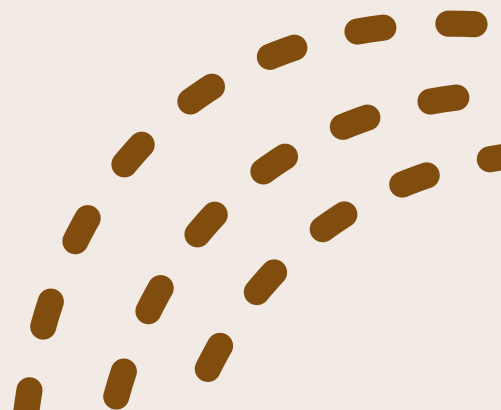
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Balancing American Strategy in an Age of Near-Peer Competition

ALEXANDER BERGH

The return of interstate war to the European continent on February 24, 2022 was a watershed moment in geopolitical history. Not only did the full-scale invasion of Ukraine shatter a three-generation-long peace in Europe but typified the rise of increasingly assertive authoritarian regimes eager to use military force to challenge the Liberal International Order. An increasingly assertive and risky stance taken by the People’s Republic of China toward Taiwan and the so-called “Nine Dash Line”, for example, strains the capacity of the Liberal Order’s champion, the United States to maintain its position as the unipolar hegemon. Indeed, democracy and multilateralism are under duress. The rise of near-peer competition in East Asia must push Washington to enact a “new pivot to Asia” to defend its leadership and deter further democratic erosion.

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Illustration by Artificial Intelligence

In an era of increasingly bipolarity, Washington must balance its strategic and security commitments abroad to avoid overreach and ultimately decline. The rise and fall of empires are determined by how the hegemon responds to crises and balances its commitments abroad. The high humanitarian, economic, and military costs of World War II handicapped France and the United Kingdom's ability to stymie revolutions in their colonies in Africa and Asia. The Invasion of Afghanistan (1979-1989) devastated the Soviet Union's economy and military and thus limited its ability to maintain its sphere of influence in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Consequentially, it lacked the capacity to repress revolutions across the Warsaw Pact in 1989. The common thread between decolonization and the color revolutions was hegemonic overreach. The US is not a new hegemon, and its influence has already been stretched as demonstrated in its interventions in Somalia (1993), Kosovo (1999), Afghanistan (2001) Iraq (2003). If it wishes to retain its hegemony, it must rebalance its commitments.

The British and French Empires as well as the Soviet Union overreached into too many theaters and thus could not stave off the most pressing challenges that ultimately solidified their declines. Overreach led to the disintegration of the vestiges of colonialism and communism. To avoid the decline of the Liberal World Order and its institutions, a new "pivot to Asia" to counter the multifaceted threat posed by the People's Republic of China is imperative. To remain competitive in a world increasingly characterized by near-peer competition from Beijing, Washington must shift its security commitments to the East by reducing its security and financial footprint in European defense and security. Simply put, the United States cannot afford to continue its campaign against Russia by funding a proxy war in Ukraine while it faces a potent and increasingly emboldened China. The cost of funding Ukraine perpetually pales in comparison to the specter of overreach instigated by the rise of China.

Supporting Kyiv's war effort against Russia provided the United States considerable strategic and security net gains over the first eighteen months of the conflict not to mention soft power incentives. Providing security, development, and humanitarian

assistance to President Zelensky's government demonstrated the United States' resolute commitment to the rules-based order. However, after nearly two years of war and a largely inconclusive counteroffensive, (to the cost of \$41 billion to the American taxpayer) the war is now 'frozen.' Territorial changes have stagnated. Despite Yevgeny Prigozhin's march on Moscow, the sinking of the flagship of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, and the delivery of advanced weaponry including M1A1 Abrams Tanks, HIMARS systems, and the Patriot Air Defense system, Ukrainian military leaders have failed to capitalize and reclaim territory in recent months.

Taken by itself, further military assistance appears frugal and unlikely to dramatically shape the tactical outcomes. However, when paired with the rise of an increasingly bellicose China with a demonstrated history of openly challenging American leadership, and continued support to Ukraine undermines Washington's ability to counter China and deter it from further brinkmanship. Thus, the United States must shift its security commitments and focus to more pressing allies and theaters abroad. Pushing for a negotiated peace and a ceasefire in Ukraine will allow Washington to concentrate its security focus on the emerging adversary: China.

The US should encourage European states to engage greater with the conflict by providing hard power: equipment, weaponry. Nixon Doctrine must guide American policy where the US will support its allies but not be carrying the lion's share of the duties in Europe. A strategic shift from Europe is vital for defending democracy in Asia. The rise of China and its institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the Belt and Road Initiative demand a strategic shift to defend democracy and liberal values in an increasingly volatile region dubbed by some pundits a "new cold war." The rise of China ultimately threatens bedrock democratic values, allies, and the network of alliances Washington took decades to create. China's increasingly hostile security posture, if unabated, will pose not only an ideological threat to American institutions and allies but a security threat.

The movement of increasingly aggressive Chinese naval patrols in the South and East China Seas in addition to the flight of the notorious spy balloon over the United States in February 2023 typify the threat posed by China. To adequately meet the challenge posed by Beijing, Washington should consider lowering troop levels in Europe, decreasing security assistance to Ukraine, and pushing NATO member states to meet the Warsaw Conference target of 2.0% defense spending to develop security autonomy in favor of increased support for Taiwan. Continued support for a 'frozen' conflict in Ukraine distracts from the most pressing threat posed by a near-peer China. Failure to meet and deter security and ideological threats posed by China gives a tacit acceptance of Beijing's increasingly potent sphere of influence and its bellicose military maneuvers. Most salient is the notion that the United States cannot defend and enforce its interests if it continues to be embroiled in Europe.

The rise of China with near-peer military and economic capabilities is a preeminent challenge to the American-led Liberal World Order. While Beijing and Washington have developed areas of cooperation, the narrative of competition is prevailing over cooperation. To meet and deter challenges posed by China, Washington and its allies must reconsider their security commitments to ancillary theaters, specifically 'frozen' war in Ukraine. The stagnation of the Russo-Ukrainian War and the failure of Ukrainian military leaders to achieve kinetic and tactical net gains over the past twelve months despite substantial security assistance demands a prevailing shift to more pressing theaters.

Specifically, reaffirming and deepening alliances like AUKUS, Five Eyes, and mutual defense treaties with South Korea, Japan, the Philippines, Thailand, Australia, and New Zealand are vital for deterring further Chinese aggression toward Taiwan and the larger patchwork of liberal and democratic values in East Asia. Enforcing Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS) and bolstering security assistance to Taiwan cannot be understated. Reviving agreements like the Comprehensive and Progressive Transpacific Partnership will not only provide downstream economic benefits to Washington and American firms but signal its commitment to

advancing democracy and free-market capitalism in East Asia.

The case of Taiwan typifies the security and ideational prerogatives for a new pivot to Asia. Maintaining freedom of navigation in the Taiwan Strait is imperative for American leaders to continue to project power in East Asia and the stability of American-led markets. Roughly 88% of the world's largest ships (by tonnage) passed through the Taiwan Straits in 2023 thereby affirming it as one of the most vital maritime chokepoints on the planet. Further, Taiwan's dominance of the semiconductor industry (producing over 60% of semiconductors globally and 90% of the most advanced versions) make defending it and its surrounding waterways indispensable.

A prolonged Chinese blockade or invasion of Taiwan would produce significant economic and security consequences threatening the fabric of American hegemony. Finally, Taiwan is a flourishing democracy and a vanguard of liberal governance in a region containing several authoritarian regimes. It is for those strategic and ideational reasons that American policymakers must look to the East instead of deepening their engagement in Europe. Abandoning Ukraine and Europe is not the answer for defending the Liberal Order and democracy in East Asia, but a strategic shift from Europe to Asia is a necessity to defend democracy, boost multilateralism, and reaffirm American global leadership. Balancing diplomatic rhetoric and bilateral security relationships is essential for maintaining the America-led world order.

The Strongmen and Their Countries

BERK TUTTUP

Today, at the foot of the increasing international conflict order, some countries that have grown up with attempting to protect and implement democratic procedures and some countries being confronted by the leaders of countries that do not fully accept the democratic norms of the West, based on an illiberal democratic, one-man, or strong one-leader system. In particular, Putin's Russia running in the Old Soviet Dream, Xi Jinping's one-party China with the Peaceful Rise Theory, Orban's Populist and Charismatic Hungary, which is a Eurosceptics in Europe, and Maduro's Venezuela, the new one-man man of his post-Chavez country, are among the countries that attract attention in research subjects.

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According to the studies of the Democracy Institutes and the analyses of institutes such as V-Dem, the number of autocratic, illiberal democratic countries in today's world is increasing due to the problems in the international system and the insensitivity to the demands for reform. The societies of some autocratic states are deceived by the rhetoric of populist leaders and see them as a powerful figure. This segment of society, which is ready to delegate all kinds of power to its leaders, provides its trust in its leaders by the charisma, experience, and power of the leader, thinking that only these leaders can solve the plight of their countries. Leaders who take this power behind them, create a political agenda in response to the needs of the people, and make all kinds of political efforts to gain power, after gaining power from the society, now begin to change the levels of the state in order to protect their own interests and maintain their leadership. An electoral solution is inadequate for the voters who are dissatisfied with this process.

In fact, the leaders of autocratic and non-democratic countries consolidate their power in almost similar ways and processes, and even enter into bilateral cooperation processes by creating one-man dialogue with statesmen who are similar to them in foreign policy. Until they gain power, they make point-to-point speeches for the needs of the people, and when they win elections, they censor the media, suppress the opposition, regulate the military, change the electoral laws, and moreover, consolidate their power with a series of reforms and constitutional amendments. In this article, I will take a look at the world's most powerful one mens, such as Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, Viktor Orban, Nicolas Maduro, and what they did to get this title.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union after the Cold War, the United States began to see itself as a hegemon in the international system. However, after a certain period, a series of norms emerged that would prevent the USA from becoming the sole hegemon in today's changing international system. Foremost among these are theories such as multilateralism and globalization. Taking advantage of these norms, China stepped into the world stage as a powerful state by increasing bilateral cooperation in the international arena, especially focusing on the countries of the global south. With the Peaceful Rise theory it provides, it is not possible to mention the same success discourses of China, which maintains economic cooperation and adds strength to its power by relying on the dialogue provided by international organizations, where there are no wars. China, which is governed by a one-party management style controlled by the

Chinese Communist Party, has undergone many changes with Xi Jinping.

Xi Jinping was elected party general secretary in November 2012 and automatically assumed the post of leader of the People's Republic of China. Managing 1.4 billion people is up to one man's mindset and actions. Xi Jinping, who openly declared his future plans with his speech in 2012, argued that the collapse of the Soviet Union, the weakness of the leadership and therefore the governance characteristics could not be achieved, and advised China to learn from this historical event. Therefore, since the time he came to power, he has made attempts to change all the mechanisms of the People's Republic of China in his favour. The first of these was to replace the Chinese People's Liberation Army. He turned the command centre of the Chinese People's Liberation Army, which was responsible for protecting the People's Republic of China and the Chinese Communist Party, to his advantage. By creating units such as theatre commands and anti-corruption units, he took control of the party. He appointed the authorities of the Chinese People's Liberation Army himself, and in case of any counter-attempt, he attracted soldiers whom he trusted. This has actually enabled Xi to strengthen his own institutional power. In this way, Xi has become an important leader for China and the world.

Second, Xi has taken various steps to establish an Intra-Party Power Consolidation. In 2018, he amended the party's constitution to make Xi the party's indefinite leader. At the same time, Xi Jinping's administration has cracked down on human rights activists, pro-democracy, journalists and dissidents, creating a police state and tightening the state's power over the digital space. By also putting pressure on Civil Society and Religious Freedom, China has rebuilt its internal dynamics. In particular, it has increased the state's repression of minority groups such as Uyghur Muslims, restricted religious freedoms, and attempted to strengthen China's internal dynamics with its own ideas. The capacity for economic controls and state pressure on the market has been increased, centralizing the power of the government and its own, and imposing strict controls on companies in the private sector. Xi Jinping has imposed internet censorship in order to prevent the increasing age of technological development from being used against him, and he has also closed down opposition groups and users on social media, leading to investigations. In this way, he strengthened his power.

As can be seen, the steps taken for the establishment of many "one-

man states” are no different from the path followed by Xi Jinping. Viktor Orban’s Hungary, for example, is nowadays disciplinarily assumed to be an “illiberal democracy.” Viktor Orban gained power thanks to George Soros, with whom he was together in his youth, and then entered politics. Orban and his party, which first followed a liberal line, suffered a major defeat in 1994. Thereupon, Orban decided to change the party’s ideology and line and follow a policy that is more nationalist, more committed to Hungarian Culture, and focused on the “Hungarian People First” policy. With this decision, he made a good profit, and he was entitled to become the youngest prime minister in Hungarian history. In its early years, it nominated its own country to organizations such as NATO and the European Union. Their candidate status was accepted, and they succeeded in getting their country accepted as a member state of these organizations. But among many other good deeds, he has been criticized for including far-right people in his elections, and he has occasionally lost elections. Today, as a strong leader, he takes a stance that affects the entire politics of Hungary.

In one of his speeches, Orban announced that he was following the paths of countries such as Singapore, China, India, and Russia with his rhetoric against liberal democracies, causing a shocking development for the European Union. Although Orban has been called a populist because of his anti-establishment rhetoric, the Hungarian people still see him as a strong leader. Orban, who wants to consolidate this power and maintain his leadership, has stepped into a series of reform initiatives like Xi Jinping. First of all, apart from the policies of the European Union, it decided to organize its politics and foreign policy according to pragmatic interests, developed its relations with Russia during the Crimean War against other European countries, and signed new economic collaborations with Russia. During his tour in 2018, he first visited countries such as Türkiye, then China, Central Asia, respectively, and tried to improve their level of relations with countries that do not accept or apply the norms of the European Union. Viktor Orban has changed his country’s Electoral Laws in his favour and rearranged the Hungarian map and constituencies to benefit his party. Later, like any autocratic leader, he censored the media and communications. Any news that Orban and his government do not want is not shown on Hungarian television. It has attempted to weaken the independence of the judiciary and changed the systems of judicial power.

Thus, the judiciary has been weakened and the power of administration, that is, the power, has been strengthened. This has

undermined confidence in the judiciary in the country. Thanks to the repressive attitude it applied to the opposition leaders, he has eroded the power of the opposition. In addition, he has tried to consolidate his power by constantly making the wishes of the people his political agenda. For example, the Orban administration has gained the trust and support of the people with its nationalism and anti-immigrant policies and has strengthened his power with national identity propaganda under the name of “Hungary’s security” by implementing harsh policies against immigrants. Orban, who wants to rebuild his national identity, first joined Turan, the “Council of Turkic States”, as an observer member according to the “Eastern Opening” policy, and then increased his cooperation, drawing attention to the old Hungarian history and culture, and expressing his Turkic ancestry many times. Of course, within this “Eastern Opening”, another strong one-man with whom Orban has had good relations since ancient times, Russian President Vladimir Putin, is at the forefront.

It should come as no surprise that Vladimir Putin grew up as a nationalist and devoted to his old culture and history, as the leaders of his family worked for Stalin and other powerful leaders even before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Likewise, in the recent past, he was a long-time agent in the KGB, the most important and powerful unit of the Soviet Union, and took many positions in Dresden, which is located on the border with East Germany. Later, with the help of the Oligarchs, Putin took power in the Kremlin and became the prime minister with the approval of the Oligarchs. According to Putin, even if communism has become obsolete, the dream of the Soviet Union is still alive and Russia is still up for the mission. Russians are called a nation that is especially fond of their own history, culture, language. Putin’s ideals and charismatic stance have influenced the Russian people, who have chosen Putin, a former KGB agent who comes from the Soviet tradition, as their leader.

In order to consolidate this charismatic leadership as a one-man, Putin took control of the media within three months of taking office. NTV was the first television channel to be affected, but it was not the last. Neutralizing the Kremlin’s former patron oligarchs, he elected his own group of oligarchs to the Kremlin. Today, Russians, like the Chinese and Hungarian people, follow the news that their leader allows. Russia’s big companies began to come under Putin’s control. It made the state mechanism effective in market control. In the same way, Putin has appointed only the candidates he nominated as

governors in the country's 83 regions, offering a list tradition for the appointment of politicians he trusts. Regional elections for governors were abolished in 2004. Although his opponents see Putin as a threat to democracy, he has filled the pulse of the people with the power vacuum in Ukraine. Putin, who suddenly seized Crimea in 2014, improved his image in the eyes of the people and made a name for himself by winning a sudden victory against the West.

As the world watched, Russia pursued a series of enlargement policies. It renewed its success in the Georgian crisis. Putin has embellished his foreign affairs decision-making center with his own ideas. He has repeatedly used the West's lack of harmony and unity in his political agenda. In particular, in order to realize Russia's policy of landing in warm seas and the dream of the former Strong Russian people, he assumed the role of being Assad's patron and protector in the Syrian civil war. During these victories, in his own domestic politics, he weakened the judiciary, imprisoned opposition leaders, and continued to strengthen his own power with the suspicious deaths of some leaders. With the death in prison of his main rival, Alexei Navalny, who died on February 19, Putin has further strengthened his one-man ideals.

When we look at Latin America, which wants to fight for its life under the guidance of the Americans, we see many despotic and one-man leaders. But there is one leader we want to focus on, Maduro. By using the natural resources of his country, Maduro caused many of his people to migrate to other countries with a series of power struggles, although he should have achieved many successes. After the death of Hugo Chávez in 2013, Maduro succeeded him. In the presidential election, he achieved great success with his party, the United Socialist Party of Venezuela. With the country with the highest inflation in the world in 2020, Venezuela has experienced an economic collapse in its history, but it has also strengthened its own power. Opposition leaders, who want to limit Maduro's power, wanted to take a series of measures against Maduro in the National Assembly. But Maduro tied the National Assembly in his favour and, although he narrowly won the elections, managed to win approval from the National Assembly for his own executive power.

In 2016, growing dissatisfaction with the Maduro regime led to a demand for a referendum. However, although the proposal gained support, the National Electoral Council ruled in favour of Maduro

and cancelled the proposal on the grounds of “voter fraud”. Not long after, Venezuela’s judicial body, the Supreme Court of Justice, issued an order against Maduro, but reversed it in his favour due to public outcry. In 2018, the National Assembly declared the election results invalid, and declared the President of the National Assembly, Juan Guadió, as interim president. Not long after, Guadó announced that he was not leaving the Maduro government, although it was officially recognized by many foreign countries. Maduro has been recognized by different countries over time. At times, Maduro has refused to relinquish power, although he has sought to encourage dialogue between the two. By 2020, no change was seen due to the three anti-coup techniques used by Maduro. So how did Maduro maintain his one-man rule?

Maduro has pacified the military with financial budgets, delegated appointments to his own authority and appointed his own men to senior positions. Maduro also authorized the military to engage in illegal activities, freeing shell companies and troops acting with cartels in drug trafficking. Second, Maduro has followed in Chavez’s footsteps by gradually dismantling the military. Finally, he promoted his loyalists to positions of power, to the bureaucracy of the state, to the judiciary, to the executive power, to the legislative power. He set up surveillance systems with the armed forces to find potential asylum seekers. In doing so, Maduro has taken under his control the forces that want to rebel against him, which will most likely create a revolution, even though it seems that he has taken precautions against refugees. In order to escape the hegemony of the United States, it increased its cooperation with countries with illiberal democracies like its own. It continues to remain at the head of Venezuela, preserving its one-man regime, just like China, Russia, and Hungary.

As can be seen, the era of strong single men has changed the state mechanisms in their own way, taken power in their hands and made a name for themselves. When we look at it, even if the mechanisms and cultures of their own countries are different, the steps they take while reaching the one-man processes are always the same. For this reason, in order to protect against a despotic pseudo-democratic state such as one-man, lessons should be learned from all the methods of censorship by the one-men we have mentioned. In order to keep transparent, sustainable, and accountable democracies alive, all the steps of one man must be followed. No matter how much they have become a threat to democracies, leaders such as Putin, Xi Jinping, Victor Orban, Nicolas Maduro have created a new formation

The Strongmen and Their Countries

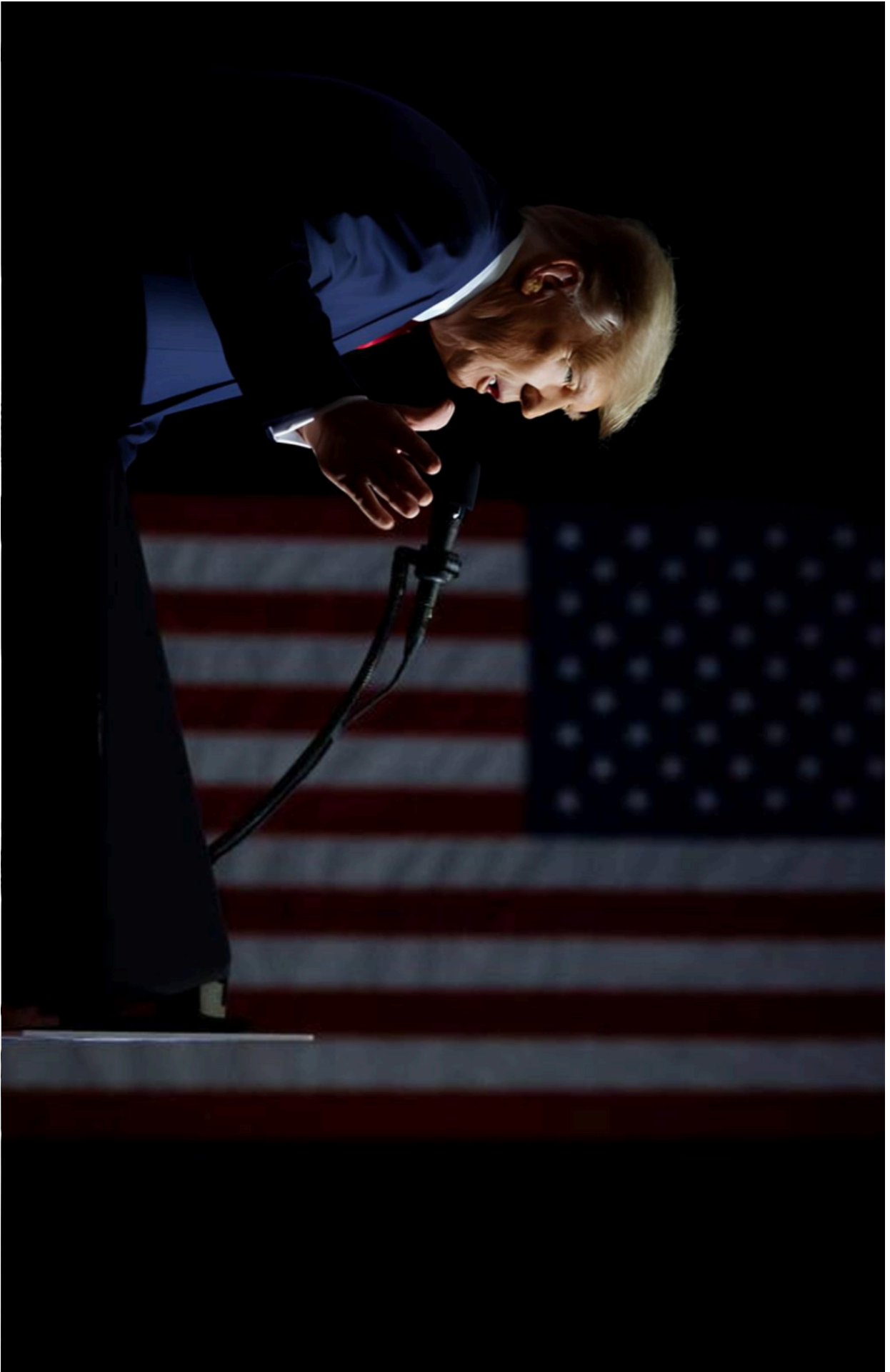
on the world stage, which inevitably affects the entire discipline and reveals powerful figures.

How Should The Republican Party Foreign Policy Strategy Be Shaped?

LORENZO IZZI

Global problems require global solutions, a wise man once said. However, although the 21st Century's problems have become increasingly global, the world is witnessing a period of closeness and unwillingness to deal with such problems together, and Donald Trump appears to be the perfect product of such a closure from the United States. However, here is why the Republican Party's foreign policy promises are a symptom of blindness.

LORENZO IZZI, is a Master of Arts in International Relations at the London School of Economics.



Firstly, increasing cooperation between Russia and China will take on board all the BRICS in an attempt to counter bits of the liberal international order, though the prospects for a new Cold-War style foreign policy are not to be seen over the horizon. It is likely that, in 2025, a new wind of contestation will arise, particularly over U.S. led global financial institutions, like the IMF or the World Bank, just like in 2016, when China set up the Asian Investment Infrastructure Bank (AIIB). In response to these dynamics, the U.S. should reaffirm its centrality in the international economy. Thus, the republican party, if it ended up being elected to form a new administration, should create a big liberal pole for development of the global south through such institutions, by listening to needs of developing states and giving them the capabilities to develop an open and free market. In these regards, a reform of the Bretton Woods institutions is of foremost importance, and the efforts to pursue such reform should involve all the different poles of international economy, including China. The alternative would probably be an isolation of America in the new markets which in the long term would make American firms and workers worse off.

On trade, on the other hand, the 10% tariff blanket that Trump promises will cost a \$300 billion increase in taxes for American families, Tax Foundation says. Thus, instead of fostering the domestic market, this policy would most likely increase the burden for the people and still be dependent on raw materials from abroad, which would have higher costs. Moreover, this policy will probably increase the ties of other markets to China, as the United States are signalling that investing in the American Market is costly. Secondly, Russia and China are both on the edge of an increasing security competition with the United States and the West more broadly, with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, China's military build-up and Taiwan's ambitions to become an internationally recognised states, visible with the outcomes of the January elections. For the first ever, in addition, China is expressing support with the rationale behind Putin's actions in Ukraine. However, in these regards, Republicans should differentiate their policies in regard to China and Russia, at least for the moment.

Concerning Russia, countering its invasion in Ukraine is essential,

as a Russian victory could generate a chain of event that may lead to other states considering the American global security architecture is weak and could also foster Putin's appetite for Eastern Europe, leading the U.S. to entrapment. On this point, Trump's promise to pull out of NATO is extremely unlikely, as the National Defence Authorisation Act signed previously this year requires a 2/3 majority in congress for such a decision, but Republicans are right in demanding more spending from Europeans. The global security challenges that the liberal world faces might soon become too much to handle for the U.S. alone, both politically and economically, and having a strong and attached ally like a militarily strong Europe could not be anything else than an asset.

On China, on the other hand, Trump should continue to follow the policy of his predecessor, which involves effective deterrence towards China's military actions in the South China Sea. These Freedom of Navigation operations are key and essential to signal to China that any unilateral attempt to change the status quo will receive a response, and Republicans have realised that this is the only strategy that might indeed deter a threatening China, who has increased capabilities to alter the status quo.

Thus, in international security terms, the republican party should not close America up and stop its supply of security worldwide, but it should pursue a somewhat Reaganian "Peace from Strength" policy, aimed at showing that America is still capable of addressing major security concerns.

Thirdly, the effects of climate change are at its highest ever. 2023 has been the hottest year that humanity has lived in ever since we started global records in 1850. China and Russia, on this hand, are experiencing a favourable trade condition over fossil fuels, with Russia's need for a new market and China's need to give up its coal-based economic system due to a lack of space. These trade relationships are undermining the efforts to counter emissions, as China is switching its economy towards gas, which, although better than coal, does not help to achieve a net-zero target.

In these regards, cooperation should be the motto. Republicans should pursue a policy that, on one hand, incentivises the already big Chinese market of green technologies, and on the other hand, counters the Chinese yet-to-arrive monopoly over these strategic technologies. To do the latter, America should invest in domestic technological innovation and foster its internal market in order to compete with China and keep prices low. The former, on the other hand, is slightly more complicated, as China's enormous energy demand could not be fulfilled by its internal market only and therefore China is more interested in the export of such technologies, especially considering European ban on petrol and diesel car in the next 10 years. Thus, by competing with China, U.S. firms would be able to generate wealth inside America and will also foster the liberalisation of such technologies.

Given this scenario, which lies behind November 2024 U.S. presidential elections, Donald Trump has no option than engaging with these dynamics. A hawkish and extremist approach will have opposite effects. Thus, on economics, republicans should focus on inclusion and proactive leadership, rather than closure and confrontation. On security, they should reinvigorate "Peace Through Strength", although with different operationalisation of the concept, in order to preserve American wealth which derives from foreign market stability. On climate, on the other hand, Republicans should focus on constructive engagement and incentivisation of green market policies, while fostering global competition which will fulfil demands and increase American wealth.

The Limitless Partnership

SURUTHI LENIN

Just a few weeks ago, the international arena witnessed the leaders of two dark horses of the global order, Russia and China, have a diplomatic, say even a friendly discussion on various topics such as creating the multipolar world, core interests such as trade, military exercises, cultural exchange. Over tea and friendly banter, they are adamant about allying against the Western bloc by rejecting “unilateralism, hegemonism, bloc-formation.” Thus, one thing is conspicuous: The China – Russia bilateral relationship is here to stay and thrive for at least quite a few years.

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On May 16th of this year, Russian President Vladimir Putin was welcomed by Chinese President Xi Jinping at the Great Hall of People in Beijing. He released a joint press statement, solidifying their tight-bound allyship Putin's two-day visit to the Land of Dragons, his first trip abroad after the start of his sixth term, with them meeting more than forty times. During this trip, he also visited Harbin, the capital of Heilongjiang province, which housed Russian ex-pats and the legacy of old-school Russian architectural marvels such as the former Eastern Catholic church and the central St. Sophia Cathedral.

Meeting the students at the Harbin Institute of Technology, notorious for defense research and its extensive work with the People's Liberation Army, he introduced a joint-school program with the University of Petersburg, his alma mater, honoring the relationship he acquired with the city. In the meeting, where both the leaders referred to each other as "old friends" and "close friends.", emphasis was placed on the seventy-five-year-old diplomatic relations of Russia-China, highlighting intergovernmental, inter-agency cooperation to inject "new, strong impetus" into Russia-China relations.

They signed ten documents, including the Joint Statement of the People's Republic of China-Russia, on deepening the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Co-ordination for the new era of bilateral relations. They take Umbridge in the latest, a rising form of international and neighborly relations through the commitment of five essential principles: mutual respect and support of fundamental relations and core interests; upholding non-alliance and non-confrontation, reciprocal benefit and, economic co-operation and supply chain stabilization being the driving force along with the intricate weaving of cultural exchange; to take up the global arena but collaboration in global governance through international/regional organizations such as BRICS, UN, APEC and SCO (BRICS is taking steps to lessen the dominance of the US Dollar) and to emulate the true essence of multilateralism and commitment to justice and political neutrality of global problems specifically Israel- Palestine conflict through a two-state solution. Both countries are headstrong in acquiring a transparent

potential settlement for the Ukraine issue following the UN Charter and holding sovereignty and territorial integrity in reverence, thus building a secure, stable, and sustainable security architecture. However, China's previous shifting statements stated neutrality and respect for Ukraine's sovereignty while providing indirect weaponry to Russia, which is confusing to deduce China's true intention regarding Russia.

It is safe to say that the Russia-China relationship has blossomed into a force to be reckoned with despite its avid critics. China and Russia cannot be considered as a symbiotic but a borderline commensalism relationship where China is Russia's only open ally amidst its isolated status due to the Ukraine War. Anthony Blinken, US Secretary of State, called the bilateral relationship a "marriage of convenience." and threw a shot at Russia by calling it "the junior partner in this relationship."

Maybe it's true. China is one of the superpower nations that Russia relies heavily on for trade and military support, causing a jump in trade after the Ukraine crisis, hailing a destination for many high-end manufacturing products, and one-third of Russian cars sold in China. In turn, China has been completely benefitting economically from ties with Russia, exporting crude oil and gas to the extent that it has replaced Saudi Arabia as China's most prominent oil supporter. Seeing that energy security is a critical factor in China's development endeavors, Russia is a crucial element in mobilizing economic development. Their two-way trade has increased by 2.7 percent by 240 billion USD. Moreover, China also provides Russia ammunition indirectly by providing machine tools, microchips, drones, turbo-jet engines, etc.

Just days before the Russia-Ukraine War broke out in February 2022, during the opening of the Winter Olympics with Russian troops closing in on the Ukraine border, China acknowledged their partnership "with no limits" and outwardly called the shots on the "NATO expansion" of Russian territory along with the global hegemony that the US exerts on other countries, thus pledging for a new wave of power. China officially remains neutral in the

conflict and puts negotiation and diplomatic solutions at the forefront, to the extent that Vladimir Zelensky, the Ukrainian president, wants China to attend the peace talks in Switzerland next month to find a peaceful solution for the Ukraine crisis. This implies China's sway over Russia, while Xi claimed it supports Ukrainian sovereignty through a phone call.

China carefully plays the long game of geopolitics so that the global arena always anticipates its next move. Before Putin visited China, Xi went on a tour of Europe and also met Anthony Blinken to discuss and negotiate the bumpy differences between the two superpowers. US's comments during the meeting were cordial, such as increased bilateral diplomatic talks and cooperation, including in military communication, counter-narcotics, and AI risk management, fostering a reliable, stable line of communication.

Alas, the US is still sour on China's Russian association since the US feels that Russia is "the West's biggest security threat since the Cold War," as well as a plethora of issues such as Taiwan, South China, human rights violations, and production of fentanyl. But right now, it is headstrong in ensuring that China doesn't provide any more ammunition to Russia since it is aware that China is the primary military and economic ally in the War, and targeting Chinese support would wither the Russian front both financially and in the war ground itself. One of America's core interests is trans-Atlantic security, which is surging China to push Russia to stop the war; if not, they will.

It is also keen on China's relationship with Iran since China, Iran, and the broader Middle East have a blossoming yet irregular relationship through economic and security platforms. America wants China to discourage Iran and its proxies from "expanding the Middle East conflicts." They also discussed the maritime security issues around the South China Sea and Taiwan. In this circumstance, Beijing may not be sold on the idea of cooperation since just during April, the Philippines and the US conducted their most extensive combat exercises near the South China Sea, trying to assert dominance over China. In turn, China is ready to open for

cooperation rather than “engage in vicious competition” and does not want the US to snoop in on its internal sovereign affairs.

This clearly states the distance between the two parties, as the meeting did not have all smiles; latent tensions were still boiling. The Chinese foreign minister Wang commented that despite the diplomatic effects, negative tensions still linger amid the bilateral relations. They believe that China’s developmental rights in the case of the South China Sea and Taiwan are not respected by Western geopolitics. In addition, significant economic sanctions on Chinese products and the banning of TikTok are causing drifts in creating a solid foundation for a stable China-US relationship.

Moving that aside, one of the significant quarrels of the US about China would be the accelerated degree of bilateral relations that China keeps with Russia. It believes this strengthened bond would cause unprecedented changes to the already shaky US hegemony. The mega-power insists on checking Russia’s advancements in Ukraine through Chinese resources and China’s development through Russia’s resources. Years ago, as mentioned before, people were skeptical of the alliance because of the assumed power asymmetry between China and Russia. Still, it is interesting that the US is deliberately ensuring that China stays away from Russia.

However, what is raising everyone’s eyebrows is, again, China strategically playing around with cracks in the global order, in this case, Xi’s attempts to form relations with European nations. On his first post-pandemic visit, he met the French president, Emmanuel Macron, and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, and he lauded their newfound cooperation. However, it was not the friendliest of meetings. Even during that meeting, Xi Jinping had to clear the air regarding its Russian associations, saying it was only trying to create peace in Ukraine and negating its industrial “overcapacity.” France is an avid critic of China, with a history of open dissent to China and selling arms to Taiwan. It has entered an inter-theatre cooperation and dialogue mechanism in its naval and air forces.

Countries like India and Japan, which have close and long-lasting

ties with France, are not on board with this newfound relationship. India and Japan, specifically India's ties with China, are shaky, with border problems and tensions rising between the two countries. Thus, both of them are disturbed by this unforeseen allyship. It is uncertain comprehend France's true intentions: maybe it can be a move to increase its gains, but it certainly feels double-sided since France's past insistence on safeguarding human rights and its ties with other countries who are anti-China may cause some intricate problems to France in the coming future. More than that, many different European countries have taken a staunch anti-Russian stance; one of the main reasons would be the Ukraine War and Russia's obvious threat to European security.

Another interesting turn of events would be Russia's association with Serbia and Hungary. Instead of the awkward handshakes, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban welcomed Xi Jinping with people waving festoon flags. The Chinese media called the relationship "ironclad," with all three countries releasing a joint statement about joining China in a community "with a shared future." Both the Serbian and Hungarian presidents are interested in creating an alliance with China, with Serbia signing a free-trade agreement. In contrast, Hungary signed eighteen joint agreements with China covering IT, railway, and nuclear energy. Xi is ecstatic about this new relationship, saying, "deepen economic, trade, investment, and financial cooperation," including the Budapest-Belgrade railway.

China hopes that the association with Hungary and Serbia would erode the massive economic sanctions that other European countries have imposed on it while creating a strategic space for smooth "China-EU" relations. Both countries have become important hubs for China's economic investment: they are the key production hub of Chinese Electric Vehicles (EV) and other automotive parts, with China opening a new factory in Hungary. Moreover, association with European countries gives an edge to China, producing an assumption that there are "cognizant" EU countries trying to form alliances with China irrespective of the domestic/regional countries' defensive policy against it and

highlighting interest-based cooperation rather than looking into the geopolitics of it.

Other EU countries, again, are not in favor of this alliance. Moreover, the Hungarian president's stringent conservative politics, lining up with the China association, is not good optics for the EU. Furthermore, this meeting implies that not all EU countries do not have complete cohesion within themselves. Neighboring countries such as India are also not on board with China-Russia relations since, as mentioned before, India-China relations lie on unstable ground due to the border issues near Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh. In the above cases, Russia has been a common denominator in how other countries wish to pursue a relationship with China. However, it is not an official alliance since both countries have agendas: Russia is close with India, Vietnam, and Indonesia and does not agree with China on Taiwan. At the same time, the former keeps stating neutrality on the Ukraine War.

No matter the degree of formality, China-Russia bilateral traditions have been smooth sailing and probably not ready to comprise its relationship since China considers "self-sufficiency" as one of its primary goals and having each other on their teams has given both the countries the power to challenge the financial and diplomatic problems that the West sanctions them to create a non-US based order. It is not impossible, but since Russia is back and forth on its gains in the Ukraine War and needs to sort out its problems before actually joining hands with China to ensure a new multipolarity.

Putinism and Beyond

DIANA TALANTBEKOVA

Saint Petersburg, Russia's northern capital, was where a key political figure's career began in the early 1990s. This person later rose to the top of the Russian government and became a major figure in global politics: Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, the current president of the Russian Federation. By 1996, as Boris Yeltsin's leadership faltered and the state's stability weakened, oligarchs began taking over state assets. It was during this time that Vladimir Putin, a former KGB (Committee for State Security) agent, came into power.

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Since Vladimir Putin became President of Russia in March 2000, he has steadily shaped the country's trajectory, transforming it into an authoritarian state with significant global influence. Domestically, his administration has eroded democratic institutions, imprisoned political opponents, and bolstered his own power through constitutional amendments. On the international stage, Putin's actions—including the 2014 annexation of Crimea, military interventions in Syria, the recent war in Ukraine, and cyber interference in foreign elections—not only challenged Western nations but also contributed to the rise of authoritarianism around the world. Thus, Putinism extends beyond domestic policy, actively influencing global politics and posing new challenges to international stability.

The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union marked a profound shift in global dynamics. The once-powerful Russia, which had dominated the 15 republics, not only weakened itself but also left a legacy of political instability, inflation, and economic crises across the post-Soviet states. By 1996, as President Boris Yeltsin sought re-election, Russia's economy was in chaos, internal institutions were paralyzed, and governance was increasingly controlled by oligarchs and private interests. The state had lost control over critical aspects of society and its own resources.

In this turbulent context, Yeltsin faced the crucial task of selecting a "successor." He sought someone who could not only manage the country effectively but also continue the direction he had set. Valentin Yumashev, a former head of the presidential administration, later revealed that Yeltsin considered about ten candidates, including Vladimir Putin. Many argue that Yeltsin chose Putin as his successor because he saw in him a young leader capable of continuing his reforms.

By 1998, Putin began to emerge as a potential successor when he was appointed first deputy chief of administration. His early career in the KGB, where he served for 16 years, including a notable six years in Dresden, equipped him with skills and experience that seemed ideal for leadership. In a short period, he became head of

the FSB (Federal Security Service), Chairman of the Security Council, and, by 1999, Prime Minister of the Russian Federation. From the outset of his presidency, Putin advocated for perseverance and hard work, urging Russians to be patient for the promised results. His 2000 speech encapsulated this sentiment: “We must accept that the work ahead will be challenging, and I ask you to approach it with understanding.” This rhetoric laid the foundation for his administration’s harsh policies, which swiftly shifted toward anti-liberalism, anti-Western sentiments, isolationism, and a distinctly authoritarian approach.

A closer look at Putin’s rise reveals his ambition to restore Russia’s past strength, deeply rooted in national traditions. His regime aggressively consolidated power, characterized by a strong presidency, weakened checks and balances, and the repression of political opposition. Putin’s goal was to revive a national or imperial identity that not only reinforced Russia’s sovereignty but also positioned it as a counterforce to Western influence. This strategic shift has had significant effects on both domestic governance and international relations, underscoring a broader trend of growing authoritarianism and geopolitical assertiveness.

First and foremost, Putinism is characterized by a highly centralized power structure, with all authority concentrated in the hands of the president. Under Vladimir Putin, democratic institutions such as parliament and the judiciary have been systematically undermined, leading to a consolidation of power within the executive branch. This centralization has enabled the Kremlin to exert tight control over political opposition, as evidenced by the imprisonment and suspicious deaths of prominent figures like Alexei Navalny, held in a special-regime penal colony, and Boris Nemtsov, assassinated on the Grand Moskvoretsky Bridge, as well as the suppression of protests. By eliminating or neutralizing rivals and dissenters, Putin effectively maintains a firm grip on Russia’s political landscape. This consolidation of power ensures that key decisions are made solely by him and his inner circle, effectively stifling any significant challenge to his authority and reinforcing his control over the country’s governance.

Putinism's economic strategy is based on state capitalism, where the Russian government retains significant control over key sectors, especially energy and defense. Major companies like Gazprom and Rosneft, which are either state-owned or closely linked to the Kremlin, dominate these industries, ensuring that economic power remains concentrated within the state and its supporters. For instance, oligarchs such as Igor Sechin and Arkady Rotenberg, who have personal ties to Putin, have been granted profitable contracts and control over large assets, strengthening their loyalty to the regime. Although Russia has implemented some market-oriented reforms, these have been limited. The government continues to leverage its economic power to reward supporters and marginalize opponents. This strategy has helped sustain political stability and control but has also stifled competition, deterred foreign investment, and contributed to economic stagnation. The vulnerabilities of Russia's heavily centralized, resource-dependent economy have been laid bare by Western sanctions and fluctuating oil prices.

Nationalism and the reassertion of Russia's global influence are central to Putinism. Putin has adopted an assertive foreign policy aimed at restoring Russia's prominence on the world stage. The 2014 annexation of Crimea, portrayed as a defense of ethnic Russians and a strategic necessity, exemplifies this approach. Russia's military involvement in Syria further underscores its ambitions, supporting the Assad regime and asserting its presence in the Middle East. Additionally, Russia has applied economic and political pressure on neighboring countries like Georgia and Ukraine to keep them within its sphere of influence. State-controlled media plays a crucial role in this strategy, depicting Russia as a defender of traditional values and a counterbalance to Western encroachment, thereby generating domestic support and legitimizing the Kremlin's assertive global stance.

Major media outlets like RT (Russia Today) and Sputnik News are government-funded and promote official narratives. Furthermore, the government enforces laws that compel media and social media platforms to adhere to state guidelines while blocking or restricting access to dissenting voices. The Russian government has closed

several independent media outlets, including the television channel Dozhd (TV Rain), the radio station Ekho Moskvyy, which was shut down in early 2022, and the newspaper Novaya Gazeta, which suspended operations under increasing government pressure. Additionally, The Moscow Times, originally a print newspaper, transitioned to an online format after facing restrictions and being labeled a “foreign agent.” These actions highlight the Russian government’s efforts to suppress independent and critical media voices.

Despite Russia’s advancements on the global stage, its domestic economy is faltering, struggling to stay afloat, and is often described as a “corrupt autocracy.” Under Putinism, corruption and a deeply entrenched bureaucratic system have become central to the regime’s operations, serving to consolidate power and ensure loyalty among the elite. The Russian bureaucracy is not only vast and complex but is also frequently manipulated to extract bribes and allocate state resources to Kremlin loyalists.

A striking example of this corruption is evident in state procurement practices. Government contracts, totaling \$462 billion annually, are frequently awarded to companies associated with Putin’s allies at inflated prices, resulting in significant financial waste. It is estimated that \$108 billion of this amount is diverted through theft and corruption. Former President Dmitry Medvedev even remarked that every fifth ruble in government contracts is stolen each year. This number, however, only scratches the surface of the pervasive corruption plaguing the Russian government, highlighting a systemic issue that undermines both economic stability and governance.

Putin’s foreign policy is defined by a mix of assertive regional integration, complex relations with the West, and strategic maneuvers in the Middle East and Asia. A central focus has been Eurasian integration, where Russia aims to strengthen ties with former Soviet states through initiatives like the Eurasian Economic Union. This effort seeks to create a bloc that counterbalances Western influence and reasserts Russian dominance in the region. Although the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) has

weakened over time, it remains a tool for maintaining Russian influence in neighboring countries.

Putin's relationship with Europe and the broader West has deteriorated, particularly after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the ongoing war in Ukraine. These actions have led to sanctions and deepened the East-West divide. Despite these strained relations, Russia has maintained selective partnerships, notably with Germany on energy projects such as the Nord Stream pipelines.

In the Middle East and Asia, Putinism is marked by strategic interventions. Russia's military support for the Assad regime in Syria has not only solidified its presence in the region but also secured a crucial naval base, reasserting Russia as a key power broker in the Middle East. Russia's involvement in conflict zones like Syria and Ukraine highlights its commitment to protecting its interests and sends a clear message to the West about its readiness to use force to achieve its goals. This approach complicates global diplomatic dynamics and underscores Russia's strategic ambition on the world stage today.

Critics of Putinism, both within Russia and internationally, have sharpened their focus following recent events. Domestically, the Russian government has escalated its crackdown on dissent, increasing repression of opposition voices and tightening control over media outlets. This has drawn condemnation from various human rights organizations and intensified scrutiny of Putin's regime.

On the international front, the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has sparked widespread condemnation from Western nations and global bodies, resulting in severe sanctions and further isolating Russia. These actions have amplified the regime's global isolation and heightened criticism from the international community. Despite this growing dissent, many Russians continue to support Putinism, valuing its emphasis on restoring national pride and stability in the wake of the chaotic 1990s. Supporters include business elites and state-affiliated oligarchs who benefit from the

regime's economic policies. They view Putin's actions as a necessary counterbalance to Western influence, believing that these policies protect Russia's strategic interests and bolster its global standing. This complex dynamic illustrates the polarized reception of Putinism, with domestic support for stability and national pride standing in stark contrast to international condemnation and growing isolation.

The future trajectory of Putinism will revolve around several key factors, with internal dynamics likely playing a more crucial role than external pressures. Despite the significant impact of economic sanctions, critical public statements from Western nations, and Russia's increasing isolation on the global stage, these external factors have so far had limited effect on either the Russian government or its populace. The persistence of the Putin regime despite these pressures indicates that external forces alone are inadequate to bring about significant change. Internally, the entrenched nature of Putin's power structure poses a formidable barrier to regression. Putin and his inner circle have deeply embedded themselves within the core institutions of Russian governance—spanning the Kremlin, the military-industrial complex, and the media landscape.

This consolidation of power ensures that internal challenges to Putinism will be met with significant resistance, maintaining the regime's stability and continuity. In 2024, Putinism significantly amplified global political tensions by challenging the previous order and contributing to the rise of other major powers. The assertive policies of Russia under Putin are intensifying geopolitical competition, with emerging powers vying for influence in critical areas such as energy security, technological advancements, and military power. This dynamic is fueling a new era of great power rivalry, reshaping the global landscape and raising the stakes in international relations.

Economic stagnation, demographic challenges, and media suppression have persisted unchanged for many years in Russia. Meanwhile, President Putin has recklessly allocated all his resources to pursuing two primary objectives: the war in Ukraine

and leveraging nuclear threats to intimidate the international community. As he explicitly stated, “Yes, for humanity this [nuclear attack] will be a global catastrophe. But as a citizen and leader of Russia, I must ask myself the question: why would we need such a world if there is no Russia?” This aggressive focus underscores how Putinism has fundamentally reshaped Russia’s political and economic landscape by consolidating power under a centralized authority, eroding democratic institutions, and fostering a state-controlled economy.

Domestically, this has led to widespread corruption and economic stagnation, exacerbating systemic issues. Internationally, Putinism has intensified geopolitical tensions, with Russia’s assertive policies challenging the Western-led order and prompting global realignments. Looking ahead, the entrenched nature of Putin’s regime suggests that internal factors—unlikely to change—will largely dictate Russia’s future trajectory, while external pressures may struggle to effect meaningful change. The ongoing confrontation with the West and internal challenges will continue to define Putinism’s impact on global stability.

America's Universal Values

JOHN GIALLORENZO

The United States has always been a nation of values, even as those values change and adapt with time. The fundamental cultural values of the United States are enshrined in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. The diplomatic values of the United States are intentionally less defined but are heavily influenced by American culture. United States foreign relations are a complicated dance between the pragmatic values of diplomacy and the absolute values of its founding documents.

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As one of the few democracies in an era of monarchy, early American foreign policy sought to foster respect from the powers in Europe. This was done in many ways; the Neo-Classical grandeur of Washington D.C. was not purely done for domestic audiences, for example. America's emphasis on having a large and capable navy also helped garner respect in an age where naval dominance was not totally one-sided. Even into World War I, the United States was still interested in the respect of its European partners. Instead of being treated like a colonial nation with its soldiers being led by European generals, the United States demanded that its soldiers fight under its own commanders, highlighting the fact that the Europeans were in no position to do otherwise.

America's first overseas war was against Tripoli, a small country in North Africa that was part of a coalition known as the "Barbary Pirates." This coalition made money by raiding the shipping lanes in the Mediterranean and ransoming the crews, cargo, and ships back to their homelands. To simplify things, many countries paid an annual fee to be left alone, but in 1801, Tripoli raised the fee. Thomas Jefferson refused to pay. Instead, a claimant living in Egypt was given funds to hire mercenaries, and with the support of the United States navy and marines, was able to take the city of Tripoli. This showed the nearby European nations that the United States was not going to be pushed around, even halfway across the globe.

The other major value of the era was loyalty. Many in America felt that because of France's assistance in the American Revolution, the United States should support France as best it could. However, many in the United States government, including founding fathers such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, felt the United States should remain unbound to any European state. To them, Europe was a turbulent and messy land of schemes and infighting. Any attempt to bind two countries together would either end in failure or see one of the two countries subordinated to the other.

Despite the belief that official alliances were unwise, the desire to return the support France gave to the early United States was strong enough for Thomas Jefferson to make the controversial Louisiana Purchase, giving Napoleon a large infusion of cash to

fund his war effort and also denying most of the American interior to the British, who otherwise would have occupied it. While some questioned if Jefferson had the authority to make the agreement so quickly, he ultimately received congressional approval.

These two factors combined in the War of 1812 when the United States fought the British over a long-running dispute over the practice of impressment, a British practice of stopping ships at sea and forcibly conscripting sailors into the Royal Navy. They claimed to only be returning British deserters, but there were widespread claims that Americans were being forced into service as well. The British needed sailors so badly because they were embroiled in the Napoleonic Wars against France, which posed a serious threat to British naval superiority. The decision was made to challenge the British and prove that the United States was not going to be walked over on the global stage. Although the war is mostly forgotten today and failed to achieve its main objectives—the British themselves banned impressment shortly before the war began, unbeknownst to the Americans—it did show that the American military had teeth.

Taking advantage of these “teeth,” the United States publicly forbade any further European colonial expansion in the western hemisphere with the Monroe Doctrine. While it wasn’t clear if the United States could enforce the threat in its entirety, it did force European powers to consider American intervention in any future campaigns. At the same time, the British also began discouraging further colonization of the New World.

The 1800s were a very important time for American foreign policy. At home, the country was expanding rapidly, its population was increasing, and its government institutions had largely solidified after the revolutionary 1700s. Because of this, it felt more comfortable being an actor on the world stage rather than a reactor. This was the first full century of American history, and as such, the values that guided it fluctuated. Broadly, the main values of this period were territorial integrity and a sort of humanitarian development. At the time, there was a widespread belief that industrial development was inherently humanitarian as it often

brought increased wealth and a higher standard of living to the areas involved. We see a similar stance today with China's industrialization being praised for raising so many millions out of poverty.

A quirk of the country's colonial past, and the limited knowledge early European colonists had of North America, was that the colonies were technically granted land all the way across the continent. While the British had started pushing back against this original grant before the revolution and many states had given up their western claims early in United States history, the idea that the United States naturally stretched "From Sea to Shining Sea" was embedded in American culture.

Initially, this led to a series of conflicts often known as the "Indian Wars," where the U.S. Army fought various native tribes to make way for American settlers. These conflicts were small in scale but often quite bloody. However, the focus quickly shifted from the Native Americans to the Mexicans who owned much of what is now the U.S. Southwest.

After defeating Mexico in the Mexican-American War and purchasing a slice of land along the new border, the United States achieved the majority of its modern-day borders. Feeling secure in its boundaries, it began to focus outward. It partnered with the United Kingdom to destroy the intercontinental slave trade that had been siphoning the population of West Africa into bondage in the Caribbean and American Southeast for over a century.

While this no doubt helped save countless lives, it was a symptom of a heated debate going on within the United States. Its cultural values of liberty, equality, and freedom for all were at odds with the sheer economic value of slavery. After brief hope that the banning of the slave trade would bring a natural end to slavery, the abolitionists decided to take a more proactive stance. Electing Abraham Lincoln to office, despite his claims that he had no intention of outlawing slavery, he was an outspoken opponent of the practice. The southern leaders were skeptical of his claims and preemptively withdrew from the Union.

During the Civil War, Lincoln made it clear to the Europeans that a formal acknowledgment of the Confederacy would be considered an act of war against the Union. A threat that was assuredly not empty, as the Union rapidly became one of the most militarized societies on earth at the time with a large and capable navy. The United States may have appeared like a collection of partnered states, but it now became clear to everyone that it would not tolerate infringement of its territorial claims.

With the conclusion of the Civil War, the focus of the United States initially shifted inward, reintegrating the South and reeling from the assassination of President Lincoln. However, it gradually came back to the world stage as outside events drew its attention. First was the continued turmoil in Cuba as the Spanish Empire fought a heated guerrilla war against separatist insurgents. While there were loud demands from the American public to intervene, the government was reluctant to fight a European state.

In an attempt to appease war hawks at home, the U.S.S. Maine was sent to Havana both to show American displeasure at the continued turmoil on the island and to investigate some of the more outlandish claims being made in the American press. Unfortunately, before it could do much of either, it exploded and sank, with its entire crew going down with her. Still, the U.S. government refused to go to war and instead sent a team to determine the cause of the explosion. When the cause was confirmed to be from an external attack, there could be only one response.

The Spanish-American War was a short conflict that saw the United States assume control of several Spanish colonies and ensure the independence of Cuba. It also allowed the United States to become one of the few, at the time, non-European entities to independently defeat a European power. No time was wasted in investing in Cuba, which would see significant American investment and tourism for generations to come.

Possessing the Philippines made trade with China, one of America's leading importers, easier and safer while also putting the U.S. close

enough to engage with China as Europe began eyeing the ancient empire. After a series of defeats and long-running trade and cultural disputes, Chinese civilians began taking up arms and attacking outsiders wherever they found them. Chinese who adopted Christianity or were too European for the gangs' liking were also executed, often publicly. The groups came to be known as Boxers in the West, and calls for the Chinese government to rein them in fell on deaf ears.

As the Boxers grew in strength and numbers, they laid siege to the embassy quarter in Beijing, sparking an international response. United States soldiers tasked with guarding the embassy in Beijing fought alongside the defenders of the other embassies while American warships and soldiers were deployed to take part in the relief expeditions. After fifty-five days, the European, American, and Japanese relief force reached the capital and broke the back of the Boxer movement.

Discussions were had about dividing China among the victorious powers, similar to how Africa was divided between the European powers. The United States was openly opposed to this, partly due to its stance against colonialism and partly because this would restrict access to much of the Chinese market. Instead, they proposed enforcing a policy of free trade onto China but otherwise allowing the Chinese government to maintain its authority. This would allow any nation to trade with China instead of requiring special permission from the central government. Ultimately, free trade won out as few of the participants could seriously defend a colony in China and felt maintaining an independent China as a trading partner was more valuable. Coming so close to the victory over Spain, and with the backdrop of the Monroe Doctrine, its actions in the Boxer Rebellion represented a small but serious step as a leader on the world stage.

While many in the United States protested America's burgeoning influence on the world stage, it did not stop the slow metamorphosis into a great power. Instead, the United States began using its new influence and standing to champion democratic values and eventually nationalism in a more traditional

sense. As with all things, these efforts started off clumsy and with mixed success.

Specifically, the United States began intervening heavily in Latin America and the Caribbean. Ostensibly, this was done to improve local governance, but it often served American business interests at the expense of most else. It also tended to create local insurgencies that harassed American and local security forces and occasionally bled over into the mainland U.S. as well. During this period, there were many Americans funding and supporting these insurgencies as an act of protest against America's growing international presence.

As the United States was experimenting with interventions, the world marched on around it, directly into World War I. In the beginning, the United States was not ready to intervene directly in a large European-scale conflict, even if it was broadly sympathetic to the Entente. Specifically, many felt that the United States had no obligation to get involved. However, as the war dragged on and repeated transgressions against the United States occurred, it became increasingly difficult for the country to turn the other cheek. While the United States was only in the war for a short period of time, it was determined to show itself as an independent actor and voice its opinions on any potential peace treaty.

Regrettably, not all dreams come true, and the eventual Treaty of Versailles had so little input from the United States that it was never ratified; instead, a separate treaty ended the war between the United States and Germany. During the interwar period, the United States tried to maintain peace by using its economic leverage to cow various non-democratic nations. This was able to mitigate some conflicts, but it was largely ineffective at its goal of creating a lasting peace.

The United States also pioneered the concept of regulated naval military sizes, hosting a series of naval conferences where the globe's major powers agreed to keep their navies at certain sizes to prevent arms races and the appearance of threatening their neighbors. Again, this had some effect in the short term but was

almost entirely abandoned within twenty years.

Europe is often considered the center of World War II, but the United States was more concerned with Japan in the interwar years. A series of diplomatic crises between the two countries raised tensions across the Pacific in the lead-up to the attack on Pearl Harbor, including smaller-scale attacks on American soldiers in China. When war broke out in Europe, the United States again saw itself under no obligation to intervene as it had no formal alliances with the European states. That did not stop Germany or Italy from declaring war on the United States shortly after the attacks on Pearl Harbor.

After the war ended, the United States was again determined to play a pivotal role in the peace and usher in a new period more in line with its values. This led to the United States creating democratic governments in the defeated powers and any ancillary parties that they controlled. It also led to a rabid push toward decolonization, with the United States openly supporting nationalist movements in many colonial regions across the globe, such as the African National Congress in South Africa or supporting Egypt in the Suez Crisis.

This did at times create friction both with U.S. allies who wanted to retain colonies, notably France with its conflict in Algeria, but also with its own value of democracy. Some of the nationalist movements had a genuine desire to form a democracy, but many of them truly sought to replace colonial rule with their own personal rule. The post-war United States struggled significantly with whether it was better for a region to be ruled dispassionately by foreigners or cruelly by locals, a question that still remains mostly unanswered.

The postwar world also brought with it the Cold War, which saw the United States ascend over the traditional Great Powers to champion the western “Free World.” It gradually became accustomed to acting on the world stage, going from asking the United Nations for permission to defend Korea to unilaterally carpet-bombing North Vietnam and launching incursions into Laos

and Cambodia. It promised to defend anyone who opposed communism and made good on the promise, even when many Americans questioned if such a blank check was the best policy, especially when a fresh wave of Latin American interventions brought about incredibly non-democratic regimes while pro-democratic demonstrators in Hungary and Czechoslovakia were crushed by Soviet forces. Despite the concern and sacrifices made during the early postwar period, the United States emerged from the Cold War as the sole superpower following the rapid disintegration of the Soviet Union.

America has numerous cultural tenets that influence how it behaves diplomatically. Of those, the two most well-known would likely be its value of individual freedoms and broader human rights. In many ways, they are very similar values and can even be the same depending on the circumstances. Individual freedoms essentially boil down to the ability for an individual person to choose how they live their life. Human rights more broadly are a series of rights enshrined in various laws and international agreements that define the minimum conditions that countries must provide for their citizens, such as access to food.

The United States is also known for its love of democracy and the rule of law that goes with it. American elections are followed across the world and even televised in countries that would be considered adversaries. While the United States has had mixed results in its efforts to support democracies abroad, it has remained an unquestioning champion of the process for over two hundred years. Democracy cannot exist without the rule of law, an obedience from the government to the laws as they are written. In many cases, American efforts to support democracy take the form of supporting the rule of law, either by sanctioning corrupt officials or helping to fund local law enforcement agencies.

A pillar of American culture from its inception has been the ability of average people to rise to great heights. To this day, the concept of meritocracy is widely beloved by many Americans, and any perceived threat to it can be met with intense backlash. A component of this is that your fate is your own. You can start a

business, run it your way, and reap the rewards of becoming a local favorite, or handle the fallout of going out of business.

It's no secret that meritocracy was not always extended to everyone within the boundaries of the United States. Over its history, there have been several movements from groups who wanted to be more included in American society. The most famous of these was the Civil Rights Movement of Martin Luther King Jr. and the broader black community. While these movements have been successful in many cases, they have not been without struggle and challenges. However, despite the often difficult journey, American society has embraced many groups that were once scorned.

Free enterprise has also been a mainstay pillar of American culture and perhaps one of the earliest to influence its foreign policy. One of the factors that made the colonies so prosperous before independence was how easy it was to open and operate a business. Because of the scale of businesses and the advanced methods that are used to produce goods, it can be difficult to find the middle ground between ease of operation and ensuring the safety of the communities the businesses operate within. Even so, there are many champions ensuring that the free market in the United States remains free and thus within the citizens' control.

This led to the creation of the "American Dream" very early in its history. To many of the poor and lower-class people of Europe, the idea that you could go to the United States, start a small farm, and have your grandchildren live in mansions selling potato chips was almost a fairy tale. It caused millions to sail across the Atlantic and build homes across the continent, opening businesses wherever they went. Many in Asia were living in similar conditions and began arriving on the West Coast in even larger numbers. While only a small handful of families would go on to be wealthy billionaires, many were able to achieve a higher standard of living than would have been possible in their home country.

From its inception, American foreign policy has sought to spread American values. It took many decades before any tangible results could be seen, but from there, things began to change rapidly. The

concept of a republic or any other democratic system seemed like a silly dream in 1776, but by 1900, even the most autocratic countries were under increasing pressure to adopt democratic reforms. Those that didn't, such as Russia and China, faced uprisings and civil wars against a population that no longer tolerated being ruled without input.

Very few groups actually received material support from the United States, but standing as a successful democratic nation showed that it was possible. From there, many began to ask, "Why there and not here?"—a question despotic regimes across the globe struggled to answer. Even today, the small holdouts of autocracy must pay at least lip service to democracy and spend tremendous effort telling their populations why democracy isn't right for them. On the contrary, the United States has often pushed its partners to be more democratic, requiring certain reforms or conditions to be met prior to any agreements being made, even going as far as to fund institutions in other countries so they can better support the local government.

The United States was also not particularly quiet about its love of free trade, often supporting free trade policies internationally and bilaterally when dealing with other nations. On several occasions, it even fought or intimidated other countries into allowing the unrestricted flow of trade across their borders. Early in American history, it sought to have a large navy not simply to protect its coastline but to ensure that its trade ships were protected and unbothered regardless of where they went. It may seem strange to us today, but back then the flag a ship was flying was incredibly important in determining if anyone would help you. The only way to guarantee your ships would have backup was either to make sure you had warships nearby or you had an agreement with someone who did.

Its desire to have consistent and reliable trading partners could also drive altruism, such as the Marshall Plan. After the destruction of World War II in Europe, Japan, and Korea, there was serious concern in the U.S. government that the population would turn to radicals with gilded promises—radicals who were often either

explicitly anti-American or at least endorsed highly restrictive trade between nations. Something that would have hurt the U.S. economy as well as set a dangerous precedent for other nations to follow. So, it was decided that the United States would finance the reconstruction of these areas so that these radical politicians could no longer prey on the desperation of those left in the wake of the war.

This isn't to say the United States has no problems or missteps. As long as the United States has existed, there have been those within it claiming it was going down the wrong path. In some cases, these criticisms were listened to, such as those who argued the Articles of Confederation needed to be replaced. A more recent example would be the Civil Rights Movement, which made tremendous strides in public relations and ultimately achieved its objectives.

On the other hand, there are many examples where the malcontents were not listened to. In some cases, the same issue has critics on both sides saying either that things have gone too far or not far enough. While the Civil Rights Movement was leading marches and sit-ins, there were groups advocating for the continuation of segregation who were ultimately defeated.

This tradition of having agitators on both sides of an issue is highlighted in the lead-up to the Civil War. Slavery had detractors since before America gained independence, but the rhetoric and tension over the issue continued to increase year on year. The popularity of openly abolitionist parties in the North and hardline pro-slavery parties in the South led to not only heated political debate but outright clashes in Congress. Eventually, this led to clashes on the battlefield between the two sides until only one was left standing.

Today, this process mostly focuses on inequality of various types, with income inequality currently taking much of the attention. Ultimately, only time will tell what the outcome will be and how it will be remembered. Although its current cultural impact is indisputable, considering how normalized discussing income inequality now is and how many wealthy individuals publicly

apologize that they make more than average.

Criticisms have also come from outside the United States. Generally, the more the United States appeared on the world stage, the more criticism it received, and thus, the majority of its foreign criticism is relatively modern. The most prevalent criticism revolves around America's tradition of intervening in foreign political affairs.

Beginning in the Caribbean and Latin America, it is now something people around the world can relate to and recite fairly consistently, especially in the Middle East and Southeast Asia. The underlying issue is that the United States gets involved in the domestic political process, often with force, leading to an artificial resolution. This removes the need to compromise and work with the other members of that country's society and sometimes even its government. Giving government branches the ability to ignore constitutional requirements and consultation of other branches. When these roadblocks are removed, it gives the government the ability to commit serious crimes such as human rights abuses and rampant corruption.

There have also been many concerns raised about the concept of "cultural imperialism." This is the notion that smaller countries gradually lose their traditions, values, and cultural identity as their children grow up learning English, watching American media, and being immersed in American ideals. As this has only really kicked off with the widespread adoption of the internet, it is hard to tell how impactful exposure to American culture really is and what the long-term implications will be. It is also unclear if individuals are embracing American culture out of a genuine agreement with its values or if they truly are going along with it due to a lack of exposure to any alternatives. Unlike the concerns about American interventions, the fear surrounding "cultural imperialism" tends to come from a small group of countries that were already at odds with the United States or its values and often goes hand in hand with more government control over local media and education.

The United States has a long tradition of generations assigning themselves values and causes that they rabidly support. In some

cases, these come from existing American values, such as the Freedom Riders taking their summer vacation to teach literacy and math courses to disenfranchised southern voters in the 1970s. In other cases, their values and causes gradually become universal values of the United States, albeit often only temporarily.

How these are chosen is somewhat mysterious to this day, but the education system has long been viewed as the most likely culprit, hence the decades of politicians complaining about the education system. However, this is unlikely for several reasons, the most prominent being that the United States does not have a single education system. It has more than fifty education systems that are only loosely related to one another. Each state has the final say on what it teaches and how it teaches it. America's secondary education system is even more decentralized, with the states operating their own universities, private universities operating with little to no oversight, and at least a handful of federal universities operating under the direct authority of Congress.

Because of the very uncoordinated way Americans are educated, universal values often come from cultural centers rather than educational centers. Movies, TV shows, books, and public gatherings like popular festivals and concerts are the main ways Americans form consensus opinions. This is also part of how America became so polarized, with people picking certain cultural centers over others and only becoming exposed to alternate views once consensus has already been reached. It is also why Americans and American politicians are so concerned about cultural icons and media forms. They are as important to making America, America as the education system is, and potentially more so.

The United States has always been interested in coalition building and forming broad multilateral associations. During the Revolution, it was cooperating with at least three European powers to help pressure the British on other theaters and supply its own war effort at home. While it voluntarily took a back seat when its economy was predicated on selling as much stuff to as many people as possible, it was still advocating for diplomacy and coalitions, partaking in the suppression of the Boxer Rebellion and then

advocating for a unified China with free trade.

The United States proposed the original League of Nations and later the reformed United Nations, and hosts the main building to this day. It has used the United Nations as an avenue to build coalitions even in scenarios when it doesn't need to. While many people are familiar with the United Nations Peacekeepers, colloquially known as 'Blue Helmets,' it is less well known that the United Nations did not have the authority to deploy peacekeepers when it was first created. The United States developed the concept at the start of the Korean War. While it was committed to defending South Korea unilaterally and was already taking steps to intervene, it proposed a resolution to the United Nations to send a broad coalition peacekeeping force to beat back the North Korean invasion. This resolution passed, and countries all around the globe sent soldiers to help, and future conflicts saw the activation of U.N. peacekeeping powers.

As American democracy promises that discussions and compromise can lead to a more effective, stable, and attentive government, American diplomacy promises that discussions and compromise can lead to a more stable, peaceful, and prosperous global system. While it is not immune to human stupidity and may not spread that prosperity completely evenly, its goal is to create a fair system for all involved.

Since the end of the Second World War, whenever something happens in the globe, all eyes turn to the United States, even when it does not want to get involved. As such, the United States has taken the lead on handling many global crises, including the recent Covid pandemic. There have been calls since the 1970s for the United States to take the lead on tackling climate change, but its track record has been mixed. There was a period when recycling and emissions limits were popular and enforced, ending smog across American cities. In the 1980s and 1990s, it was far less fashionable and only slowly gained momentum again in the 2000s. By the 2010s, it was something that was discussed, but serious efforts were few and far between. Now, in the 2020s, it looks like the United States may be ready to start making moves again, but

how those moves will come about and how successful they will be remain to be seen. Perhaps a more important question will be how long the measures last, which historically has not been very long in most cases.

On other issues, the United States has often sought to rapidly form a multilateral coalition, decisively handle the crisis, and then return to the global status quo. After a long back and forth with the Europeans on who was responsible for handling the collapse of Yugoslavia, the United States stepped forward and accepted that from then on it was going to be the world police and led a bombing campaign against the Serbian forces. When Iraq invaded Kuwait, its other Arab neighbors looked to the United States for assistance, and it, through the United Nations, formed a coalition and repelled the Iraqi invasion. When Houthi terrorists started hijacking and later sinking merchant ships traveling through the Red Sea, the globe called for the United States Navy to begin convoying ships through the region. Many both in and out of the United States question American global leadership, but it is clear that in times of crisis, it is the United States that is expected, and able, to step up and tackle the challenges that face the world.

In the world of governance and international relations, there are no manuals or tutorials. Those in positions of power have nearly limitless possible ways to approach problems with three main pillars to guide them. They have legal limitations on what they can do, they have material limitations on what they can do, and they have their values and beliefs, which can both limit and drive leaders' actions. Because of this, it is important to understand the culture and beliefs of those in power and the culture that they come from. Perhaps decisions that the United States has made over the years make more sense now, understanding the mindset and values of those making the decisions. Or maybe modern America seems more understandable given the importance of values and the long path that brought us here.

The United States has often acted with a directness that it views as efficient and reliable but tends to come across as oafish at the best of times. It can also be fairly easy to predict, to the point where

random internet users can reliably predict America's reaction to various events simply by knowing recent history. Predictability is useful as a global superpower, but it can also be an Achilles' heel, as your adversaries can meticulously prepare for exactly what you are going to do, as the United States and Saudi Arabia have found with the Houthis.

The United States has often failed to comprehend the average person in foreign countries. This has led to disastrous attempts to support regimes that were so unpopular they had to resort to intense repression to retain power, or has led to the United States sitting back and watching as disinterested or outright hostile populations allow the American-backed or created government to evaporate in favor of something less aligned with United States interests. Only recently has the concept of "public diplomacy" been given a name, and currently, that is as much as it has gotten. Being used as little more than a marketing firm to advertise new programs or American policies, the idea of genuinely engaging with foreign populations and learning their thoughts and grievances remains elusive.

Ultimately, the United States tends to view the world through rose-tinted glasses, believing that its good intentions will ensure all its plans succeed on the first try without any hindrances. When that is inevitably proven false, it tends to resort to bashing its head against the obstacle harder and harder until one of them breaks. It will then go and sulk on its pseudo-island and lick its wounds before coming back to repeat the process ad infinitum.

The Global Stakes of America's Choice in 2024: Multilateralism vs America First

CHRIS GOWE

The events of the past two months have seen the 2024 United States presidential race entirely upended. After President Joe Biden's disastrous debate performance in late June and the failed assassination attempt on former President Trump at a rally in Butler, Pennsylvania, in early July, the overwhelming sentiment reflected in many pundit forecasts and betting markets was that Trump's victory had been all but sealed. Biden crawled from the rubble of the June debate looking like he wasn't fit to govern for the next few months, let alone the next four years; Trump emerged from the failed assassination attempt looking downright heroic.,

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That has all changed seemingly overnight now that Biden has dropped his bid for re-election and Kamala Harris has ascended to the top of the 2024 Democratic ticket. What was once looking to be a Trump-led Republican landslide in the making has shaped up to be a highly competitive race, with Kamala quickly closing the polling gap with Trump in key battleground states and entirely overtaking him in others. Now, Kamala is ahead in the key battlegrounds of Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin in the latest polling. As the race currently stands, Trump and Harris remain in a close contest, but Harris's success in erasing Trump's polling lead and overcoming his fundraising advantage is a remarkable achievement.

While the Democratic candidate and the trend of the race may have changed in dramatic fashion, the fundamental choice Americans face in this election in terms of policy remains essentially the same. This is especially true in the realm of foreign policy. Harris differs slightly from Biden on some issues, but the overall posture and vision for the U.S. role in the world that Harris stands by will likely follow the same course set by Biden. It is markedly at odds with Trump's vision for U.S. foreign policy.

Until 2015, there was broad bipartisan consensus between Republicans and Democrats on the U.S.'s role in global affairs, particularly in upholding the post-World War II liberal international order through multilateralism, institutions, and military/economic alliances. Of course, this consensus did not preclude debate on specific foreign policy issues. For instance, Democrats and Republicans often clashed over trade agreements, military interventions, and the degree of emphasis on human rights in foreign policy. These debates, though significant, did not fundamentally challenge the shared belief in U.S. global leadership. This changed with the emergence of Trump and his America First doctrine, which shifted the Republican Party toward a more unilateral, nationalistic approach.

During his first term, Trump viewed international relationships in myopic financial and transactional terms, often hyper-focusing on the cost to the United States of various security arrangements and

paying seemingly little attention to the strategic value of America's long-standing alliances. He also shocked allies and partners by repeatedly praising autocratic rulers such as Kim Jong Un and Vladimir Putin.

In polling, Republican support for an active global role for the U.S. was recorded as lower than that of Democrats for the first time in 2016, and the disparity has grown since then. Demonstrative of this shift solidifying over time is survey data from the Chicago Council on Global Affairs which shows that for the first time in nearly five decades of polling on this topic, a majority of Republicans in 2023 preferred that the U.S. stay out of world affairs. Notably, the data also revealed that Trump Republicans are "much more negative" than other non-Trump Republicans about the U.S. role in the world, the U.S. alliance system with Europe, and defending allies in general.

The world has lived through the ramifications of four years of Trump at the reins of U.S. foreign policy and nearly four with Biden at the helm. Given the highly divergent governing styles and worldviews that each president represents, along with the track records of their respective administrations, what are the implications of four more years of Bidenesque foreign policy under Harris versus that of America First 2.0 under Trump? This article aims to explore how the 2024 election will shape outcomes in terms of U.S. leadership in the world, particularly concerning the Israel-Palestine conflict, the U.S.-China strategic competition, the Taiwan Strait, the Russo-Ukrainian war, and North Korea.

BIDEN'S FOREIGN POLICY TRACK RECORD

Over the past four years, Biden has had to deal with a number of thorny international issues. He oversaw the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021; early 2022 saw Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the U.S. has since been Ukraine's primary arms and ammunition supplier; and on October 7th, 2023, Hamas launched a major incursion into Israeli territory, leading to a massive U.S.-

backed retaliation from Israel and a catastrophic humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

No doubt one of the weakest points of Biden's foreign policy track record is the withdrawal from Afghanistan from July to September 2021, a highly chaotic operation that left 13 American service members killed in action, stranded U.S. citizens and Afghan allies, and left behind \$7 billion of military equipment. Both Trump and Biden were bent on ending "America's longest war," and the Trump administration set in motion the withdrawal from Afghanistan through a withdrawal agreement it negotiated with the Taliban in February 2020. Under Trump, the U.S. reduced troop levels from 13,000 to 2,500, even amid continued attacks by the Taliban on Afghan forces.

Although Biden simply followed through on the withdrawal plans set out by Trump, his administration's decision to execute the withdrawal on a timeline only slightly delayed from the original—despite the Taliban's noncompliance with the agreement and U.S. intelligence assessments that the Afghan government would likely collapse—proved to be disastrous. While working to end the 20-year failed exercise in militarized nation-building may have been the right move in the long run, the logistical failures and the sense that America was abandoning Afghan translators and supporters on the ground could nonetheless prove to be an indelible stain on U.S. credibility and Biden's legacy.

On the other hand, Biden will no doubt get a lot of credit for bringing back a more traditional internationalist approach to U.S. foreign policy after four years of Trump's unconventional and recalcitrant posture. Under the Biden administration, the U.S. rejoined the Paris Climate Agreement, led a massive effort to help Ukraine defend itself against Russian aggression following its invasion, and ushered in a new era of multilateralism in Asia to counter China via AUKUS, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, and U.S.-Japan-South Korea trilateral cooperation. The U.S.-South Korea alliance also received a major upgrade under Biden via the Washington Declaration, a joint statement that announced the creation of a Nuclear Consultative Group and reaffirmed the U.S.

commitment to extended deterrence against the North Korean nuclear threat. U.S. allies in Europe and elsewhere have welcomed a more amicable Washington that is committed to collective defense under NATO Article 5 and that stands strongly against challenges to the liberal international order.

ISRAEL-PALESTINE CONFLICT

Given that Biden and Harris have thus far presented themselves as being in virtual lockstep on foreign policy, Harris will no doubt have to fend off attacks tying her to Biden's missteps. However, unlike an incumbent, she may have more of an opportunity to chart a new course and distinguish herself from her current boss on some issues. One potential area for distinction was thought to be the Israel-Hamas conflict, which has caused growing frustration among younger and progressive voters in particular.

Harris has not yet outlined a detailed policy plan on the issue, but she has called for a ceasefire and expressed more concern over the humanitarian crisis than Biden has, reportedly urging the White House to be more sympathetic toward Palestinians. Even so, her national security advisor has stated that she does not support an arms embargo on Israel, signaling that significant policy shifts may be unlikely. Harris's record also suggests continuity with mainstream Democratic support for Israel, as she consistently backed military aid during her time in the Senate. Protesters have repeatedly interrupted Harris's speeches at campaign events in recent weeks, underscoring the challenges she will face in balancing pressure from the progressive wing of the Democratic Party and the longstanding U.S. foreign policy stance to which the general electorate is more sympathetic. Harris would also clash with Netanyahu on the issue of Iran, given her previous stance of supporting a return to the JCPOA, the deal that previously halted Iran's nuclear program in exchange for unfreezing Iranian assets and which Trump abandoned during his first term.

A second Trump administration would also be solidly pro-Israel, but Trump's recent statements have been mixed (calling on Israel

to “finish up your war”), and he has yet to offer any specific steps he would take to bring about peace in the region. When interviewers or commentators press Trump on his plans to address the conflict, he falls back on his typical refrain that “only he” can solve the conflict and that the war wouldn’t have happened in the first place if he had been in office (a baseless claim he also repeats with regard to the war in Ukraine). Trump has shown no compassion for Palestinians, and he has pledged to cut off all U.S. aid to Palestine should he win back the White House (he previously cut more than \$20 million in aid during his first term). Other policies during his first term were also unabashedly pro-Israel, from relocating the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem to withdrawing from the Iran nuclear deal. A second Trump term would likely see a return to this style of policy, with an emphasis on backing Netanyahu’s right-wing nationalist plans for the region.

CHINA

A hypothetical Harris administration would also be unlikely to diverge significantly from Biden on China policy. As Vice President, Harris has been tasked with traveling throughout Southeast Asia to shore up support from Indo-Pacific allies amid the U.S.-China strategic competition. During a trip to the Philippines in 2022, she reiterated the United States’ “unwavering commitment” to defend the archipelago nation in the event of Chinese attacks in the South China Sea. She also struck a combative tone when speaking on the issue of China’s intellectual property violations and dumping during the 2019 primary campaign.

A Harris administration’s approach to China would likely maintain the Biden administration’s “small yard, high fence” doctrine: upholding targeted sanctions, implementing friendshoring strategies in critical industries, maintaining continuity on Trump-era tariffs, and adopting a “tough on human rights issues” stance vis-à-vis Xinjiang. Given Harris’s record of championing human rights, she may be even tougher than Biden when it comes to Xinjiang and other related issues. The downside to this approach is that it makes it more difficult to address global issues that have

traditionally required a working relationship with Beijing, namely climate change and the North Korea nuclear problem.

China is one area where there is little daylight between America First Republicans and internationalist Democrats, as both sides have tried to one-up each other in showing who can be tougher or more competitive against the Asian power. For his part, Trump has said that he would double down on the policies of his first-term trade war by increasing tariffs to 60-100% on all Chinese imports to the U.S. Trump has long been obsessed with the trade deficit and sought to gain an advantage for America through tariffs and trade war tactics (in practice, the tariffs have resulted in a bilateral reduction in the deficit with China but an increase in the deficit with other trading partners like Mexico and South Korea). Trump would also bring a hardline approach to China policy, but his focus would be more on the economic dimension of the great power competition.

TAIWAN

When it comes to Taiwan, Biden has on multiple occasions broken with the official U.S. policy of “strategic ambiguity” by suggesting that the U.S. would defend Taiwan in the event of a Chinese invasion. Given the hit that U.S. credibility took regarding its security commitments during the Trump presidency, what U.S. allies and partners in Asia really want is strategic clarity, not ambiguity. Taiwan will be watching closely to see what kinds of statements Harris and Trump make regarding a commitment to Taiwan’s defense, and whether the U.S. is indicating that it will militarily intervene or merely arm the island while sending warning signals to Beijing. Given Harris’s record of strengthening alliances with ASEAN and other Asian partners as VP, and her statements pledging to deepen “unofficial ties” with the island, a continuation of the Biden administration’s approach of supporting Taiwan and opposing unilateral actions to change the status quo would likely be on the horizon.

For his part, Trump made waves in Taipei last month after

complaining that “Taiwan doesn’t give us anything” and suggesting that Taiwan compensate the U.S. for its defense (Taiwan spends millions of dollars on U.S.-made arms every year). Trump’s record on Taiwan was mixed during his first term—initially drawing praise from the Taiwanese after taking a call from President Tsai Ing-wen as president-elect, but later reverting to recognizing the “One China” policy while speaking to Chinese President Xi Jinping. Ultimately, the pro-Taiwan advisors in Trump’s orbit steered the administration toward more support for the island nation, and his administration approved major arms sales to Taiwan, including dozens of F-16 fighter jets. Given Trump’s recent statements on Taiwan and the influence of his advisors on previous decisions, it’s unclear whether a similarly supportive approach toward Taiwan would be undertaken in a second Trump presidency.

The China hawks who previously influenced Trump’s foreign policy, like John Bolton, have mostly left his orbit, and more isolationist figures elevated in a second term may enable Trump’s more transactional approach to the island. His insistence that Taiwan should “pay us for defense” underscores his view of the relationship as a business deal, suggesting that his support for Taiwan’s defense may depend on perceived economic gains for the U.S. rather than security or geopolitical considerations. Notably, he has repeatedly refused to commit to defending the island in the event of an attack from China. Additionally, some speculate that Trump could use Taiwan as a bargaining chip in negotiations with China on trade and high-tech competition, potentially scaling back support once he extracts concessions from Beijing. Whether Trump would defend Taiwan in a crisis remains unclear, with his decisions likely to be influenced by internal cabinet dynamics.

RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR

The war in Ukraine is an area where significant policy differences exist between the Biden-Harris administration and Trump. Since the start of the conflict, Biden has overseen the provision of tens of billions of dollars in military aid, including advanced weapons

systems like HIMARS rocket launchers and Patriot air defense systems. His administration has also been instrumental in rallying NATO allies to support Ukraine and imposing wide-ranging sanctions on Russia. Assuming cooperation from Congress, a President Harris would likely be able to maintain this level of military and financial assistance to Kyiv. Harris, who has aligned herself with Biden's foreign policy throughout their time in office, would likely focus on continuing to strengthen the international coalition supporting Ukraine while holding Russia accountable for war crimes and human rights violations.

The GOP, traditionally the more hawkish party on Russia and Vladimir Putin, is now divided over the extent of U.S. support for Ukraine going forward. Some in the conservative think tank sphere have argued that supplying Ukraine with military equipment dilutes U.S. warfighting capabilities and would make it harder for the U.S. to prevent China from taking Taiwan. Other more traditional Republican internationalist voices on the right have made the case for balancing both theaters and increasing military spending to restock depleted and thinly spread U.S. assets. Trump's VP pick, JD Vance, has argued for European nations like Germany to support Ukraine on their own without U.S. assistance, and Trump himself has long been skeptical of funding for Ukraine.

In June, Trump threatened to cut U.S. aid to Ukraine if reelected, leading Kyiv's allies to scramble to secure long-term funding amid the uncertainty the 2024 election poses for Ukraine's ability to continue to ward off Russian assaults. Trump advisors also reportedly presented the former president with a plan that would have the U.S. withhold funding for Kyiv unless it enters peace talks with Russia. It is unlikely Kyiv would accept such a proposal, given that its position is that peace can only be sought when Russia withdraws from Ukrainian territory. Ukraine is also in a better position than it was a few months ago, having successfully captured territory in the Russian Kursk region—territory that, if held, could serve as a useful bargaining chip in future negotiations.

NORTH KOREA

Whoever is sworn in on January 20th next year will face a changed and more volatile international landscape than the one that existed when Biden took office just three and a half years ago. The first hot war in Europe since World War II has exacerbated the bifurcation in the international system, where liberal democracies and authoritarian nations increasingly find themselves at odds on security and economic issues. Cooperation across these ideological divides—essential for addressing critical global challenges—has been harder to come by since Russia’s February 2022 invasion and amid intensified U.S.-China competition.

One such issue is North Korea, where progress toward denuclearization and any related diplomatic processes has traditionally required the participation of China, which keeps the Kim regime afloat by engaging in sanctions-skirting trade and providing aid. The war in Ukraine and the U.S.’s preoccupation with countering China in other areas have provided ideal cover for North Korea to hunker down and accelerate its weapons development and military modernization programs. Russia’s global pariah status has elevated North Korea’s importance to Putin (or rather lowered Putin’s status to that of the DPRK), and the two countries have deepened their cooperation since Russia’s winter 2022 invasion. North Korea is believed to have sent Russia nearly 5 million artillery shells as well as dozens of ballistic missiles to aid in its conflict with Kyiv. In exchange, the DPRK has received technology to help it deploy spy satellites, along with other conventional military vehicles like tanks and aircraft.

Biden’s policy approach to North Korea—telegraphing an openness to renewed dialogue with the DPRK with “no preconditions” while simultaneously focusing on pressure and sanctions—has failed to produce any positive results. The next administration would be well-positioned for a long-overdue course correction on this issue. Unfortunately, given the tendency for other more “pressing” geopolitical conundrums to overshadow the Korean Peninsula, a Harris administration would most likely continue Biden’s approach to Pyongyang, which is itself simply a copy-and-paste of Obama’s

“strategic patience,” rather than take an active approach toward finding a diplomatic avenue forward.

Obama famously warned Trump about the urgency of the North Korean nuclear threat shortly after the 2016 election. This warning motivated Trump to take DPRK weapons development seriously, and he prioritized the issue as president despite it being a non-issue during his campaign. Trump deserves credit for breaking with the status quo of U.S. policy on North Korea and pursuing aggressive top-down diplomacy with the Kim regime in 2018 and 2019. But his strategy, too, ultimately failed. The summits in Hanoi and Singapore produced little in the way of substantive results, with the same vague promises of denuclearization that had been given by previous North Korean leaders.

Despite these diplomatic efforts, North Korea remained defiant, showcasing its largest ICBM ever, the Hwasong-17, in 2020 and continuing on a path of accelerated nuclear weapons development. Trump’s approach may have failed to achieve lasting results, but he could still pursue further diplomacy if he returns to the presidency. However, such a strategy could put him at odds with South Korea’s President Yoon Suk-yeol, who favors a policy of containment and deterrence over engagement with Pyongyang. Yoon has strengthened South Korea’s alliance with the U.S., focusing on isolating North Korea diplomatically and economically unless there is tangible progress toward denuclearization.

A second Trump term might also see renewed tensions over the U.S. military presence in South Korea. During his first term, Trump demanded a significant increase in South Korea’s financial contribution to U.S. forces stationed there—a demand that could resurface and strain the alliance. Trump has also made nonchalant comments in support of South Korea developing its own nuclear weapons (presumably to get the U.S. off the hook as a defense partner), a dangerous proposition that risks upending the NPT based international nuclear nonproliferation regime. Additionally, Trump’s more hawkish stance on China could widen the gap between U.S. and South Korean policies, particularly as South Korea attempts to balance its security ties with the U.S. against its

economic relationship with China.

North Korea may see a potential Trump return as an opportunity to restart nuclear negotiations. According to high-ranking North Korean defector Ri Il Kyu, Pyongyang is preparing a strategy aimed at securing sanctions relief and economic aid if Trump is re-elected. North Korea's growing ties with Russia, particularly in missile technology, and the further deterioration of U.S.-China relations have also reduced its need to pressure the U.S. to lift sanctions, potentially complicating future negotiations and weakening American leverage. Ultimately, while Trump might be inclined to pursue more diplomacy with North Korea, the challenges and dynamics in the region suggest that any new approach will face significant hurdles.

The 2024 U.S. presidential election is set to be a pivotal moment in determining the direction of American foreign policy. The race presents a stark contrast between Kamala Harris's commitment to multilateralism and alliances—reflective of the Biden approach thus far—and Donald Trump's "America First" doctrine, which prioritizes national interests and often takes a unilateral path.

Harris, building on Biden's record, would likely continue to emphasize rebuilding and strengthening alliances, supporting global institutions, and addressing international challenges through cooperation. Her administration would maintain strong ties with NATO, push back against authoritarian regimes, and engage in multilateral efforts to counter universal threats like climate change and global pandemics. Harris's potential foreign policy would be marked by strategic partnerships, particularly in Asia, and a sustained commitment to Ukraine in its fight against Russian aggression.

On the other hand, Trump's return to the presidency would likely bring a reassertion of the America First ideology that characterized his first term. His approach often involved withdrawing from international agreements, pressuring allies to bear more financial burdens, and prioritizing direct deals that served immediate U.S. interests. While this may resonate with voters seeking a focus on

domestic concerns, it risks alienating allies and reducing America's influence on the global stage. The long-term consequence of such a course would likely be an emboldened and more influential China and Russia, who would not hesitate to fill the void left by the U.S. Trump's unpredictable stance on issues like Taiwan, Ukraine, and relations with North Korea and China could lead to significant shifts in global dynamics, especially if he follows through on his isolationist tendencies.

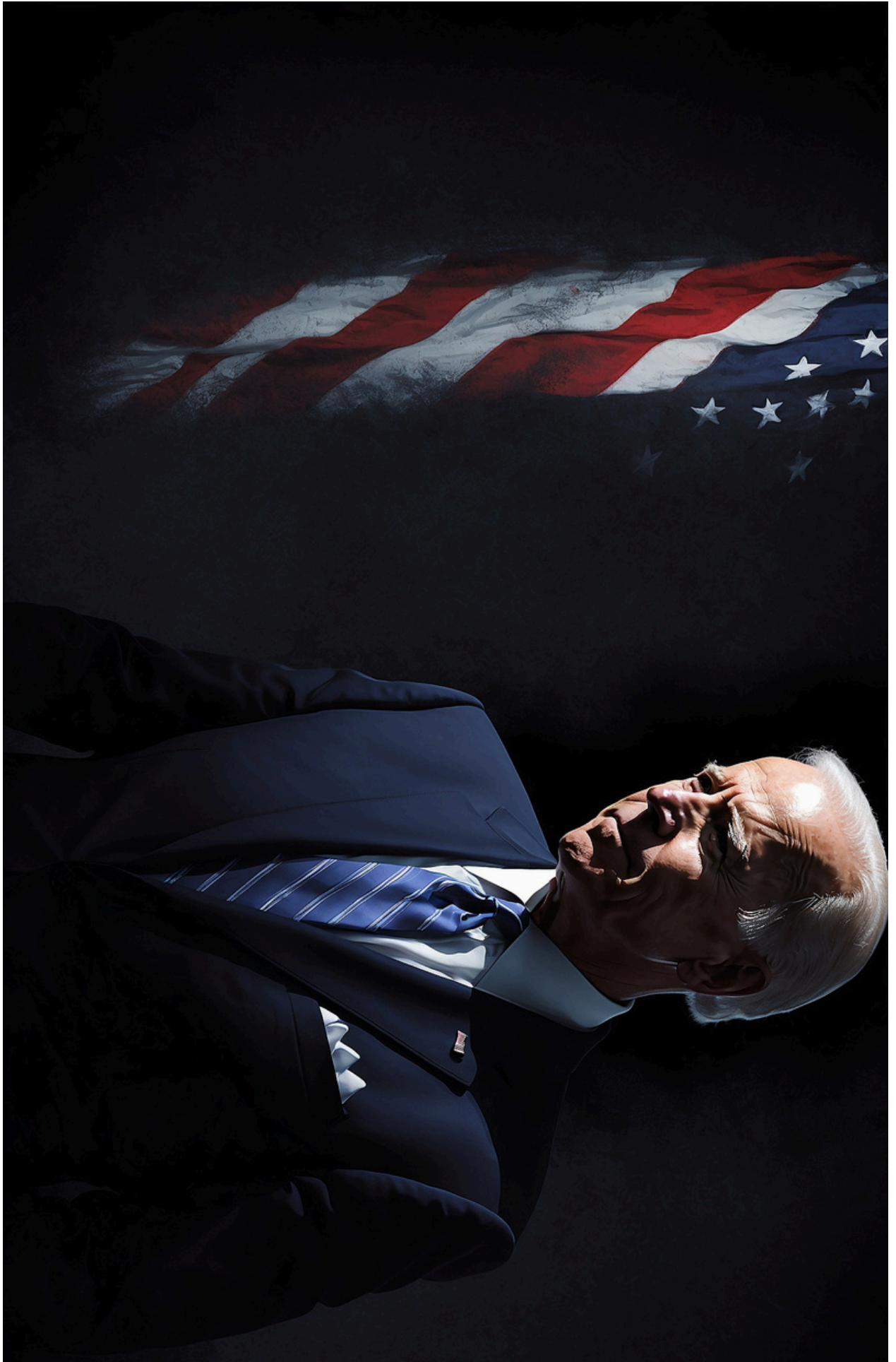
Ultimately, the election will determine whether the U.S. continues to engage with the world through the lens of shared responsibilities and global leadership for the rules based liberal international order, or pivots toward a more insular, transactional approach. The implications of this choice will be far-reaching, affecting not only American foreign policy but also the broader international order for potentially decades to come.

Has the Biden Administration Been Successful?

MARCUS MILDENBERGER

“I made a lot of mistakes in my career, but I gave my best to you,” President Joe Biden declared while addressing a roaring crowd during the opening night of the 2024 Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Biden’s speech, originally planned for the convention’s final day before his sudden withdrawal from his campaign and endorsement of Vice President Kamala Harris, was, as CNN’s Van Jones described, “an old lion’s last roar.” As Biden ends his presidency, passing the Democratic torch to Harris, his fifty-year career of public service will finally conclude. As a United States Senator, Vice President, and President, his time in office was certainly filled with many mistakes, missteps, and failures but will ultimately end in a remarkably effective presidential term at a time of profound political polarization and razor-thin congressional margins.

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Biden's legislative accomplishments stimulated economic growth following the COVID-19 pandemic, invested over a trillion dollars into crumbling American infrastructure, and recommitted the U.S. to combating climate change. Biden's tenure has been far from perfect, challenged by historic levels of U.S. inflation, a chaotic southern border, hypocritical foreign policy rhetoric, and an inflamed Middle East. As Joseph Robinette Biden's term comes to an end, this article asks: have four years of the Biden administration been successful?

DOMESTIC AGENDA

The Biden Administration inherited a nation in disarray following the January 6 riot at the U.S. Capitol and two years of the COVID-19 pandemic that had killed 400,000 Americans by the time he assumed office in January 2021. One of the first legislative successes of Biden's presidency was stabilizing the American economy and getting the pandemic under control through the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021. The nearly \$2 trillion package addressed vaccine distribution and allocated billions in emergency funding for small businesses, childcare, and personal protective equipment. It also provided Americans with a third round of direct stimulus in the form of \$1,400 checks, the most generous direct financial assistance for civilians in the world. The effects of most legislation are often not immediately felt, and the pandemic's human and economic costs continued to increase throughout Biden's first year in office. However, there is little doubt that the American Rescue Plan had an immensely stabilizing effect and will be viewed as Biden's first of many successful legislative accomplishments.

Following the passage of the American Rescue Plan, the Biden administration accomplished what successive presidents had failed to do: improve America's collapsing infrastructure. Biden signed the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, commonly known as the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, which allocated \$1.2 trillion of investment in America's roads, bridges, broadband networks, airports, and waterways. Over 40,000 projects have begun since the law's signing, creating over 300,000 jobs. These projects will

likely take years to complete, but the initial impact of this legislation was monumental for addressing crumbling infrastructure and will surely be felt for generations to come.

Additional legislative successes include the CHIPS and Science Act, signed into law in late 2022. Aimed at strengthening U.S. supply chains and enhancing domestic production of semiconductors, the law authorized \$280 billion in spending to support research and manufacturing of semiconductors in the U.S., a vital industry that had been increasingly dominated by China. It also saw significant investments in higher-level STEM education programs for training non-college technical workers. The law's implementation has faced challenges, such as a shortage of highly skilled workers and bureaucratic delays, yet the bipartisan bill was a crucial step in leveling the technological gap between the U.S. and China at a time when computing technology and artificial intelligence have become booming industries.

To address the continued lack of funding for veteran healthcare, President Biden signed the PACT Act in 2022. The law increased funding for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and expanded healthcare and benefits for veterans exposed to burn pits, Agent Orange, and other toxic substances. Two years later, over a million claims through the PACT Act have been made, with nearly a million more U.S. veterans across all 50 states receiving benefits—a resounding success in taking care of the nation's veteran population.

In a historic first, Joe Biden nominated Ketanji Brown Jackson to the U.S. Supreme Court, replacing retired Justice Stephen Breyer. The first former public defender to serve on the court, Justice Jackson will continue to provide a diverse perspective to a system dominated by prosecutors. Additionally, the Senate approved a combined 205 district and circuit court judges nominated by President Biden, the most in the first four years total of Presidents Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama, and equal to Donald Trump.

On immigration, the Biden administration has struggled to

articulate how it will reform America's outdated system. Biden reversed Trump's family separation policy, but his administration's border policies went nowhere in a gridlocked Congress, providing critics an opportunity to blame the president for surges of immigration. Border patrols encountered over 2.2 million migrants crossing illegally in 2022, an all-time high. Unable to deter significant migrant flows, Biden turned toward executive action and ordered a crackdown on asylum claims. The administration also directed border control to shut down the border if illegal crossings surpass 2,500 individuals. Ultimately, Biden's actions have not made U.S. immigration more humane, orderly, or secure and will most likely lead to drastically longer processing periods for immigrants.

THE ECONOMY

One of Biden's greatest challenges has been navigating through four-decade highs of the U.S. inflation rate. Wages struggled to keep up with the dramatic cost increases, which peaked at 9.1% in June 2022, with cumulative inflation closer to 20% throughout Biden's four years. Widespread supply chain disruptions caused by the pandemic and unprecedented federal spending to revive the economy gave indications of an economic recession, reflected in the President's approval ratings, which dropped below 40%, also in June 2022.

One of the misplaced critiques of the Biden administration's economic policies has been the dramatic increase in gas prices under his term, peaking at \$5.07 per gallon in the summer of 2022. While the President has little market control over gas prices, prices have steadily gone down, and domestic oil production and exportation have surged. Today, the U.S. is producing more crude oil than any other nation on earth and ever in human history while exporting more fossil fuel than ever, accounting for over 80% of globally produced fossil fuels.

Fortunately for Biden and American consumers, inflation has started to fall, consumer confidence has risen, and faith in the

trajectory of the U.S. economy has slowly been restored. The U.S. economy has experienced solid growth over the past four years and has regained all pandemic GDP losses while surpassing every other G7 nation in terms of economic recovery measured by GDP. Wages have continued to regain ground on inflation, and the stock market has also seen consistent growth with all-time highs for the S&P 500.

Job creation under the Biden presidency has been another success. The U.S. created over 15 million jobs while Biden was in office, 11 times more than the last three Republican administrations combined. While unemployment claims reached highs of 15% in 2020, today claims have steadily decreased. Biden also became the first sitting President to join a union strike when he walked the picket line with members of the United Auto Workers Union (UAW) at a General Motors parts center outside Detroit in 2023. One month later, the UAW secured a significant wage increase and benefits package with America's Big Three automakers: Ford, General Motors, and Stellantis.

THE ENVIRONMENT

One of the stark differences between the Trump and Biden administrations is their approach to climate change and the risks a warming planet poses to humanity. While the Biden administration's climate policy has been far from perfect, it has taken steps to reduce emissions and re-engage with allies on reducing the future effects of rising global temperatures. The Biden Administration reversed the Trump decision to leave the Paris Climate Agreement on his first day in the Oval Office, recommitting the U.S. to cutting carbon emissions, regulating the use of fossil fuels, and transitioning the U.S. to a more renewable economy. The Biden administration also canceled the controversial Keystone XL pipeline project, a victory for Native American tribes and environmentalists.

Another legislative success came in the signing of the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), one of the largest investments in the American

economy and the first comprehensive climate legislation in U.S. history. Costing approximately \$800 billion over the next decade, the IRA provided the largest investment in America's economy and infrastructure since the New Deal. The law created more than 20 tax incentives for clean energy, manufacturing, and reducing greenhouse emissions to better transition the economy for future climate-related threats. Additionally, the law allowed for Medicare to negotiate lower drug prices for ten of the most commonly used medications, a massive achievement for reducing American healthcare costs. Not a single congressional Republican voted for its passage, with many pointing to the law's large price tag while downplaying the threat of rising global emissions, despite evidence that increasing carbon emissions will have long-term economic consequences. The IRA is not only a vital step in ensuring future generations a cleaner planet and reducing the consequences of climate change's destructive effects, but it will also chip away at high medication prices while supporting the future of the Affordable Care Act.

FOREIGN POLICY

Another stark change between the Trump and Biden administrations has been the re-engagement with allies on key foreign policy challenges. While Trump pursued a more unilateral foreign policy, often transactional, Biden has re-committed the U.S. to the NATO alliance, expanded new partnerships in the Indo-Pacific, and stood up to global autocrats like Vladimir Putin.

In the first year of the Biden presidency, U.S. foreign policy was consumed by the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Biden has successfully avoided a direct confrontation between American forces and Russians while providing Ukrainians with vital support in dismantling the Russian army. The United States has given \$175 billion in military assistance to support the Ukrainian government and a slew of weapons to defend against Russian advances. Biden helped unite a transatlantic and trans-Pacific coalition to sanction Russia and support Ukraine, which, despite early military stalemates and ongoing congressional challenges, has been his

greatest foreign policy success. Today, Ukraine has restored some partial battlefield mobility through unbelievable willpower and Western support, even making incursions into Russian territory. This war will carry on to the next administration; however, the Biden administration has done a remarkable job of standing up for Ukrainian sovereignty and providing the necessary tools for the Ukrainian army.

One of the Biden Administration's earliest missteps was the predictably chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan in September 2021. The end of America's longest war was, on its face, a success, but the manner in which U.S. forces exited the country weakened American credibility with allies on the ground in Afghanistan and cost 13 U.S. service members their lives. A month after the U.S. withdrawal, the Afghan government and national security forces were overrun by the Taliban, who have increased their crackdown on women's rights and extrajudicial killings.

In Asia and the Indo-Pacific, Biden has made improvements to diplomatic relations with once-adversarial nations like Vietnam while expanding existing partnerships with the Philippines and upgrading relations with Indonesia. While his grand strategic shift in pursuit of U.S. objectives in the Indo-Pacific to counter growing Chinese influence was an early policy priority, this momentum has stalled, a costly misstep.

The most recent challenge for the Biden administration has been balancing financial and military support for Israeli military operations in Gaza with voters demanding accountability for crimes committed against Gazan civilians with U.S. weapons. In the wake of Hamas' barbaric October 7 attack, the U.S. immediately granted \$14.3 billion of assistance as part of a sweeping \$106 billion aid package, including replenishing U.S. weapons to Ukraine and providing humanitarian aid to both Israel and the Gaza Strip. Biden initially warned Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of the risks of running into Gaza with no war objectives or long-term strategy, similar to the American reaction to the September 11 attacks that committed thousands of U.S. troops and trillions of dollars to the Middle East. There was widespread hope that Biden

could leverage support for Netanyahu to quickly negotiate the freeing of hostages while mitigating the suffering of innocent Palestinian civilians. Over the past 11 months, that hope has completely evaporated.

While American allies and the international community have called for investigations into Israeli and IDF war crimes, crimes against humanity, and the killing of journalists and medical professionals, the Biden administration has refused to cooperate. While the administration has supported similar investigations into Russian perpetrators of the same crimes against Ukrainians, regarding Israel, Biden has refused to do the same. Biden announced the construction of a pier in Gaza to assist in delivering humanitarian aid, which was only necessary due to an Israeli siege on aid entering the strip. The pier cost over \$230 million and was a disaster from the beginning, breaking numerous times before the U.S. abandoned the project altogether.

In March, as Israeli forces approached Gaza's southernmost city of Rafah, one of the last refuges for displaced Palestinians, the President vaguely offered a red line: if IDF operations continued to target refugee encampments in Rafah, some form of U.S. military assistance would be suspended. Intense IDF airstrikes followed, killing hundreds of Palestinians with no policy change from the Biden administration, which has since continued to send more weapons to Israel.

Since the war in Gaza began, the U.S. has supplied Israel with more than 10,000 massive 2,000-pound bombs, dozens of F-15 warplanes, and thousands of Hellfire missiles, allowing the IDF to kill Palestinians at a shocking rate. U.S. military assets, including the GBU-39 bomb dropped on a United Nations school in June that killed 32 people, including seven children, have abetted an expanding Middle East conflict at a time when the administration should be better positioning itself for future conflicts in Asia and the South China Sea. While the administration has continued to claim the conflict has not expanded outside Israel and Gaza, this is simply not true, with upticks in violence in Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. Furthermore, U.S. forces stationed across the Middle East

have increasingly become targets for Iranian-backed proxies who see the U.S. as Israel's chief military sponsor. The Biden administration's military, financial, and diplomatic support for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has damaged America's global reputation and accelerated the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians living in Gaza — a colossal failure.

Biden's greatest foreign policy missteps and challenges have come in the final year of his administration. He has abandoned the rhetoric on human rights accountability in favor of longtime American allies, foregoing calls to hold Saudi Arabian officials responsible for the death of Washington Post journalist Jamal Khashoggi and ignoring Palestinian suffering at the hands of the Israeli military and government. Biden's messaging has also become less effective and truthful regarding America's role in ongoing international conflicts as his presidency has continued. This June, while addressing the nation, Biden claimed that "the United States is not at war anywhere in the world." While the U.S. has not officially started any wars under the Biden administration, the U.S. military has been active across the world, launching strikes targeting Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and Somalia.

As Joe Biden prepares to leave office, his administration will have grown the American economy, given assurances to American allies on certain key issues, and recommitted the U.S. to combating climate change. Despite domestic successes, his administration has struggled to leverage an end to the war in Gaza, address an outdated immigration system, and articulate its policy victories to the masses.

U.S. Presidents have two constituencies: the people and history. While Biden's administration has been plagued by historically low domestic approval ratings, he has also been one of the most effective presidents in modern history. Biden will be remembered for historic investments in the future of America, reviving America's economy after COVID, and unwavering support for Ukraine in its fight against Russia. However, his administration will also be frustrated that it did not achieve more or provide its successor with a more navigable geopolitical future. Still, despite widespread

political polarization and a historically unproductive Congress, Biden has been successful in laying a foundation for future American progress and prosperity.

A World with More Isolationist America

BILLY AWANDA

The prospect of a second Trump presidency after the 2024 elections raises considerable speculation about the potential direction of U.S. foreign policy, especially in light of his administration’s substantial departure from traditional U.S. foreign policy practices. Epitomized by an “America First” agenda, Trump prioritized national sovereignty, economic interests, and displayed a disdain for multilateralism. Often, making extensive strategic changes in foreign policy can be challenging due to the complex interplay of domestic and international factors, which create momentum favoring continuity over change. However, in the U.S., the Constitution distributes foreign relations powers between the executive and legislative branches, granting some powers exclusively to the president, others to Congress, while leaving some unassigned.

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U.S. UNILATERALISM DURING
TRUMP'S FIRST PRESIDENCY

To understand the potential foreign policy trajectory of a second Trump term, it is imperative to explore key elements of his initial tenure, which was characterized by an agenda to reassert American power while simultaneously reducing its international commitments. His administration's economic and trade policy was perhaps the most defining foreign policy element, in which he emphasized the "protection of American industries and jobs" through the use of tariffs and trade wars. The withdrawal from the trade-oriented Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the climate-focused Paris Agreement, and the renegotiation of NAFTA—which he termed the "worst trade deal ever made"—into the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) were pivotal moments that demonstrated his preference for bilateral over multilateral agreements. Trump sustained his critique of many international commitments, asserting that bilateral partners and multilateral institutions were taking advantage of the U.S. for security guarantees and trade agreements. This skepticism led to additional U.S. withdrawals from key international arrangements such as the World Health Organization (WHO), and his administration's subsequent hardline stance against NATO, even going as far as questioning the value of the alliance.

For Trump, international institutions have tended to constrain rather than amplify American power, thus reverting to unilateralism was seen as imperative to give the U.S. more leverage to take decisive actions. Indeed, this unilateralism was evident in the killing of Iran's most powerful military commander, General Qassem Soleimani, pressuring Britain into excluding the Chinese firm Huawei, compelling NATO allies to increase their contributions to collective defense, and pressuring Canada and Mexico to renegotiate NAFTA. However, on the broader spectrum of U.S. foreign policy, these "successes" came with far-reaching implications. While Europe has been unable to counter America's financial power, it did not comply with Trump's demand to abandon the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear deal with Iran, which remains tenuously intact. Additionally,

despite significant American pressure, Iran has not been forced to negotiate on American terms even after the death of General Soleimani. Moreover, while NATO countries are contributing more to defense, France and Germany are now advocating for Europe to accelerate efforts to build a more autonomous defense capability and reduce their reliance on the U.S. for security.

Repeatedly, the insistence on demonstrating American strength, on winning, and on being seen as victorious had unintended impacts. Trump came to power promising to end what he described as Washington's naïveté, which he claimed was enriching the rest of the world at America's expense. He vowed to be a great dealmaker. However, his record shows more deals destroyed than created. Even on issues where Trump might have enjoyed broad international support—such as nuclear disarmament and countering Chinese aggression—he undermined agreements and alienated allies. He waged a trade war against China largely on his own, announced the drawdown of American forces from Germany without prior notification to Berlin, and sought to dismantle the Iran nuclear deal single-handedly. This unwavering commitment to unilateralism forced American allies to alter their behavior and disrupted their long-held faith in the U.S.-led Western alliance.

FOREIGN POLICY UNDER A SECON TRUMP PRESIDENCY

As Americans head to the polls in November 2024, one question that has encapsulated observers of U.S. foreign policy is what it would look like under a second Trump presidency. Based on precedent, if Trump were to win, it is likely that his primal instincts would be fully at play, perhaps reflecting continuity with his administration's foreign policy during his first term in office.

Regarding the Trans-Atlantic alliance, there is no doubt that Trump has, in the past, raised legitimate concerns about the sustainability of U.S. global obligations as part of multilateral alliances. However, what seems to elude the former president is that America's desire to provide global leadership comes with greater commitment,

especially in the midst of an international system that has transformed substantially. Indeed, while American power is still the greatest, it has nonetheless waned compared to a decade ago, and even more so compared to the decade before that. Thus, while there is logic in seeking to withdraw from some of its grand strategic commitments, doing so comes at the cost of accelerated and diminished global influence.

In the past, Trump has threatened to oversee the withdrawal of the U.S. from NATO, to the point where Congress became concerned and passed legislation making it impossible for presidents to pull out of the alliance without the approval of the Senate or an Act of Congress. However, this barely allays concerns, because the issue is not just whether Trump would try to have the U.S. leave the alliance, but whether it would act in concert with its NATO partners. It is likely that Trump will not only call for a drastic increase in NATO spending by allies but also seek a radical reorientation of the alliance. This could, for instance, take the shape of an American commitment to provide a nuclear umbrella in Europe and guarantee airpower through its existing bases in Turkey, Germany, and England, in exchange for shifting the bulk of infantry, logistics, and artillery roles to allies. This would drastically reduce the security role of the U.S. within the alliance, except in times of great crisis.

Moreover, this radical reorientation may also take the form of a refusal by the U.S. to commit to Article 5 of the NATO treaty in the event of an attack on members that have not yet met the target of spending 2 percent of GDP on defense, due to at least two important reasons. First, invoking Article 5 requires consensus, meaning it can only be operational if all members agree that an attack has occurred and authorize action. The disagreement of one member, especially a powerful one, could therefore thwart consensus. Second, even in the event that Article 5 is invoked, the provision for members to respond as “deemed necessary” provides flexibility that could allow a member to refrain from providing substantive support.

Beyond the scope of Article 5, a second Trump presidency may put additional pressure on NATO's deterrence role. In the past, particularly during the Cold War, NATO was considered to have successfully deterred an attack by the Soviet Union, and this deterrence has also largely been effective against plans for a conventional attack by Russia on the alliance, including during a time when the alliance is providing substantial military support to Ukraine. To a large extent, this deterrence is anchored on the American nuclear umbrella, which acts as a key deterrent to Russia. However, a second Trump presidency would raise concerns about this deterrence policy, given his past comments telling Russia to "do whatever the hell they want" against allies who don't spend enough on their defense. Although France and the UK have nuclear capabilities, they do not provide the same level of deterrence as the U.S. does against Russia.

Trade and economic policy have consistently been central to Trump's agenda and manifested in the form of economic nationalism. Indeed, while his stance on various other issues has evolved over time, his focus on trade has remained constant. During his first term in office, Trump's success in advancing his trade agenda was facilitated by the unique aspects of the U.S. political system and Constitution, which, despite granting Congress clear authority over taxation (including tariffs), also allows considerable flexibility for a president and the executive branch to take action on trade and economic matters. Part of Trump's rhetoric prior to and during his first term in office was that he is a "tough and shrewd" negotiator in business, and that he would do away with trade policies that largely benefited other countries at the expense of U.S. economic interests. In 2018, he tweeted (now on X) that "trade wars are good, and easy to win," after signing a series of executive actions that imposed tariffs on imported metals from Canada, Mexico, the EU, India, and China. However, given the influence of the U.S. economy, domestic economic policies have tended to have far-reaching implications on the global economy. Thus, the unprecedented imposition of tariffs on key bilateral trade partners triggered reciprocal tariffs on U.S.-produced commodities such as motorcycles, whiskey, juices, and soybeans. The impact of this economic reciprocity was so

significant that the U.S. administration disbursed USD 28 billion to farmers to mitigate the losses incurred from the trade war with China.

Yet, during his campaigns, Trump has reiterated his intention to extend the trade wars to an even greater degree, proposing to implement a universal baseline tariff of 10 percent on the majority of foreign products and specifically 60 percent or more on products imported from China. Additionally, Trump has proposed several additional tax cuts, including eliminating federal income taxes on Social Security benefits, the money service workers like waiters and ride-share drivers earn from tips, and has promised to reduce the corporate income tax rate from 21 percent, which he had approved in 2017, to 15 percent. For Trump, bolstering the U.S. economy necessitates creating additional jobs, and imposing higher tariffs on foreign goods would encourage more domestic production, create more local jobs, and reduce the import-export gap. However, despite Trump's insistence on the continuation of this international trade policy, research shows that while there was success in reducing imports and increased production in some industries like steel and semiconductors, the tariffs nonetheless resulted in higher consumer and production prices for factories dependent on imported inputs. Moreover, due to retaliation, exports of certain U.S. products also declined.

The re-election of Trump in the forthcoming elections could have far-reaching implications for the international order, which has largely been anchored on multilateralism, alliances, and the promotion of democratic values. These tenets, however, appear to be in direct conflict with Trump's foreign policy priorities, which mainly emphasize national sovereignty, economic nationalism, and a transactional approach to international relations. It is likely that a second term for Trump could accelerate the further decline of the liberal international order, as the U.S. continues to undermine and even withdraw from multilateral institutions and agreements. On a structural governance level, this trend could lead to the disintegration of the global order into a multipolar world, where power is concentrated in regional blocs or individual states, potentially creating an unpredictable and unstable international

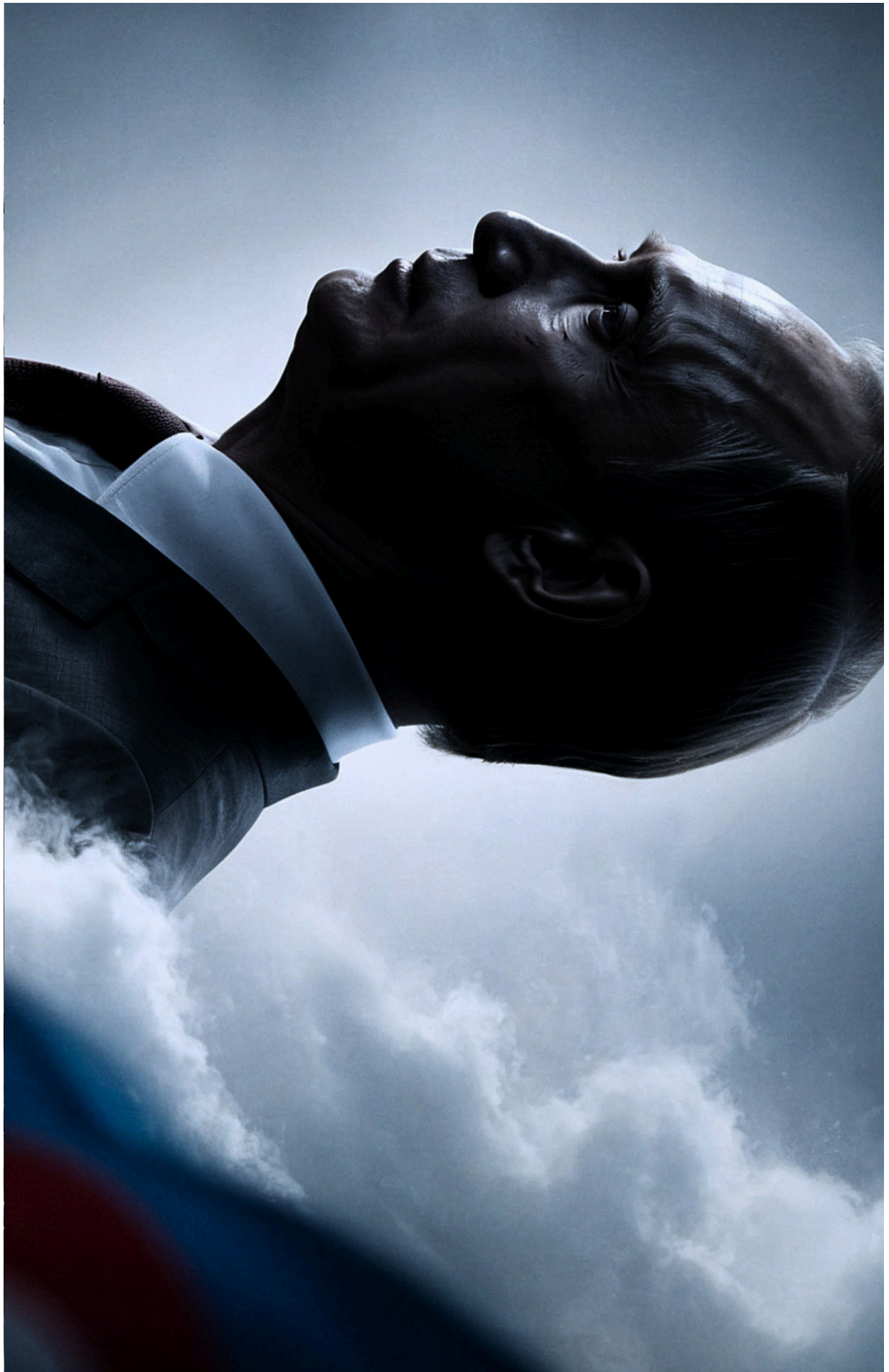
environment, with a greater potential for conflict and competition between major powers.

What Does President Putin Really Want?

KEVIN DOREMUS

Understanding what Russia wants is not merely an academic exercise; it is crucial to comprehend the dynamic nature of international politics. As we observe the ongoing war in Ukraine, it becomes increasingly evident that Russia's actions are not isolated events but part of a broader strategy rooted in historical and cultural constraints. Russia's current approach reflects its everlasting quest for status and recognition on the world stage. Over the years, Russia's relationship with the West has gone from pragmatic cooperation to rivalry, leading to a realignment of its foreign policy towards non-Western powers, particularly China. This shift is not only reshaping regional politics but also challenging the rules-based order that the US has led. By examining the underlying motivations of Russian foreign policy, we can better understand the drivers of its current behavior and possibly forecast future actions.

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To understand the motivations behind Russia's foreign policy, it is essential to understand the historical roots of its quest for status. Russia's desire to be seen as a great power is not new but rather a continuation of policy that dates back to its imperial period. During the time of the Tsars, Russia consistently sought to assert its influence on European politics. This can be seen following the Truce of Yam-Zapolsky when the Vatican negotiator, Antonio Possevino, did not view Ivan IV as equal to European kings or emperors. Later on, Russia would engage in wars with Türkiye and Sweden. In particular, one of the justifications for war with Sweden was that Sweden insulted Peter I's honor. The quest to be seen as an equal among major powers intensified over the years under the Russian Empire and the early days of the Soviet Union. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 was not just a geopolitical loss for Russia; it was a profound blow to its identity and prestige. This was what President Putin called a geopolitical catastrophe. Today, Russia's actions can be seen as part of an ongoing effort to reclaim its status and recognition, influenced by both its imperial past and the legacy of the Soviet Union.

From Ivan the Terrible to Putin, Russia has felt the need to obtain great power status. In Larson and Shevchenko's book, Russia sought status in multiple ways. As Russia focused on its foreign policy towards the West, it was not seen as being part of the European monarchies. Some Russian leaders engaged in wars to show that Russian power was comparable to European kingdoms. Others, such as Peter the Great, sought to import certain aspects of Europe, believing that if they could assimilate these elements, Russia would become more European and be welcomed into the great power club. Fast forward to the end of the Soviet Union, Russia was at its peak as a major power. The US and the USSR were two superpowers at the top of the world. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the territorialization that the Soviets implemented not only resulted in the collapse of the Soviet Union but also of what used to be the Russian Empire. Not only was the Soviet Union gone, but the Russian Empire also lost territory, and Russia lost its prestige of being a great power. If we are to ask what Russia wants, it is a return to great power status, in which it is considered equal to countries such as the United States.

To comprehend Russia's actions, we need to examine the concept of ontological security. It is a term that originates from sociology and psychology. Originally, this concept came from R.D. Laing and Anthony Giddens, which highlights the importance of stability and continuity in life. Jennifer Mitzen applies this concept to international politics. She defines ontological security as the need to experience oneself as a continuous, whole person in time, which also applies to states. For states, this means projecting and maintaining a coherent identity that aligns with their historical and cultural narratives. The Russian state that existed before Vladimir Putin continued even after he passed away.

The government must ensure that it maintains its strong sense of identity. Just like individuals, a state wants its identity to be respected and acknowledged. It seeks to project its identity in a positive light or as prestigious. To protect its identity, a state may resort to tactics that may seem irrational to outsiders but are understood and appreciated within its local community. Sometimes, a state's sense of identity may take precedence over physical security or economic stability, leading to prolonged conflicts or hostilities. The fear of losing one's sense of identity can cause a state to feel insecure, and it may establish routines with other states to alleviate this anxiety. However, traumatic disruptions in social interactions with other countries can lead to feelings of ontological insecurity, causing unexpected or dramatic behavior from states.

In Russia's case, this sense of self is deeply tied to its historical role as a great power, one that has been repeatedly challenged since 1991. The fall of the Soviet Union and the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance challenged Russia's ontological security, leading to a profound identity crisis. This necessitated the need to restore Russian status and to protect it from identity erosion. This drives many Russian actions, including the invasion of Ukraine.

Suppose we apply the idea of ontological security to Russia. Throughout history, the Russian state has consistently sought the status and recognition of other major powers worldwide. Russia perceives itself as a major power, comparable to the United States

and China, and views itself as the center of Eurasia, responsible for bringing enlightenment and development to the Turkic peoples of Central Asia and acting as “a guarantor of peace in the Caucasus.” This self-perception was a significant factor during the 2008 Russo-Georgian War when Russia felt compelled to defend its image as a dominant power in Eurasia. Russia’s identity as a culturally distinct and civilizational state meant that it could not tolerate former parts of the Russian Empire being integrated into the Western sphere of influence. When this identity as a major power in Eurasia was threatened, Russia sought various methods to restore its stability and status.

The application of defending this sense of self is evident in Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Prior to the invasion, the Kremlin published an article by President Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” in which he referred to the two Slavic nations as “one people.” This view is not unique to Putin; other Russian leaders have historically shared this belief. For example, as documented in Vladislav M. Zubok’s *Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union*, other Russian decision-makers in the 1990s shared the view “that the borders of the Russian Federation, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan were the products of the Bolsheviks’ cynical manipulation of nationalism in order to construct their totalitarian empire.” The idea that Ukraine should be part of Russia has deep roots, and the 2014 Maidan Revolution, which disrupted the social interaction between Russia and Ukraine, caused profound ontological insecurity for Russia. From the Kremlin’s perspective, the invasion of Ukraine was necessary to restore its ontological security, despite the substantial costs involved.

This concept of ontological security is not unique to Russia. Other states, such as China and the United States, also deal with their own identity challenges. For instance, China’s rise is not just about economic and/or military power but also about reclaiming its historical status in Asia. “Never forget national humiliation” is one of the driving messages from the Chinese Communist Party. The humiliation of losing territory to colonial powers in the 1800s drove the quest for status. Similarly, the United States’ foreign policy often reflects its self-perception as a global leader and

and defender of democracy. In the 1890s, the United States was dealing with economic downturns, social issues, and reconstruction following the American Civil War. At this time, the United States experienced an identity crisis and began to become more activist on the global stage. By comparing these examples, it can be seen that the quest for ontological security is common.

While the concept of ontological security offers a compelling framework for understanding Russia's actions, it is crucial to note that this is not the only lens through which to view Russian actions. There are significant debates in the field of political science and international relations regarding how one should interpret Russian actions. Structural realists, for instance, might argue that Russia's behavior is less about identity and more about security concerns. For them, Russia's actions to annex Crimea and invade Ukraine and Georgia were motivated by the need to secure its borders and maintain a strategic buffer against NATO expansion. Structural realists, such as John Mearsheimer, argue that the expansion of NATO influenced Russian behavior and that allowing nuclear weapons based in Ukraine to be returned to Russia opened the chance of war. This viewpoint interprets Russia's actions as rationally designed to ensure its survival in an anarchic world.

However, social constructivists offer different perspectives. They focus on how the roles of identity, norms, and historical narratives shape a state's behavior. From a constructivist viewpoint, Russian actions are not merely about material concerns like security or economics but are deeply rooted in a historical self-conception as a great power. This perspective looks at how Russia socially interacts with the world and how it develops its identity. Yet, focusing on material and non-material aspects separately provides a limited view. Integrating these scholarly perspectives allows for a more nuanced look at Russia. For instance, Deborah Welch Larson, Alexei Shevchenko, and Andrei Tsygankov have all documented the continuity of Russia's quest for status and recognition throughout its history. They note that economic and security concerns still matter, but when paired with ontological security, one can see how Russia might interpret those concerns. By considering these different viewpoints, we gain a more

comprehensive understanding of the motivations behind Russia's actions on the global stage.

FOREIGN POLICY TODAY

In examining the current state of affairs, it is crucial to explore Russia's evolving social interactions and strategic partnerships with countries such as China, Iran, and Türkiye. Over the past few years, these relationships have deepened, reflecting a prominent shift in Russia's foreign policy as it distances itself from the United States, Great Britain, and the European Union. The partnership with China has moved beyond economic cooperation to include military assistance and shared political interests in creating a multipolar world. Russia's ties with Iran have also strengthened, driven by mutual interests in Syria and a shared opposition to U.S. policies in the Middle East. Meanwhile, Türkiye, despite its NATO membership, has increasingly cooperated with Russia, particularly in energy trade. These alliances signal a broader strategy where Russia seeks to build a multipolar world, reducing its reliance on Western powers and positioning itself as a key player in non-Western parts of the world.

Russia's continuous quest for status is clearly demonstrated by its strategic appeal to the Global South. As Natalie Sabanadze says, "[Russia's] aim is uncontested regional hegemony that can best be guaranteed in the multipolar world. This requires weakening the US and its allies through pressuring them in many directions simultaneously." This strategy involves creating as many pressure points as possible for the United States and Europe. Instead of focusing solely on the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the United States and its allies have to focus on the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. By spreading out over multiple fronts, the ultimate aim is to weaken Western influence. The effectiveness of this approach is evident in the fact that roughly two-thirds of the world's population resides in countries that have chosen not to sanction Russia.

The result is that states that hold about two-thirds of the world's population are not sanctioning Russia. Although Russia may not be respected as a power in Europe or America, it is still respected in other parts of the world. While Russia may struggle to gain respect as a power in Europe, it continues to seek respect and recognition from other parts of the world. Historically, Russia has always been driven by a desire for status and recognition. From the era of the Tsars, it sought to build an empire that would be granted membership in the club of European powers. The Soviet Union then elevated Russia to the status of a global power. However, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has been on a quest to reclaim the status that it believes it rightly deserves.

As we look to the future, Russia's quest to maintain or even gain more status is far from over. The state's identity has been challenged time and again, but Russian leaders have chosen to fight to preserve their current identity. Whether through military actions, alliances, or economic moves, Russia is likely to find a way to remain a player on the chessboard of global politics. The international response to the invasion of Ukraine is going to be crucial. The actions taken now will set the tone for the future and what is tolerated. We may see shifts in alliances and strategies among powers as they respond to Russia's persistence. Some may choose not to support sanctions because it would be too costly or because their interests have changed. In this dynamic, anarchic world, Russia's persistence in maintaining its status will likely continue to drive its policy. Whether these efforts will restore Russia to its former glory or lead to its further isolation remains to be seen. What is clear is that Russian leaders are willing to go to great lengths to ensure that their country remains a formidable force in the world.

Echoes and Lessons from The Korean War and the Ukraine War

SEUNGHAWN SHANE KIM

Though separated by decades and distinct geopolitical landscapes, the Korean and Ukrainian Wars exhibit striking historical and strategic parallels. This year marks the 74th anniversary of the Korean War, making it a poignant moment to reflect on these similarities. Due to the similarities between the two wars, many experts recommended that the Korean armistice model be implemented in the Ukraine War to stop the expansion of the war. By examining the historical, geopolitical, and strategic similarities in these two wars, it is essential to determine what lessons can be drawn for Russia, the United States, and the international community and find any alternatives for reducing this conflict.

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THE KOREAN WAR AND UKRAINE WAR IN HISTORICAL PARALLEL

The Korean War began on June 25, 1950, when North Korean forces, backed by the Soviet Union and China, crossed the 38th parallel and tried to invade South Korea. Historically, this invasion was predicated on the belief that the United States would be unwilling or unable to mount a substantial military response. Several factors contributed to this miscalculation.

The United States had significantly demobilized its military forces after World War II, reducing the number of soldiers from eight million in 1945 to 684,000 by 1947. This drastic reduction led to a perception that the US was unprepared for another large-scale conflict so soon after the war. It was part of a broader trend of reducing military expenditures and shifting focus to economic recovery and domestic issues. This was the reason that led to another fundamental underestimation of the US commitment to containing communism globally. The North Korean leadership, supported by Soviet and Chinese assurances, misjudged the Truman administration's readiness to respond militarily to aggression in Korea as part of its broader strategy of containment, articulated in the Truman Doctrine. They underestimated the Western partners, including the United States' ability to galvanize the allies into action and respond swiftly.

Furthermore, North Korean leader Kim Il-sung and his Soviet and Chinese backers believed the United States was more focused on Europe, particularly the emerging Cold War tensions with the Soviet Union. The belief was that Asia was of secondary importance to US strategic interests, and thus, the US might not intervene decisively in the Korean Peninsula. This belief was reinforced by US Secretary of State Dean Acheson's speech in January 1950, which outlined America's defense perimeter in the Pacific and notably excluded Korea. North Korea and its allies interpreted this speech as an indication that the US would not defend South Korea, thereby encouraging the invasion.

Similarly, the Ukraine War, which can be traced back to Russia's

annexation of Crimea in 2014, illustrates a comparable underestimation of Western resolve. Under President Vladimir Putin, Russia believed its actions in Ukraine would meet minimal resistance from the West. This belief was rooted in historical precedents, where previous aggressive moves by Russia, such as in Georgia (2008) and earlier in Ukraine, met with limited and short-lived Western responses due to a lack of consensus among NATO member states. The Kremlin's strategy seemed to rely on the assumption that the West would eventually acquiesce. This was articulated by Dmitry Medvedev in 2022 at Russia's National Security Council. According to the Wilson Center's Kennan Institute, he recalled the 2008 Georgia conflict, suggesting that the West would tire of confrontation and seek negotiations, viewing Russia as too significant to ostracize completely.

THE ONGOING PROXY WAR AMIDST GLOBAL REORGANIZATION

The Korean War, which erupted in 1950, took place in a bipolar world dominated by the United States and the Soviet Union. After World War II, these two superpowers emerged, each championing opposing ideologies: capitalism and democracy led by the US and communism led by the Soviet Union. The division of Korea at the 38th parallel into Soviet-backed North Korea and American-backed South Korea epitomized this global ideological confrontation.

The conflict in Korea quickly escalated into a proxy war, with the North receiving substantial military and logistical support from the Soviet Union and China, while South Korea was bolstered by a coalition of United Nations forces, predominantly composed of US troops. This war became a battleground for the larger Cold War struggle, with each side aiming to prove the superiority and resilience of its political and economic system.

The Ukraine conflict exhibits characteristics of a proxy war between the Western powers, led by the US and NATO allies, and an authoritarian or revisionist bloc that includes Russia and,

indirectly, China. Through economic ties and diplomatic backing, China's tacit support for Russia underscores its strategic alignment against Western influence. The Western response, characterized by extensive military aid to Ukraine, economic sanctions against Russia, and diplomatic efforts to isolate Moscow, mirrors the strategic dynamics of Cold War proxy conflicts. The war in Ukraine, much like the Korean War, is a microcosm of a larger struggle, this time between liberal democracies and authoritarian regimes. Concurrently, this war occurred during a global reorganization towards multipolarity, alongside a stronger US-Sino rivalry. It highlights the geopolitical fault lines and shifting alliances that define the contemporary international order.

LIMITED WARS: KOREAN AND UKRAINIAN CONFLICTS

Both the Korean War and the Ukrainian War have been characterized by strategic decisions to limit the scope of the conflict, even though the situation in Ukraine has recently evolved after the United States allowed Ukraine to use its weapons to strike inside Russian territory.

During the Korean War, the United States intervened strategically to prevent an escalation into a direct military confrontation between the major powers, especially China. President Truman's "limited war" policy restricted the use of nuclear weapons and prohibited bombing military infrastructure outside of the Korean peninsula, such as in Manchuria. This was because the United States wanted to avoid massive military retaliations from China and the Soviet Union, which could potentially lead to another World War. The United States was not ready to prepare for another major world war, leading the Truman administration to prioritize containing the communists behind the 38th parallel.

In the Ukrainian conflict, the West initially adopted a similar strategy of restraint, providing military aid to Ukraine while restricting the use of these weapons beyond Russian borders. Similarly, Vladimir Putin emphasized that Russia had no plans to

attack outside of Ukraine, indicating a strategy of restraint on Russia's part as well. However, as Russia intensified its military actions in Ukraine under the pretext of creating a "buffer zone," the situation shifted. Ukraine is now permitted to use Western-supplied weapons to target sites within Russia, indicating a significant change in the West's approach to the conflict.

LESSONS FROM THE ECHOES OF BOTH WARS

One of the key lessons from the Korean War that can be applied, especially to Russia, is the critical importance of recognizing and rectifying strategic miscalculations. During the Korean War, North Korea, backed by the Soviet Union and China, underestimated the resolve of the United States and its Western allies. This miscalculation ultimately led to a significant consolidation of Western efforts, resulting in a robust military and political response from the United States and UN member states. Similarly, Russia must realize that its initial miscalculations regarding Western reactions have led to an unprecedented consolidation of the Western front. NATO and even IP4 nations (South Korea, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand) have come together more decisively than anticipated at the Washington NATO summit, providing substantial military aid and imposing severe economic sanctions. Thus, Russia should abandon any notion of achieving total victory, understanding that continued aggression will only strengthen the Western alliance against it.

The Korean War underscores the importance of an alliance-based approach to international conflicts for the United States. The success of the US-led coalition during the Korean War demonstrated the power of collective security and international solidarity. In the context of the Ukraine War, the US must ensure it continues to leverage its alliances effectively. One of the critical lessons of this alliance-based diplomacy is to avoid sending mixed or ambiguous signals, as occurred with the annexation of Crimea and earlier events in Ukraine. Such ambiguity can embolden aggressors and risk leading to a permanently divided Ukraine.

Clear, consistent support for Ukraine and a unified stance among Western allies are essential to counter Russian aggression and support Ukraine's sovereignty. Although the US's foreign policy might differ depending on the result of the November US presidential election, this should remain a foundational aspect of US foreign policy.

Additionally, the Korean War provides a historical precedent for the importance of seeking peace and consensus amidst ongoing conflicts and global reorganization. Despite the intense hostilities during the Korean War, significant efforts were made by the United Nations Command and numerous affiliated nations to negotiate an armistice, leading to a ceasefire and the establishment of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). While not a formal peace treaty, this outcome created a relatively stable situation by stopping the devastating war. Like the international community in the 1950s, the current international community should find a diplomatic resolution that brings lasting peace to the region and should not halt top-level and grassroots dialogues. The numerous wars like the Ukraine War, including the Israel-Hamas war, and disputes occurring amid this global reorganization highlight the necessity of concerted efforts toward conflict resolution. The Ukraine War should catalyze renewed diplomatic initiatives to establish a stable and peaceful regional order.

CHALLENGES AHEAD

Despite possible lessons learned from these two wars, challenges are still ahead. The United States has its presidential election in November, a critical event that could influence US foreign policy. The outcome of this election will determine the legislative agenda and could have significant implications for international relations, particularly regarding the Ukrainian conflict. Depending on which party and which candidate gains control, there could be shifts in the US approach to supporting Ukraine and the alliance-based approach. A change in leadership to Donald Trump might lead to a reassessment of military aid, economic sanctions against Russia, and diplomatic strategies. Any signs of reduced support or a pivot

in policy could embolden Russia and impact the conflict dynamics. Additionally, the elections could lead to a greater focus on domestic issues, as seen in recent Pew Research Center polls showing that only 23% of Americans prioritized supporting Ukraine. This shift could potentially divert attention and resources from international engagements and influence the US's ability to lead international coalitions effectively.

Another significant development is the increasing cooperation between North Korea and Russia. This growing partnership presents several strategic challenges and has the potential to destabilize regional and global security. North Korea and Russia have been exploring ways to enhance their military and technological cooperation. Such collaboration could lead to the exchange of advanced weapons systems and technologies, bolstering North Korea's military capabilities and complicating security dynamics in East Asia. Moreover, Russia, facing international sanctions and economic isolation due to its actions in Ukraine, may seek closer economic ties with North Korea, which has already been shown to receive millions of ammunition from North Korea. This increased cooperation between North Korea and Russia could also complicate diplomatic efforts to address security concerns in the Korean Peninsula and Eastern Europe. It could encourage North Korea to pursue more aggressive policies, knowing it has the backing of a major power like Russia.

Ultimately, the echoes of the two wars share commonalities in various factors and lessons drawn from the Korean War: the need for strategic clarity, strong international alliances, and a persistent pursuit of peace. By learning from historical precedents, Russia, the United States, and their respective allies should better navigate the complexities of the Ukrainian conflict. This approach will not only help mitigate the immediate impacts of the war but also contribute to a more stable and peaceful international order in the long term. However, the upcoming US elections and the increased cooperation between North Korea and Russia present significant hurdles in achieving these lessons, making geopolitics in Europe and Asia more complicated.

The New Threat to Democracy: AI

ARUSHI KAUR

The advent of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has sparked many debates on the ethical implications of its use cases and prompted a deeper conversation on potential technological sentience. AI, however, is not necessarily a recent development but rather a technology that has simply become more advanced and accessible over the years. ChatGPT, Gemini, Character.ai, and QuillBot are just some examples of increasingly popular AI tools that can be leveraged by anyone around the world with access to a smart device. While such tools have been utilized to improve operational efficiency in sectors such as finance, education, and tech, it is no surprise that the misuse of AI for malicious intent has raised significant security concerns around the world.

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Generally, AI software is often marketed as a tool to aid in decision-making and reduce human error. However, what logic does AI use to make certain decisions, and what determines that a decision was indeed appropriate? How does one define human error—and more importantly, who defines it? AI-based automation is also linked to operational efficiency with the eventual reduction of overhead costs; however, is this “automation” more integral than safeguarding the jobs that it has replaced? Even if these trade-offs are somewhat justifiable, perhaps the most relevant concern in the digital age is AI’s role in shaping human beliefs and institutions. What is AI’s role in this scenario, and should it even have a role to play?

A major testament to this development is the 2024 election year. In 2024, around 70 countries were scheduled for national parliamentary and presidential elections. Several countries, however, fell victim to pre-polling AI-related incidents, which depicted the proliferation of misinformation through various social media platforms. From deepfake videos to other forms of biased AI-generated content, governments have struggled to restrict and regulate the flow of such misinformation. A non-profit publication named Rest of World collected information about instances of AI-based misinformation from several countries holding elections, such as India, Pakistan, Venezuela, and South Korea. A commonality found among these countries was AI-generated content used to convey a politically biased message to persuade voters in favor of a particular party.

Unlike others, South Korea’s government introduced an amendment to the Public Official Election Act to ban the use of deepfakes for campaigning during the 90 days before election day. However, in India, for example, pop culture was utilized as a medium to connect with social media users. Specifically, clips from Bollywood movies were altered by replacing actors’ faces with politicians. Though these clips are often created for entertainment purposes, they do play a role in influencing a viewer’s opinion of a particular party or candidate based on the nature of the character associated with them in such clips. Given India’s socio-cultural diversity and ethno-religious history, politics is often intertwined

with caste, ethnic groups, and religion. Specifically, there exists a threshold of sensitivity regarding politics, which, if violated, can potentially spark widespread violent conflict or further division between different communities. That said, in a democratic country experiencing a rampant increase in smartphone and social media usage, media regulation can come at the cost of an individual's freedom of expression.

India's neighbor, Pakistan, faces a similar challenge, where political leaders from opposition parties have called for the boycott of elections through misleading deepfakes. For example, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party leader Imran Khan was seen giving a speech after winning the election despite being in jail. Essentially, an AI-generated audio track of Khan's voice was embedded with an older video of him giving a speech. Similarly, Donald Trump was seen endorsing Khan once again in an old video with a generated audio track created using Parrot AI. Although this video was declared a deepfake by a fact-checking organization, there is a possibility that, had this been a more refined and realistic deepfake, Trump's false endorsement of Imran Khan could have had negative repercussions in the United States, Pakistan, and any of their adversaries. It is imperative to note that the relevance of these deepfakes lies in the matter of authenticity and the extent of trust the public has in official government media communications.

If deepfake technology improves to become virtually indistinguishable from authentic media, controlling the spread of misinformation and disinformation will require equivalent efforts from the government to create advanced AI detection technology, yet even this is not a lasting solution. While AI-generated content may impair public trust in a government, the opposite is possible as well. For example, the Journal of Democracy explained how AI-generated letters issued to policymakers throughout the United States could convey a false consensus on particular issues. Furthermore, policymakers would essentially deem non-existent matters to be the legitimate concerns of the general population. Consequently, there arises a chasm or an implicit barrier between the government and the general population, as genuine concerns are miscommunicated, making the election and lawmaking process

rather ineffective and inefficient.

This dynamic poses several implications for the legitimacy of the institution of democracy, not only in the United States but in other democratic countries around the world. In a democracy, the right to free speech implies that an individual can vocalize their opinion; however, if that opinion is artificial and inauthentic, should that freedom be granted? This connects back to the paradox of regulating media content without infringing on the right to free speech by allowing unrestricted online content. Threats to democracy existed even before the public release of AI technology, where threat actors were able to execute cyber campaigns to fulfill certain strategic objectives. One of the most applicable examples of this is Russian interference in the 2016 US elections.

Essentially, Russian operatives employed tactics such as disinformation campaigns, social media manipulation, data leaks, and cyberattacks directed at weakening election-related infrastructure to skew the election in favor of Donald Trump. By proliferating inflammatory content, manipulating online political discussions, and employing APT groups such as Fancy Bear to steal and leak sensitive government information, Russia strategically undermined institutional democratic practices intended for fair and free elections. That said, due to the accessible nature of AI software over the past 2-3 years, both internal and external actors with political, financial, or espionage-related motives have been able to deploy more advanced and efficient cyber campaigns to threaten a state's sovereignty and internal security.

As a result of such advanced and widespread campaigns, the integrity of democratic institutions continues to deteriorate. Given this situation, countermeasures to defend against the misuse of AI must be of utmost importance for all democratic governments. Some examples of countermeasures include employing digital literacy campaigns, promoting ethical AI development, establishing stricter regulations and compliance standards, and developing advanced fact-checking tools. Digital literacy campaigns involve educating voters about biased AI-generated content and disinformation, and helping them understand how to

identify credible sources to inform their decisions accurately. Secondly, by promoting ethical AI development, potential biases in existing AI training models can be avoided, which can help reduce discriminatory practices such as voter targeting and the marginalization of particular groups.

Establishing stricter regulations and enforcing compliance with security standards can also help ensure transparency, protect private information, and provide better incident response guidance in the case of a cyberattack. Lastly, developing advanced fact-checking tools for filtering AI-generated content can help counteract the spread of false information by flagging online content that is inaccurate. If all of these countermeasures are utilized in a cohesive effort, the consequences of misusing AI can lead to increased awareness about how to optimize one's right to free speech. A final concern regarding this matter relates to the notion of the balance of power. A core principle in international relations, the balance of power refers to the equal distribution of power among states to avoid creating a dominant world power. The balance of power in today's multi-polar system is somewhat disparate or skewed, with Global North states being more influential and dominant than the Global South. While states like China and India have become prominent global powers, other states in the Global South have yet to acquire the same degree of influence. In the case of AI, the ability to purchase, maintain, and develop AI technology is limited to states with adequate power and resources.

Such an imbalance can result in issues regarding global governance, with states potentially disagreeing on how to regulate the use of AI due to differing priorities. Furthermore, centralized decision-making could arise from the conglomerate of states that are the primary developers and suppliers of AI technology for the world. This could lead to a lack of transparency in how AI models are trained and cause biased decision-making and regulation that benefits certain states at the expense of others. Moreover, centralized control over AI regulation could potentially exacerbate economic disparities by giving states equipped with AI-specific advantages, such as improvements in productivity, market

leadership, and opportunities for startups and innovation. Given these developments are relatively recent, a cohesive and united effort from all states can help mitigate the impact of AI's threat to democracy and protect the future of human autonomy.

Putin and the U.S. Presidents

BRANDON JOHNSON

Firstly, holding his cards close, Putin treats personal history as a top secret. Is he married? How many children? Counterparts are left guessing about his true motivations. Putin exploits his meetings as publicity stunts to promote his cult of personality. A future president will meet with a Sphinx. Second, before any meeting Putin prepares a psychological profile. Doing his homework, he seizes on his interlocutors' dreams, flaws and phobias. Putin, moreover, will exploit any vulnerability to throw an opponent off-guard. Facing criticisms from the famous musician Yuri Shevchuk Putin pretended not to know his name. To scare Angela Merkel, Putin brought fearsome dogs to a meeting. With Trump, it was beautiful women.

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Third, Putin, a fan of Henry Kissinger, is hard-headed. He tries to fit his goals with the underlying self-interests of others. As in the *Godfather*, 'Nothing personal, just business.' Fourth, often, especially with Westerners, emotions get the better of him. Putin can turn rivalry into macho showdowns. In these cases, he wants to see opponents humiliated: Boris Berezovsky, Boris Nemtsov, Mikheil Saakashvili, Aleksei Navalny. Finally, Putin's approach greatly contrasts with the American approach based on institutional rules, morals and values. This has led, over the years, to a downward spiral of recriminations.

PUTIN AND BILL CLINTON (1999-2001)

Russians tended to view Clinton as an otherworldly wizard. America, a far-off wonderland, seemed to possess unlimited military and economic power. On Russian TV, Clinton was seen playing the saxophone. Salacious accounts of Monica Lewinsky bolstered Clinton's macho image. Putin realized that his country was viewed as an embarrassing basket case. Clinton's vice-president, Albert Gore, had pinned his own presidential hopes on his experience as an urbane Russian hand who had transformed the Communists evil empire into a flourishing democracy. Instead, Republican-led Congressional hearings depicted Russia as a degraded mafia-state. Yeltsin was an unstable drunkard.

Putin adroitly stepped into the image of an anti-Yeltsin, an athletic dependable leader. Putin, moreover, exploited the West's pleas to fight corruption. By riding the streets of casinos and prostitutes Putin shored up his image both at home and abroad. In fighting corruption, Putin systematically took down his political rivals, the oligarchs. A serious point of contention between Russia and Clinton was the Yugoslav crisis. The vast majority of Russians thought that the West was unfairly demonizing their traditional ally, the Serbs and siding with Muslim minorities. This reminded them of Chechnya. The NATO bombing of Serbia horrified the Russian public. Inheriting a standoff, Putin skillfully distanced himself from hardliners such as Yevgeny Primakov. But at the same time Putin realized he had a card to play against a seemingly omnipotent

West. He could moderately object to the West's campaign earning admiration at home while forcing concessions from the West. Wishing to avoid another violent breakup, Clinton let Putin apply a heavy hand in Chechnya.

PUTIN AND GEOEGE W. BUSH (2001-2009)

For Putin, George Bush offered a welcome change from Democratic moralizing. A Republican from a famous dynasty, Bush, it was hoped, would focus less on human rights. Instead, oil and gas would form the basis for interactions. The 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001 presented another opportunity. Putin, the first to call G.W. Bush realized America's focus would shift to fighting Islamic terror. This would fit in with Putin's own program of pacifying the Caucasus regions. America, moreover, would do Russia's dirty work in Afghanistan.

But the attempt to form a heart-to-heart relationship soon backfired. For Putin, friendship implies informal agreements and obligations. Putin had agreed to help America with military air bases in Russia and Central Asia. Bush, it seemed to Putin, had implicitly agreed to not harm Russian interests. Then Bush unilaterally decided to prosecute the 2003 Iraq War. For Putin, the real stab in the back came when America supported a pro-Western, Viktor Yushchenko over the Kremlin-backed Yanukovych in a disputed election in Ukraine. Iraq had shown America's military might, but now the threat of a 'hybrid' Color Revolution threatened close to home.

Fears of Western expansionism seemed to be confirmed by talk (in February 2008) of offering NATO membership to Ukraine and Georgia. As William Burns, then US Ambassador to Russia, reported this was a Russian redline. As a consequence, Russia pushed back ferociously against the pro-Western Mikhail Saakashvili during the Georgian War. Betrayed by his 'friend' G.W. Bush, Putin saw the West as a deceitful wolf. But as opposed to the Clinton years, Putin now saw that American goliath could be countered: economically, through Russian oil, informationally through Russia Today, and even militarily, though focused interventions.

PUTIN AND BARACK OBAMA (2009-2017)

Putin viewed Obama with condescension. He seemed to spout PR about ‘hope’ while fomenting American exceptionalism and imperialism. In Putin’s eyes, Obama was an affirmative-action know-nothing. Worse yet, he was henpecked by female neocon hawks, Hillary Clinton and Victoria Nuland. (In Russian culture, assertive female politicians have been dealt with harshly. Maria Spiridonova and Valeriya Novodvorskaya were placed in psychiatric wards.)

Cynically, Putin placed a vapid frontman, Dmitri Medvedev, as ‘Prezident’ while Putin and Nikolai Patrushev dealt with real (male) leaders in the shadows. The “reset” policy promoted by Obama’s Russia hand, Michael McFaul, was viewed cynically. Putin now felt he could fool and cower the West. Putin was bemused, and then outraged, when American officials treated Medvedev as a genuine president. Obama’s devious minions were encouraging Medvedev to dismiss Putin. For Putin, Obama’s hand was behind the 2012 Moscow street protests.

But it was the toppling of Yanukovych during Ukraine’s Maidan protest in 2014 that completely enraged Putin. This was an American coup that required military intervention. Putin decided to annex Crimea. In Putin’s eyes, the Monroe Doctrine, as interpreted by Theodore Roosevelt, justified American intervention in Latin America. Didn’t Russia have a right to protect its own backyard? Why couldn’t Obama understand this? The entire world became a manly chess game, with a winner or loser. There could be no partnerships. This was how Putin viewed the Syrian civil war.

PUTIN AND DONALD TRUMP (2017-2021)

Putin was stunned by Trump’s victory and didn’t know what to make of him. Indeed, Trump enjoys popularity among everyday Russians, a rarity for American figures. At first, Trump was compared to Russian demagogic firebrands, such as Vladimir Zhirinovskiy. But Zhirinovskiy was a KGB man who headed a

Kremlin-run front-party. In reality, Russia holds few analogies to Trump. Putin saw Trump as naïve in international affairs. At a press conference, he tried to school him as an elder who tutors a student. But while the Russian public was initially hopeful that “our Trump” could bring a new *détente*, Putin was skeptical.

Putin could never understand the allegations of Russian interference in US elections: the posting of a few Facebook pages by a Prigozhin troll farm. There was an impenetrable cloud of Western media talking points that perplexed Putin. Were Western analysts serious that Trump was a ‘Siberian candidate’? It seemed that the West was going crazy. In fact, under Trump’s Russia hand Fiona Hill, America took a hard line. Russia’s new gas pipeline to Germany was blocked. Ukraine received increasing covert military support. In 2017, Trump, moving past what the Obama administration allowed, sent Javelin anti-tank missiles to Ukraine. Putin concluded only force could resolve his conflicts with the West.

PUTIN AND JOE BIDEN (2021-Present)

Biden and Putin only despise one another. Their interactions occur, often covertly, only through intermediaries: Victoria Nuland, Anthony Blinken, and Bill Burns vs. Nikolai Patrushev and Sergei Naryshkin. Putin and Biden thus interact with each other from afar. Their negotiations concern the ever-shifting redlines. In what cases would Russia use nuclear weapons? What would be Biden’s response? Biden openly wishes for Putin to be toppled or killed. Putin, akin to Kim Jong Un, uses appearances to ‘signal’ deterrence.

Thanks to his nuclear saber-rattling, Putin has convinced Biden to slow and limit aid. As opposed to the Cuban missile crisis, it is Biden who has blinked. Putin feels there will be little difference between a Harris or Trump administration. Russia is in a ruthless, long-term marathon struggle with the West. But reviewing this history, we see that Putin responds to hard-headed, Realist proposals and cynically mutually beneficial partnerships. Perhaps on this basis, a future US president will find some grounds for dialogue.

The World in the Dream of China

AVERY PREWITT

Over the past few decades, China has emerged as a dominant global power, reshaping the economic and geopolitical landscape. Once primarily viewed as a manufacturing hub, China now plays a pivotal role in international diplomacy, technological innovation, and global governance. Its meteoric rise, marked by becoming the world's second-largest economy and a leader in global trade, has challenged traditional power structures and introduced a new model of development and influence. At the heart of this transformation lies the vision of President Xi Jinping, a leader who has charted an ambitious course for China's future.

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Xi Jinping's leadership represents a defining era for modern China. Through his centralization of power and strategic policymaking, Xi has sought to position China as a leader not just in Asia but on the world stage. Central to his vision is the concept of the "China Dream" (中国梦), a guiding philosophy that encapsulates national rejuvenation, economic prosperity, and global prominence. This vision speaks to the aspirations of a modern, assertive China while evoking pride in its rich historical legacy. The China Dream promises a future where the country achieves greatness through innovation, unity, and strategic global engagement.

XI JINPING'S VISION

Xi Jinping's rise to power marked a pivotal moment in modern Chinese history, reshaping the nation's political landscape and setting the stage for its ambitious global aspirations. Born in 1953 into a revolutionary family, Xi experienced privilege and hardship. His father, Xi Zhongxun, was a high-ranking Communist official, but during the Cultural Revolution, the elder Xi was purged, and the young Xi Jinping faced public humiliation and exile to the countryside. These formative years gave Xi a unique perspective on the resilience of the Communist Party and the importance of discipline, loyalty, and ideological commitment.

Xi Jinping's ascent to power in 2012 was a watershed moment in modern Chinese history, heralding a new era of transformative leadership. His multiple roles as General Secretary of the Communist Party, Chairman of the Central Military Commission, and later President positioned him as a leader with the power to steer China towards a future of national rejuvenation. His rise mirrored a growing confidence within China that it could reclaim its historical position as a global leader, marking a significant shift in the nation's trajectory.

At the heart of Xi's leadership is the concept of the "China Dream" (中国梦), a vision he introduced early in his tenure. The China Dream encapsulates the collective aspirations of the Chinese people to achieve prosperity, national strength, and cultural renewal. It is

both a domestic and international vision, calling for restoring China's historical greatness while elevating its role on the global stage. This dream aligns with Xi's long-term goals of modernizing China's economy, building a world-class military, and positioning the country as a leader in global governance.

One of Xi's most ambitious strategies for achieving his vision is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a colossal project launched in 2013. As of 2023, the BRI has united 150 countries across Asia, Africa, Europe, and Latin America, making it one of history's most expansive global infrastructure and investment programs. Central to the BRI is the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, a key component of Xi's plan to revive and modernize the ancient Maritime Silk Road. This initiative enhances maritime connectivity by developing port infrastructure and shipping lanes. Notable investments in ports, such as Hambantota in Sri Lanka, Piraeus in Greece, and Mombasa in Kenya, illustrate China's strategy of securing critical nodes in global trade networks while fostering economic ties with participating nations.

Xi's leadership style is characterized by centralization and an emphasis on ideological loyalty. Through an extensive anti-corruption campaign, Xi has consolidated power, eliminating rivals and ensuring that the Communist Party remains the unchallenged authority in China. His approach reflects a blend of pragmatism and authoritarianism, reinforcing the party's control while advancing ambitious reforms. The 2018 constitutional amendment that removed term limits for the presidency symbolized Xi's determination to maintain a steady hand in implementing his vision, potentially extending his leadership indefinitely.

Key policies and speeches have further illustrated Xi's roadmap for China's future. In his 2017 address at the 19th Party Congress, Xi outlined a vision for China's development through 2050, emphasizing the importance of socialism with Chinese characteristics, technological innovation, and environmental sustainability. This long-term perspective underscores the depth of Xi's strategic planning and his commitment to shaping China's future. As part of the BRI, the Maritime Silk Road has become

emblematic of Xi's broader strategy to project China's influence across continents, blending economic cooperation with geopolitical ambition.

Central to Xi's vision is the role of the Communist Party as the core vehicle for achieving national rejuvenation. Xi has worked to integrate party ideology into every aspect of Chinese society, from education to business to media. Through a combination of traditional propaganda and cutting-edge technology, the party under Xi has tightened its grip on public life, ensuring that his vision is not only disseminated but also deeply ingrained. This ideological dominance is bolstered by advancements in surveillance technology, allowing the party to monitor and influence public sentiment in unprecedented ways.

THE CHINA MODEL

Under Xi Jinping's leadership, China's political trajectory has not only continued but also undergone a significant transformation. His blend of historical narrative with a vision for global leadership has not only reshaped the Communist Party's role in society but also positioned China as a nation with the ambition and means to redefine the international order. At the heart of this ambition is the 'China Model'—a development framework that merges state-led economic growth with political centralization. This model, supported by initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and China's growing influence in international organizations, has become a cornerstone of Beijing's strategy to export its governance and economic ideals abroad.

The Belt and Road Initiative is a clear manifestation of the China Model's global reach. With 150 participating countries as of 2023, the BRI represents an unprecedented effort to build infrastructure and foster connectivity across continents. Its flagship component, the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, is particularly significant in reviving and modernizing ancient trade routes. China has positioned itself as a critical hub in global maritime trade by investing in ports such as Hambantota in Sri Lanka, Piraeus in

Greece, and Mombasa in Kenya. These projects not only strengthen trade networks but also deepen China's economic and political ties with partner nations, embedding its influence in regions of strategic importance.

Beyond infrastructure, the China Model extends into diplomacy and global governance. Beijing has sought to amplify its voice within international organizations such as the United Nations and the World Health Organization, advocating for policies aligned with its interests. This approach often blends traditional diplomacy with economic leverage, offering investments and development aid as tools to build coalitions and sway decision-making processes. For example, China's leadership in establishing the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) demonstrates its intent to create parallel institutions that reflect its priorities while complementing existing global frameworks.

Case studies further illustrate the China Model's impact. In Africa, Chinese investment in infrastructure projects like railways and telecommunications has spurred economic growth while creating long-term dependencies on Chinese loans and expertise. In Southeast Asia, partnerships with countries like Malaysia and Indonesia have advanced regional connectivity but have also raised concerns over environmental and social impacts. In Europe, China's acquisition of critical assets, such as the port of Piraeus, showcases its strategic approach to expanding influence within established economies. After acquiring a majority stake in the Greek port in 2016, China transformed it into one of Europe's busiest ports, strengthening maritime trade routes between Asia and Europe. While Greece benefited from revitalized infrastructure, this move sparked unease among European Union officials, who feared Beijing's growing economic leverage in strategic assets.

The United States has reacted to the BRI and the Maritime Silk Road with outright skepticism, framing them as tools of geopolitical expansion. American officials frequently describe the initiative as a "debt trap," pointing to cases like Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port, leased to China after debt repayment challenges. In response, Washington has launched initiatives like the "Blue Dot Network"

and the “Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment” to promote transparent, sustainable alternatives to China’s infrastructure-led diplomacy.

Xi Jinping’s China Model seeks to present an alternative to Western-led development paradigms. By prioritizing state control, long-term planning, and infrastructure-led growth, this model offers an appealing narrative for countries seeking rapid modernization without adopting liberal democratic frameworks. However, the China Model is not without controversy. Concerns about debt sustainability, sovereignty, and environmental impacts have prompted resistance in some regions, highlighting the tensions between China’s ambitions and global apprehension.

THE DESIRED WORLD ORDER

China’s vision under Xi Jinping extends beyond domestic development and regional influence; it seeks to reshape the global order. Central to this vision is a multipolar world, where power is distributed among various states rather than dominated by a single hegemon. Xi has often framed this as rejecting what Beijing perceives as a Western-centric global order, advocating instead for a system rooted in mutual respect, shared prosperity, and the principle of non-interference.

At the heart of this vision is the belief that the current global governance system, heavily influenced by the United States and its allies, no longer adequately reflects the realities of a multipolar world. For example, China’s leadership roles in United Nations bodies, such as heading four of the 15 specialized UN agencies, including the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), allow Beijing to significantly influence global standards and policies. This influence is particularly pronounced in areas such as technology and agriculture, where China’s unique approach and priorities can shape global practices and regulations.

China has provided an alternative to Western-led development

models through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). For instance, in Pakistan, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship BRI project, includes infrastructure, energy, and transportation initiatives designed to enhance connectivity. While these projects have undoubtedly benefited local economies and improved infrastructure, they have also increased China's strategic presence in South Asia, particularly in regions contested by India. However, they have also raised concerns about debt dependency and potential loss of sovereignty for the partner countries.

THE “COMMUNITY OF COMMON DESTINY FOR MANKIND”

Xi's concept of a “Community of Common Destiny for Mankind” (人类命运共同体) encapsulates Beijing's aspirations for a harmonious global order. This idea has been prominently showcased in forums like the Belt and Road Forum and international gatherings like the UN General Assembly. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, China used this framework to promote its vaccine diplomacy, supplying doses to countries across Africa and Southeast Asia under initiatives like COVAX. This approach positioned China as a global leader in addressing shared health challenges while advancing its geopolitical influence.

However, critics argue that the concept also serves as a soft-power strategy. Soft power, a term coined by political scientist Joseph Nye, refers to a country's ability to influence others through non-coercive means such as culture, political values, and foreign policies. For instance, China's promotion of digital connectivity under the BRI, such as building 5G networks in Africa and Southeast Asia, has raised concerns about data security and digital sovereignty. While the rhetoric emphasizes mutual benefits, these projects often enhance Beijing's technological and economic leverage in partner countries, thereby increasing its soft power and influence.

STRATEGIC MULTIPLARITY

China's push for a multipolar world often positions itself as a counterbalance to U.S. hegemony. For instance, Beijing's growing partnership with Russia reflects a shared goal of challenging Western dominance. The two nations have conducted joint military exercises, such as naval drills in the Pacific, and coordinated efforts in forums like the United Nations Security Council to block Western-led resolutions on issues like Syria.

In the Global South, China has used platforms like the BRICS grouping (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) to advocate for reforms to global governance. For example, the BRICS New Development Bank offers an alternative to Western financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), providing loans to member countries with fewer political conditions attached. This aligns with Beijing's broader narrative of fostering a fairer global financial system.

REIMAGINING GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

Beijing's desired world order also includes reforms to global governance structures. For example, China has advocated for increased voting rights for developing nations in the IMF and the World Bank, arguing that these institutions disproportionately favor Western countries. At the same time, Beijing has used its influence to block measures it opposes, such as Western-backed human rights investigations within the UN Human Rights Council.

China's Belt and Road projects further reflect its efforts to reimagine global governance. For instance, in Kenya, China funded the Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) construction, linking the port city of Mombasa to the interior. While the project boosted trade and connectivity, critics argue it exemplifies how BRI projects create debt dependencies, as Kenya faced challenges in servicing its Chinese loans.

CRITIQUES AND LIMITATIONS

Despite its ambitious vision and growing influence, China under Xi Jinping is grappling with significant challenges and criticisms, both domestically and internationally. These issues, ranging from concerns about authoritarianism and human rights abuses to geopolitical tensions and economic dependencies, are not to be underestimated. They pose formidable obstacles to Beijing's efforts to achieve the "China Dream" and reshape the global order.

China's rapid expansion of influence through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has drawn mixed reactions. In Europe, China's acquisition of strategic infrastructure, such as the port of Piraeus in Greece, has sparked debates over national security and economic sovereignty. While Greece initially embraced Chinese investments following its financial crisis, there has been growing skepticism over Beijing's influence. European Union officials worry that such investments create economic dependencies and grant China undue leverage over critical assets.

This skepticism has expanded to include concerns about Chinese technology, particularly 5G networks. The U.S. and some EU countries have restricted or banned Huawei, citing national security risks and claiming the technology could be used for espionage or cyberattacks on critical infrastructure. These concerns underscore broader apprehensions about the potential strategic consequences of deepening ties with Beijing. The United States has also taken a strong stance against what it perceives as "debt-trap diplomacy" in BRI projects.

Controversies like Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port, leased to China after the country failed to repay its loans, have fueled accusations that Beijing uses infrastructure investments to gain control over strategic assets. This narrative has fueled skepticism among recipient countries, some of which, like Malaysia under former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, have renegotiated or canceled BRI projects to avoid excessive dependence on Beijing. In response, the U.S. and its allies have launched competing initiatives, such as the "Blue Dot Network," to promote transparent and sustainable

development investments.

China's human rights record remains one of the most controversial aspects of Xi Jinping's leadership. In Xinjiang, the Chinese government has been accused of detaining over a million Uyghur Muslims in "re-education camps," conducting forced sterilizations, and implementing widespread surveillance. These actions have been labeled as crimes against humanity by some countries and organizations, including the United States. Beijing has consistently denied these allegations, describing the camps as "vocational training centers" aimed at combating extremism. However, satellite imagery, survivor testimonies, and leaked government documents have painted a starkly different picture, intensifying international condemnation.

In Hong Kong, the imposition of the National Security Law in 2020 marked the end of the city's semi-autonomy under the "one country, two systems" framework. The law, which criminalizes secession, subversion, terrorism, and collusion with foreign forces, has been criticized for its broad and vague provisions that could be used to suppress dissent. Pro-democracy protests were met with harsh crackdowns, leading to mass arrests of activists and the suppression of dissent. This has strained relations with the West, resulting in sanctions and travel bans on Chinese officials responsible for the crackdown.

China's expanding surveillance state has also drawn significant criticism. Through technologies like facial recognition, artificial intelligence, and the Social Credit System, Beijing has created an unprecedented model of authoritarian control. In Tibet and Xinjiang, these tools are used to monitor and suppress ethnic minorities. International human rights organizations warn that China is exporting this surveillance technology to authoritarian regimes, further entrenching global repression.

China's rise has created intense friction with other global powers, especially the United States. Under the Trump administration, relations between the two nations reached new lows. The trade war initiated by President Trump imposed tariffs on hundreds of

billions of dollars worth of Chinese goods, escalating economic tensions. At the same time, Trump's confrontational rhetoric on issues like intellectual property theft and currency manipulation highlighted a growing rivalry. While Xi Jinping's relationship with Trump was sometimes framed as cooperative—evidenced by high-profile summits—the overall trajectory of U.S.-China relations during Trump's presidency was defined by mistrust.

With the recent U.S. election results, questions arise about how China will navigate its relationship with the new administration. The potential for the current administration to pursue a more unified global front with allies to counterbalance Beijing could significantly alter the dynamics of U.S.-China relations. This uncertainty, especially as Taiwan remains a contentious issue, adds a layer of complexity to China's strategic planning.

China's assertive actions in the South China Sea have further alienated neighboring countries in the Indo-Pacific region. Beijing's construction of artificial islands and military installations in contested waters has provoked criticism from countries like Vietnam and the Philippines. This has also drawn the attention of alliances like the Quad (comprising the U.S., Japan, India, and Australia), which seeks to counterbalance China's growing influence in the region.

Domestically, China faces mounting economic challenges that threaten its global ambitions. The country's real estate crisis, exemplified by the collapse of significant developers like Evergrande, has exposed systemic vulnerabilities in its economic model. Evergrande's failure to meet debt obligations has sent shockwaves through China's financial system, raising concerns about a broader economic slowdown. This crisis is part of a larger pattern of slowing growth, rising unemployment, and demographic decline.

The government's response, which includes strict regulatory crackdowns on industries like real estate and technology, has further complicated the recovery process. For example, Beijing's heavy-handed intervention in the tech sector, targeting companies like Alibaba and Didi, has deterred foreign investors and stoked

fears of overregulation. China's demographic challenges compound these economic issues. The aging population and declining birthrate, legacies of the one-child policy, threaten to reduce the country's workforce and strain social welfare systems. These domestic pressures may limit Beijing's ability to sustain ambitious initiatives like the BRI, potentially weakening its global influence.

The combination of international skepticism, human rights controversies, geopolitical rivalries, and economic instability poses significant obstacles to achieving the "China Dream." However, Xi Jinping's vision of a rejuvenated China capable of reshaping the global order remains resilient in the face of these challenges. While the path to the "China Dream" may be complex and resistant, the vision for national rejuvenation and global leadership remains a powerful one. To achieve this ambitious goal, Xi Jinping must navigate an increasingly contentious international environment, address domestic vulnerabilities, and adapt to a multipolar world that is resistant to unilateral dominance. The next decade will test the resilience of China's vision, requiring strategic recalibrations and perhaps a redefinition of what the "China Dream" can realistically achieve in a divided and competitive global landscape.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

As China continues its rise under Xi Jinping's leadership, the future of its global role remains a subject of intense debate and speculation. While Beijing has demonstrated remarkable success in expanding its influence and asserting its vision for a multipolar world, the road ahead is fraught with opportunities and challenges that will shape China's trajectory and the broader international system.

China's increasing economic and political clout suggests it will remain a key player in shaping the 21st-century world order. Initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a global infrastructure development strategy adopted by the Chinese government in 2013, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), a multilateral development bank that aims to support the

building of infrastructure in the Asia-Pacific region, will likely persist as cornerstones of Beijing's strategy to deepen economic ties with developing nations. In areas like Africa and Southeast Asia, China's investments in infrastructure and technology will continue to drive growth, reinforcing its role as an indispensable partner for many countries.

However, Beijing's ability to maintain this momentum will depend on how effectively it addresses its criticisms and challenges. If China can mitigate concerns about debt dependencies, human rights abuses, and regional dominance, it could solidify its reputation as a reliable leader in global governance. Conversely, failure to resolve these issues could alienate potential allies and entrench opposition from the West and its partners.

POTENTIAL SCENARIOS FOR THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

SCENARIO 1: COEXISTENCE AND COOPERATION

In this scenario, China and other major powers find common ground on climate change, global health, and economic recovery. The evolution of multilateral institutions to accommodate Beijing's aspirations creates a more inclusive framework that reflects the realities of a multipolar world, fostering a sense of optimism about the potential for global cooperation.

SCENARIO 2: INTENSIFIED RIVALRY

Geopolitical tensions could escalate, with the U.S., EU, and regional powers intensifying efforts to counterbalance China's influence. This could lead to economic decoupling, military confrontations in contested areas like the South China Sea, and a fragmented global order dominated by competing blocs.

SCENARIO 3: CHINESE-LED GLOBAL ORDER

Should Beijing successfully overcome its domestic and international challenges, it may emerge as the preeminent global power. In this scenario, the “China Model,” a term used to describe China’s unique approach to governance and development, gains widespread acceptance, and institutions like the BRI and AIIB become dominant forces in global governance, shaping norms and policies around Chinese priorities.

BALANCING COOPERATION AND COMPETITION

The relationship between China and other global powers, particularly the United States, will remain central to the international system’s evolution. While competition in areas like technology, trade, and military strategy is likely to persist, there are also opportunities for collaboration on shared challenges. Climate change, for instance, presents a critical area where cooperation between Beijing and Washington could yield significant global benefits. Similarly, worldwide health and economic recovery provide potential pathways for engagement, particularly in multilateral settings like the G20 and the United Nations.

China’s growing relationship with the European Union (EU) adds another layer of complexity to the balance between cooperation and competition. While the EU has expressed concerns over Beijing’s human rights record, economic practices, and security issues related to Chinese technology, China has deepened ties with individual member states, often leveraging these relationships to its advantage. For example, Hungary has emerged as one of Beijing’s strongest allies in Europe. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has frequently blocked EU resolutions critical of China, such as statements condemning human rights abuses in Xinjiang or the crackdown in Hong Kong.

This support strengthens China’s position within Europe and underscores Beijing’s role in encouraging the rise of populist movements that challenge EU cohesion. Through initiatives like the

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has invested heavily in Central and Eastern European countries, creating what is known as the “17+1” cooperation framework. While some nations, such as Hungary and Serbia, have embraced Chinese investment, others, including Poland and the Czech Republic, have grown increasingly skeptical. The divergence in attitudes reflects broader tensions within the EU regarding how to engage with Beijing.

By cultivating close relationships with populist governments, China has managed to divide opinion within the bloc, undermining collective EU efforts to counterbalance Beijing’s influence. This strategy has significant implications for the balance of power in Europe. Populist movements often align with China’s emphasis on national sovereignty and economic development over liberal democratic values. The support of these governments provides Beijing with critical allies in its effort to shape a more fragmented and multipolar global order. However, it also exposes China to the risk of backlash if broader European sentiment turns decisively against it, as seen with the EU’s Global Gateway initiative, which directly challenges the BRI by offering an alternative development model.

CHINA’S DOMESTIC REALITIES AND THEIR GLOBAL IMPLICATIONS

Domestically, China faces significant economic and demographic challenges that will critically shape its future trajectory. The ongoing real estate crisis, exemplified by the collapse of Evergrande and financial instability among other significant developers, has revealed deep vulnerabilities within China’s economic system. Real estate, which contributes nearly 30% of China’s GDP, has long been a cornerstone of the country’s rapid growth. However, years of over-leveraging, speculative investments, and lax regulations have created a bubble that is now bursting. The consequences are far-reaching, with ripple effects threatening local governments reliant on land sales, businesses connected to the property market, and millions of middle-class households whose wealth is tied to real estate.

Broader economic headwinds further compound this crisis. Slowing growth, rising unemployment—particularly among urban youth—and weakened consumer confidence highlight underlying structural problems in China’s economy. Beijing’s regulatory crackdowns on industries such as technology, education, and private finance have created uncertainty among investors, both domestic and international. These policies, while aligning businesses with Communist Party priorities, risk stifling innovation and deterring the foreign investments necessary for long-term growth.

China’s demographic challenges exacerbate these economic difficulties. Decades of the one-child policy have resulted in a rapidly aging population and a shrinking workforce. By 2035, it is projected that over 400 million Chinese citizens will be over the age of 60, placing immense strain on the country’s social welfare systems. Efforts to reverse these trends, such as introducing a three-child policy and incentivizing families to have more children, have thus far failed to boost birth rates significantly. The declining labor force threatens productivity and economic dynamism, raising questions about China’s ability to maintain its status as the world’s factory while transitioning to an innovation-driven economy.

The combined weight of these domestic challenges could have profound implications for China’s global ambitions. If Beijing successfully addresses its economic and demographic issues, it could stabilize its domestic economy and reinforce its international standing. This would enable the country to sustain initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), expand its technological leadership, and continue its push for a redefined global order. Success in managing these challenges would also bolster Xi Jinping’s narrative of the “China Dream,” strengthening domestic and international confidence in his leadership.

Conversely, failure to address these crises could constrain China’s ability to project power abroad. A prolonged economic downturn or financial crisis could force Beijing to scale back its investments in critical regions, undermining its influence in developing nations and weakening the BRI’s appeal. Domestically, economic instability

and growing discontent among the middle class could erode public trust in the Communist Party, leading to a more cautious and inward-focused China. Additionally, an aging population and shrinking workforce may leave the country less competitive globally, particularly as other nations innovate and quickly adapt to emerging challenges.

These realities highlight the delicate balance Beijing must navigate. Its domestic challenges are not isolated from its global ambitions but are deeply interconnected. The next decade will test the resilience of China's economic model, the adaptability of its governance, and the durability of its vision for both domestic prosperity and global leadership. Whether Beijing emerges stronger or weaker will depend mainly on its ability to confront these pressing issues while maintaining the momentum of its international aspirations.

China's ascent under Xi Jinping is characterized by a grand vision for national rejuvenation and a redefined global order. The "China Dream" embodies aspirations for domestic prosperity, military prowess, and global leadership, bolstered by initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative and active participation in international institutions. However, the journey toward realizing this vision is riddled with obstacles. International skepticism, human rights controversies, geopolitical rivalries, and domestic economic challenges pose significant barriers to achieving the transformative goals outlined by Xi.

China's growing influence has inspired both admiration and apprehension on the global stage. Initiatives such as the Maritime Silk Road have bolstered Beijing's connections with developing nations but have also drawn criticism for fostering debt dependencies and strategic leverage. Relationships with critical powers like the United States and the European Union remain fraught as competition over trade, technology, and governance models intensifies. At the same time, Beijing's deepening ties with nations like Hungary reveal its ability to exploit divisions within Western alliances, highlighting its strategic acumen and the fragility of global unity in countering its ambitions.

Domestically, China's economic vulnerabilities and demographic challenges threaten to undermine its long-term stability and ability to sustain ambitious projects like the BRI. The collapse of real estate giants like Evergrande has exposed systemic risks, while an aging population and shrinking workforce could limit the nation's future economic dynamism. How China navigates these crises will determine whether it can maintain its trajectory as a rising global power or retreat into a more inward-focused posture.

Looking ahead, China's future global role hinges on its ability to balance cooperation and competition with other powers. The opportunities for collaboration on shared challenges, such as climate change and international health, could pave the way for a more cooperative global order. However, the escalation of rivalries, particularly with the United States, could lead to a more polarized and fragmented international system. The delicate balance between these two scenarios is crucial for China's future.

Ultimately, Xi Jinping's vision for China's rejuvenation represents a continuation of its historical aspirations and a transformative shift in its global ambitions. Whether China emerges as a dominant global power, a key player in a multipolar world, or a nation constrained by internal and external pressures will shape the 21st century. The stakes are high for China and the entire international community as it grapples with the implications of Beijing's rise, and the potential outcomes are numerous and significant.

Could China Shape the World?

LEON LI

China appears to be on an inevitable path to reshaping the world and hopes to do so in its favor. Xi Jinping has repeatedly called for a world where China exercises complete sovereignty over how it governs—a world detached from Western political liberalism and the U.S.-led order. In pursuit of this goal, China has leveraged the sheer scale and mass of its industrial base to expand its economic, military, and political influence globally. This has resulted in intensified competition in economic and military power with the West, as well as the establishment of new norms and institutions within the international system.

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Undoubtedly, the world has moved away from a status quo without China. However, China's ability to transform the world order to its preferences remains seriously challenged by the structure of its political system, the growing difficulties in its economy, and an increasingly vigilant international community that monitors its every move. Ultimately, whether China can reshape the global order in its favor depends on how it reshapes itself.

A NEW WORLD MADE IN CHINA

Following three decades of a command economy and near-complete autarky, China began a series of economic reforms in the 1980s. Another 30 years later, China has emerged as the world's dominant manufacturing power. In 2011, it surpassed the European Union as the economy with the highest manufacturing output in the world and—after meeting its own large domestic demand—secured the largest share of the world's manufacturing exports. China's largest imports—minerals and semi-processed goods—further highlight its role as the world's largest processing hub.

Policies like “Made in China 2025” have further enhanced China's manufacturing capabilities, and its dominance in critical mineral supply grants the nation significant influence over other countries' strategic sectors, such as semiconductors, renewable technologies, and defense. The industrial prowess China has demonstrated serves as the foundation for its increasingly active engagement with other countries, multilateral platforms, and international organizations.

Notably, BRICS represents an important attempt by China to organize divided yet economically linked developing countries and create an alternative economic bloc in the world. This multilateral platform provides China with opportunities to experiment with alternative financial institutions and maximize its gains from exports to Global South countries. Nations closely aligned with China, such as Russia and increasingly Brazil, have played a role in advancing China's strategy to establish an alternative economic order that operates outside the Western liberal framework.

China's growing industrial power also gave rise to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013. Beijing's strategic aim of fostering a more interconnected and secure Central Asia, combined with its commercial goals to safeguard critical energy imports, materialized into a grand economic initiative that also allows China to accumulate political influence wherever the BRI extends. The initiative has attracted numerous countries, with participants spanning East Asia, Europe, and Latin America. This enables China to expand its soft power in developing nations, building bilateral relationships through aid and loans.

Another important intended outcome of the BRI is to realign various global trade corridors in the Greater Asian and Indo-Pacific regions to align with China's economic interests. The BRI infrastructure projects have aimed to achieve this goal with mixed outcomes, but the surge of Chinese activities in countries with BRI projects has provided China with more investment and trade opportunities. In the Middle East, for example, China has been increasing its investments in healthcare infrastructure and other non-transportation projects. Chinese products and standards, which are embedded in the projects China finances, also proliferate throughout the BRI regions, fostering long-term technological dependence on Chinese goods.

The expanding trade network between China and a growing number of developing economies also creates opportunities for China to reshape the global financial order. A notable example is China's effort to internationalize its currency, the yuan (RMB). Recent initiatives, such as promoting the use of RMB in cross-border settlements and securing its inclusion in the IMF's elite reserve currency basket, have enhanced China's financial influence over other countries. Although the RMB faces structural challenges to further internationalization—particularly due to China's strict capital controls—the growing role of RMB in international trade complements China's industrial power in reshaping the global economic order.

SELLING THE CHINESE STATE

China's industrial and technological power extends its influence beyond the economic realm. Intensive state and private investments in technological innovation have positioned China as a global leader in information and communication technologies (ICT), electric vehicles, batteries, solar panels, and robotics. Over the past two decades, China has transitioned from being a major recipient of technological transfers to becoming a leading provider of them.

Most recently, European companies have begun purchasing Chinese innovation firms and entering into technology transfer agreements with large Chinese corporations in the automobile sector. The implications of China's technological advancements are two-fold. Firstly, China has developed significant surplus capability in high-tech manufacturing and infrastructure development. Through the Digital Silk Road initiative, an integral part of the BRI, and competitive pricing of its high-tech goods, China has been able to export large volumes of its hardware and software, thereby expanding its economic influence on a global scale.

Secondly, countries receiving Chinese technologies often begin to adopt the underlying concepts and designs of these technologies, which are frequently tailored to China's own political and social management system. Most notably, the Chinese surveillance state is being exported through millions of Chinese-made cameras and, more critically, Chinese-made surveillance software. China exports surveillance technologies to both democracies and autocracies, and Chinese companies that operate China's surveillance system also provide training to countries seeking to build "smart cities," an urban design concept that integrates surveillance and communication technologies to maximize convenience for their populations.

In China, smart cities have largely become a reality, with one camera for every three people nationwide and seamless integration of convenience and surveillance through the widespread use of biometrics and cameras for payments and other public activities. As

more countries begin to replicate the design of Chinese cities using Chinese technologies and models, global norms around privacy and state jurisdiction are likely to be further eroded. Additionally, China's advancements in technological innovation are driving systematic changes in international governance.

The Chinese state has actively participated in international standard-setting organizations, which determine industry standards for the production, processing, assembly, or operation of specific products. The number of Chinese standards has grown significantly in recent years, enabling Chinese firms to mandate the implementation of these standards by their foreign partners, particularly in BRI countries. This subtle and highly technical form of influence has long-term implications for the technological use and development in countries that adopt Chinese technologies.

AWAKENED LION VS DESCENDING EAGLE

China's economic growth and technological advancement have also enabled it to make significant strides in catching up with the United States—a national goal long held by Chinese leaders. One of the most critical aspects of this catch-up effort is the modernization of China's military. To date, China has built the largest army and navy in the world, with a third aircraft carrier soon to become operational. The Chinese military has advanced its armaments to rival top-tier militaries, and its missile, nuclear, and space capabilities are rapidly scaling up.

Additionally, China has aggressively improved its cyberwarfare capabilities, with cyberattacks attributed to China becoming increasingly sophisticated, damaging, and destructive. This expanding military power has made China increasingly assertive in its neighboring regions. It has ramped up shows of force in the South China Sea, around Taiwan, and toward Japan and the United States. More Chinese military patrols and exercises have been observed in East Asia, sometimes conducted jointly with Russia and other countries.

Paramilitary forces have also played an increasingly important role in China's strategy. The recent Joint-Sword 2024B exercise around Taiwan featured significant involvement from the China Coast Guard, highlighting China's growing ability to engage in forceful coercion through gray-zone tactics and paramilitary assets. Collectively, these developments signal China's intent to break away from the U.S.-led status quo in the Indo-Pacific and reshape the regional order in Asia to its advantage through economic and military power.

Beyond military advancements, China aspires to achieve great power status that rivals the United States. To this end, China has pursued leadership in global security, development, and governance. In global security, China has demonstrated activism by organizing regional security dialogues, such as the Xiangshan Forum and Shangri-La Dialogue, and establishing regional security organizations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The nation has positioned itself as a peacekeeper, becoming increasingly involved in peace talks in Myanmar, Ukraine, and the Middle East.

China's growing willingness to take the lead in regional security and provide security to others reflects its ambitions on the global stage. In terms of development, China's foreign aid and loans, combined with its emphasis on the "development rights" of Global South countries, have garnered support and goodwill from many developing nations. Perhaps China's most significant impact lies in international governance, where it consistently re-emphasizes "respect for a country's sovereignty." Embedded in this principle is China's promotion of an alternative international system that refrains from interfering in a country's governance model.

Essentially, China advocates for a world where security cooperation and economic development are not directed by the West or guided by political liberalism. China has achieved notable success in influencing the norms of the international system. In the United Nations, an increasing number of countries have aligned with China in voting patterns on human rights issues. Many nations have also acknowledged China's redefinition of "human rights,"

shifting the focus from individual liberty and protection to development and prosperity—transforming the concept from individual rights to state rights.

SCALING THE HEIGHTS,
TRIPPING OVER ROOTS

China's economic and technological power has fueled its activism and assertiveness in foreign economic and security policies. The country has positioned itself as an alternative source of security and leadership in the international system. However, China's success in translating its material power into achieving its global vision should not be overstated. Significant obstacles remain, the most critical of which may be rooted in China's political system itself.

The Chinese state governs an expansive country with numerous interests and foreign counterparts, while significant decision-making power resides at the ministerial and local levels. This reality has led to a lack of coordination, compliance, and quality assurance in many foreign policy initiatives, particularly when local interests and incentives diverge from the goals of central policymakers. Xi Jinping's success in centralizing China's political system has allowed for greater oversight and supervision over the quality of its foreign policy initiatives. This new structure also makes it easier for China to implement a more cohesive and unified foreign policy strategy.

However, the centralizing institutional revisions and the imposition of party monitoring within government bureaucracies have led to erratic official behavior, oscillating between overcompliance and paralysis. Central directives on foreign economic and security policies may be passively implemented by delegated officials seeking to avoid punishment or, conversely, implemented excessively by those eager to demonstrate initiative and loyalty. This dynamic renders the foreign policy apparatus increasingly inefficient and personalistic, as officials defer difficult decisions up the hierarchical chain and prioritize "easy wins" that align with Xi's central directives.

These developments complicate efforts by Chinese foreign policy officials to sustain China's influence abroad as a reliable and responsive partner. Simultaneously, overcompliance with national security priorities by China's military and security apparatus has resulted in sporadic and seemingly uncontrolled actions that create tensions with targeted countries. Notably, cyber-espionage and cyberattack operations conducted in Southeast Asia have undermined China's credibility and harmed its interests in the region.

China's demands on Chinese and foreign companies operating within its borders, justified by national security concerns, have also damaged investor confidence in Chinese businesses and the broader business environment. These challenges have weakened China's economic appeal and heightened awareness in other countries about the nature of China's influence on the international order. Beyond the issues within China's political system, its pursuit of a world aligned with its interests is further constrained by challenges to its economic power. International resistance to a dominant China has prompted many nations, most notably the United States, to reduce and control their economic dependence on China.

At the same time, China faces significant economic headwinds, including a slowdown in growth, stagnant domestic consumption, a shrinking workforce, and an aging society. Confronting an increasingly resistant global environment and mounting domestic economic difficulties, China's prospects of reshaping the world in its favor appear increasingly uncertain. Nonetheless, China has undeniably reshaped the global landscape through its economic strength and political ambition. The world has shifted away from a U.S.-led liberal order toward a multipolar and contested one.

However, China's domestic political and economic developments have complicated its pursuit of a world aligned with its interests. The Chinese leadership faces rising and critical challenges in economic performance, societal changes, and the political system. The future of China's global role and its ability to realize a vision for a new global order will depend on the kind of nation China

transforms into. Close attention will need to be paid to the choices Xi Jinping and his party make in addressing these challenges and in how China engages with key countries, particularly the United States, Russia, and India. The contested future of China—and of the world—will not be determined by Xi’s dream but by Xi’s choices.

Xi Jinping's Way of Thinking

RICCARDO NACHTIGAL

Under President Xi Jinping, the People's Republic of China is witnessing a constant strengthening of its domestic political system and economic structure, along with an increasingly significant involvement in world affairs. China has definitively become a superpower of our century, boasting the second-largest economy in the world, revitalized and modernized armed forces, and a slow but relentless development of soft power through culture and a confident, conflict-avoiding rhetoric on the international stage.

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These achievements were not created overnight: Xi Jinping's model of governance and political thought reflect a long and complex series of principles rooted in Chinese culture and society, historical events and their reinterpretations, combined with the leader's personal background, the Chinese Communist Party's approach, and Xi Jinping's own political vision. This intricate and heavily heterogeneous mix of ingredients is shaping China's current foreign policy.

Understanding this complex philosophy of thought allows for a better understanding of contemporary China, not only as an actor in the international sphere but also as a culture that presents deep differences and genuine alternatives in its vision of world order compared to those in the West. Only by grasping these principles at their core is it possible to establish constructive relationships with Beijing.

In order to unravel and understand the core principles of Chinese leadership, governance, and foreign policy, this article will explore Chinese political philosophy traditions, modern Chinese history, and Xi Jinping's personal background. It will then explain the key political concepts developed by Xi's administration and their influence on both domestic and foreign policy.

CHINESE POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY TRADITIONS

Xi Jinping's political philosophy takes its roots from China's multi-millennial culture, which, to a certain extent, still influences Chinese society today. Three main traditions of Chinese political philosophy emerged during the imperial age: Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. It is worth noting that these three traditions developed at different times and differ significantly in several aspects. Nevertheless, Chinese culture has absorbed and embodied these philosophies to varying degrees throughout the imperial era, and they continue to define some core principles in Chinese society, even after the establishment of Marxist doctrine in the People's Republic of China.

Daoism is both a religion and a philosophy developed in ancient China. Its central text, the Tao Te Ching, is attributed to Laozi, who is widely regarded as the founder of Daoism and is believed to have lived in the 6th century BC. According to Daoism's main principles, a good government is one that respects the natural flow of things and refrains from unnecessary interference in external matters. Contemporary principles of Chinese foreign policy, such as non-interference in other states' internal affairs, peaceful coexistence, and strategic patience, partially stem from this traditional way of thinking.

Buddhism represents another core religion and philosophy of ancient China. It originated in ancient India and later spread across East Asia, developing different currents and interpretations based on the region or country. Chinese Buddhism remains a part of contemporary Chinese society to varying extents depending on the province, but it continues to be influential. Buddhist culture in China emphasizes the concept of harmony within society and among different groups. Policies such as Hu Jintao's "harmonious society," further developed by Xi Jinping, and the concept of "和而不同" (harmony in diversity) promoted during Xi Jinping's presidency are examples of policies with Buddhist roots.

Lastly, Confucianism is arguably the most influential political philosophy of ancient China. Developed by Confucius, a philosopher from the fifth century BC, this philosophy outlines models of good governance. According to Confucius, the most important values for a good government and society are hierarchy, social harmony, and moral leadership. Confucianism advocates for a strong but benevolent leader (the "benevolent ruler"), and Xi Jinping has incorporated this principle into his governance style. He positions himself as a unifying figure who upholds traditional Chinese values such as family, respect for authority, and national loyalty.

CHINESE MODERN HISTORY

Chinese modern history has profoundly affected Chinese society and leadership since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. First and foremost, the so-called “century of humiliation” negatively shaped China's perception of itself and the world. The Opium Wars, the unequal treaties with Western powers, and the bloody, brutal wars with Japan—particularly the Second Sino-Japanese War—took a heavy toll on Chinese society, leaving a lingering sense of inadequacy, weakness, and humiliation among the Chinese people when comparing themselves to the outside world.

This feeling of humiliation was further exacerbated by memories of a great past. Until the 19th century, imperial China was regarded as an incredibly strong empire that ruled over East Asia through a system of satellite states, which paid tributes to Beijing in exchange for political favors and military protection. The invasions by the so-called “barbarians” into the Middle Kingdom led to a period of political instability within China, beginning with the transition from empire to republic, followed by the era of warlords, and culminating in the Chinese Civil War. This civil war, fought between the nationalists under Chiang Kai-shek and the communists led by Mao Zedong, paused during the conflict with Japan but resumed in 1945.

The Chinese Civil War lasted until 1949, when Chairman Mao seized power in China, forcing Chiang Kai-shek to retreat to Taiwan, where he established a new Republic of China led by the Kuomintang, his political party. These dramatic experiences shaped the priorities of all leaders of the People's Republic of China, from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping. They focused on critical issues such as territorial sovereignty and the non-interference of foreign powers in internal affairs. At the same time, they developed a strong narrative centered on rising from oppression, emphasizing that only the Chinese people can shape China's future and restore its status as a great and powerful country reminiscent of its imperial past.

XI JINPING'S PERSONAL BACKGROUND

Xi Jinping was born in 1953 into a prominent political family. His father, Xi Zhongxun, was a veteran revolutionary leader during Mao's Marxist revolution and a former Vice Premier. This family background played a critical role in shaping Xi's political trajectory. However, during the Cultural Revolution, Xi's family faced persecution, and he was sent to the rural province of Shaanxi for "re-education." This experience in the countryside is said to have had a lasting impact on Xi's understanding of China's rural population and its economic and daily challenges.

Xi Jinping studied chemical engineering at Tsinghua University and later pursued postgraduate studies in Marxist theory, deepening his interest in political ideology and governance. He worked his way through various political roles at the local and provincial levels, including serving as Party Secretary in Zhejiang and Fujian provinces. Demonstrating excellent leadership and management skills, he was promoted to Vice President of China in 2008 during Hu Jintao's presidency. In 2012, he became the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and in 2013, he was elected President of the People's Republic of China, solidifying his position as the paramount leader of China.

Together with Chinese traditional ways of thought, which form a key part of Xi Jinping's philosophical backbone, three main political visions have deeply influenced his perspective on governance throughout his career: Mao Zedong's thought, Deng Xiaoping's reforms, and modern CCP ideology. Mao Zedong's thought has shaped Xi's vision of the primacy of the Communist Party in every aspect of society. In his speeches during Party Congresses and New Year addresses, Xi often invokes principles such as class struggle, the need for strong leadership, and the idea that the Party must lead China through continuous revolution to maintain its purity.

On the other hand, Deng Xiaoping's 改革开放 (Reform and Opening Up) policy from the late 1970s and 1980s has heavily influenced Xi's economic vision, particularly its focus on liberalizing the Chinese market by gradually reducing the role of the state in the

economy. However, Xi simultaneously promotes the concept of the “party-state,” ensuring that the government retains control over key sectors of the economy to prevent capitalism from undermining the CCP’s power.

Furthermore, Xi has also been influenced by modern Chinese Communist Party ideology. Initially formulated by Deng Xiaoping and later refined by Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, the Party’s modern ideology emphasizes the importance of adapting Marxism to China’s unique national and cultural conditions. This approach has led to the development of the so-called “socialism with Chinese characteristics” for the new era, where both a market economy and state authority are integral components of Beijing’s governance.

THE NATIONAL STRATEGY

This complex mix of old and new political philosophies—combining a pursuit of harmony with a determination for China to rise again as a primary actor in international relations—represents the core of Xi Jinping’s political thought. This philosophy translates into confident yet multifaceted policies, both domestically and internationally, which are often difficult to fully grasp from an outside perspective.

In domestic politics, Xi has focused on centralizing power, reducing the influence of potential rivals within the Party, and asserting personal control over key aspects of governance. For instance, Xi serves as the head of the Central Military Commission (CMC), maintaining direct authority over the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). Furthermore, with the reform of the constitution, Xi has secured the ability to serve as President of the People’s Republic of China for life.

This centralization of power is justified by Xi Jinping as necessary to simplify decision-making mechanisms, enabling faster implementation of domestic reforms and foreign policy decisions to accelerate China’s rise as a superpower. Internally, this includes a more efficient redistribution of wealth to the people, while

externally, it involves adopting a more proactive stance on international issues. One notable domestic policy initiated by Xi in 2012 has been the Anti-Corruption Campaign. By targeting both high-ranking officials (“Tigers”) and lower-level bureaucrats (“Flies”), this campaign increased Xi’s overall support among the Chinese people.

This campaign has sparked debate over whether it was primarily a tool for eliminating political rivals and consolidating power or if it was a neo-Confucian policy designed to purify leadership for the sake of good governance. Likely, both factors played a role. Other important domestic initiatives include the Chinese Dream and the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation, both aimed at improving the economic conditions of the Chinese people, redistributing wealth within society, and implementing social policies that have strengthened national unity.

These policies are aimed at creating a harmonious society, with social stability considered a fundamental condition for China’s rise. Again, this policy is multifaceted. Taking Xinjiang and Tibet as examples—regions characterized by significant ethnic minority populations—Xi has pushed to reduce separatism and social unrest by centralizing the administration of these provinces under his control. This approach includes, on one hand, applying coercive measures to prevent separatist actions, while on the other hand, supporting these peripheral regions by sending teachers and doctors to improve education and healthcare for local citizens.

These actions reflect a dual strategy: a willingness to unify Chinese society while acknowledging cultural diversity. On one hand, Xi’s approach incorporates Maoist and Confucian principles of societal uniformity. On the other, it draws from Buddhist and Daoist ideals of harmony within society, alongside Marxist principles of providing public healthcare and education for all.

XI'S GLOBAL DOCTRINE

Xi's major aim in foreign policy has been, since the beginning, to position China as a global power, albeit with a more indirect approach. On one hand, the Chinese president has embraced a more assertive foreign policy, particularly regarding Taiwan and the South China Sea. On the other hand, he has focused on expanding China's global influence through economic, diplomatic, and military means. China's growing economic clout, military modernization, and efforts to reshape international institutions have positioned Xi as a key figure in the global geopolitical landscape, contributing to the perception of China's rebirth from the humiliations of the past.

Furthermore, Xi's attempts to reform global governance in institutions such as the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization suggest his government's intent to build an alternative model of world governance, with China as a dominant power within it. This intent is also evident in the creation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a trade project aimed at strengthening ties with over 140 countries by financing infrastructure projects like roads, ports, and railways to enhance Chinese influence across Asia, Africa, and Europe. The BRI can be seen as a neo-Maoist project, seeking to revitalize the socialist revolution, which, according to Mao, should begin in the countryside (the Third World and peripheral areas) before spreading to the cities (Europe and America).

Yet, on the other hand, Xi's diplomatic discourse has always been conciliatory and benevolent. Economic partners in the BRI, despite some concerns about a potential debt trap, continue to benefit from the Chinese project, which, according to Xi, offers financial support for developing countries and aims to serve as a bridge between the East and the West, much like the ancient Silk Road. Additionally, the development of the BRICS community represents a step toward China's economic independence from U.S. protectionist policies toward Beijing. However, this does not imply that Beijing seeks to dominate the world through its economic power.

To better understand Xi's foreign policy choices, it is useful to consider the concept of "harmony in diversity" rooted in Buddhism, which has been adapted into a political theory for 21st-century China by contemporary Chinese philosopher Zhao Tingyang. According to Zhao, the world does not need a single interpretation of governance. Unlike the West, which focuses on projecting its values globally, the Chinese model of governance does not aim for domination but rather seeks to harmonize international relations between diverse societies and cultures.

Thus, according to Zhao, harmony in diversity entails a commitment by all actors to establish constructive relations with others while recognizing the differing cultural backgrounds of their counterparts. This awareness leads to diverse visions of world order. In this context, institutions like the IMF, the World Bank, and the WTO can be seen as reflecting Western values. In contrast, the BRICS and the BRI embody a different vision of world order. The United Nations, however, may serve as a synthesis of these various visions, functioning as the international institution where harmonious relationships can be cultivated.

As a result, Xi's political thought is highly complex, drawing from a variety of philosophical traditions, historical memories, and personal experiences. The ancient is intertwined with the modern, force is balanced with diplomacy, and the personal is connected to the collective. At times, this heterogeneous vision may appear ambivalent, while at other times, it is remarkably coherent. Certain policies may highlight elements of one tradition, while others draw from different traditions.

More specifically, most of the time, elements of one tradition combine with elements of another to create multifaceted policies. To a Western observer, this may seem confusing. Yet, if there is one lesson that Xi and, in general, Chinese politicians have learned from their millennial and rich history, it is that the realm of politics is the realm of compromise. As Daoism suggests: Yin and Yang may initially appear as two opposite forces, yet one cannot exist without the other. Once this concept is grasped, one can begin to truly understand Chinese politics.

Xi Jinping's Chinese Communist Party

KRISTIN HYNES

Xi Jinping was born in Beijing in 1953, four years after the establishment of the People's Republic of China. At the time, the country was under the leadership of Mao Zedong, who had led the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to victory. From 1927 to 1949, a major conflict was intermittently fought between the CCP and the Kuomintang, resulting in the establishment of a communist state. In addition to the civil war, the Chinese also had to repel Japanese forces during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945).

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This war eventually merged into the broader conflict of World War II, during which China was one of the Allied Powers. Both the Chinese Civil War and the Second Sino-Japanese War continue to have a lasting impact on China today, particularly on its relations with two of its closest neighbors, Japan and Taiwan. As China was recovering from years of conflict, Xi's formative years were deeply shaped by his family background. His father, Xi Zhongxun, was especially influential in his development.

Xi Zhongxun was not only an influence on his son but also on his country. He played a significant role in bringing the CCP to power. Although he was highly respected within the CCP, he was eventually expelled from the party and imprisoned. Despite this, his son Xi Jinping would go on to become a key figure in the CCP. Since 2012, Xi Jinping has served as the General Secretary of the CCP and the Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC). The following year, he also became the President of the People's Republic of China.

Widely regarded as one of modern China's most powerful leaders, Xi's leadership has had profound implications at both domestic and international levels. Within China, he has campaigned against corruption, though some critics argue that this has been a tool to eliminate political rivals. Internationally, Xi has sought to expand China's influence through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). However, this project has faced significant criticism, with opponents suggesting that it serves as a means for China to exert political leverage over participating countries.

Since coming to power, Xi Jinping has played a pivotal role in shaping the CCP and, by extension, the entire country. His views are deeply connected to the themes of humiliation and nationalism, both of which are central to his vision for China's future and its position in the world. Under his leadership, Xi has emphasized national rejuvenation as a pathway to restoring China's historical greatness. At a reception in September commemorating the 75th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, Xi stressed that the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is a shared goal for all its sons and daughters. During his speech, he explicitly

included the citizens of Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan as his fellow countrymen.

THE RISE OF XI JINPING

The Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) was a decade-long political and social upheaval launched by Mao Zedong, the Chairman of the CCP, aimed at reinforcing communist ideology and purging capitalist elements from Chinese society. During this period, Xi Jinping, like many other educated youths, was sent to work in poor rural villages. It was also a time when Chinese citizens, especially young people, were mobilized to challenge authority and denounce those deemed counterrevolutionaries.

Even family members were not exempt from scrutiny. The Cultural Revolution was a turbulent time that tore families apart. Xi himself was forced on stage to be publicly condemned by a crowd that included his own mother. His family faced further tragedy when his sister, Xi Heping, died. While official records state that she died after being persecuted by Red Guards, it is possible she committed suicide under duress. Following this tumultuous period, Xi graduated from Tsinghua University in 1979 with a degree in chemical engineering.

After graduation, Xi Jinping joined the military as an aide in the Central Military Commission and the Defense Ministry. In 1985, he became vice mayor of Xiamen, a sub-provincial city in southeastern Fujian, a position he held for seventeen years. He continued rising through the political ranks, becoming governor of Fujian province from 2000 to 2002, before being appointed party chief of Zhejiang province. He remained in that role until March 2007, when he was named party chief of Shanghai.

Seven months later, Xi entered the national leadership as one of the nine members of the Politburo Standing Committee, the highest leadership body of the Communist Party. Xi's rise continued when he became Vice President of China in 2008. His efforts during this time helped him secure widespread support within the party, ultimately leading to his appointment as General Secretary of the

CCP in 2012 and President of the People's Republic of China in 2013. He was elected General Secretary at the 18th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party.

Xi Jinping's rise to power was marked by the retirement of numerous senior members of the Politburo. Around that time, the European Parliament published a report titled *Quick Policy Insight: China's New Leadership* by Xavier Nuttin, which noted that little was known about Xi's true political beliefs, aside from his zero-tolerance policy for corruption. The report also mentioned that two months before the 18th National Congress, Xi disappeared from public view. However, due to the highly secretive nature of the Chinese political system, his whereabouts during that period have never been disclosed.

DOMINATION WITHIN THE PARTY

Xi Jinping's rise to power within the party has been marked by a deliberate consolidation of authority. Over the years, Xi has tightened his control in several notable ways, including the abolishment of term limits. In 1982, Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997), another key figure in modern Chinese history, introduced term limits. A significant motive for this reform was to prevent any one individual from amassing too much power.

In 2018, Chinese media outlets reported that Xi was concurrently holding three key posts, granting him control over the party, the military, and the state. Media commentators argued that having term limits apply only to the presidency did not make sense, as no such limits existed for Xi's other two major roles—party leader and military chairman. That same year, term limits were removed from China's constitution, allowing Xi to rule indefinitely. In March 2023, Xi was granted an unprecedented third term, further solidifying his grip on power. Alongside removing term limits, Xi has also established significant control over the military.

By implementing sweeping reforms within China's military, Xi Jinping has ensured that the military remains loyal to the CCP. Xi

believes that strong countries require strong militaries. According to *The Pursuit of Light*, a documentary aired by state broadcaster China Central Television (CCTV), Xi views a close connection between the military and government as essential, citing the collapse of the Soviet Union as a cautionary example. He believes that if China's military is not fully committed to the CCP, it could lead to similar problems.

As a result, Xi has directed China's top military leaders to reinforce the CCP's complete control over the armed forces. As Chairman of the Central Military Commission, General Secretary of the Communist Party of China, and President of the People's Republic of China, Xi has established a centralized leadership structure that consolidates his personal authority and promotes "Xi Jinping Thought." His goal is to implement a form of socialism with Chinese characteristics without facing significant opposition. This consolidation of power shapes China's domestic policies and strengthens its position as a dominant force on the global stage.

ANTI-CORRUPTION CAMPAIGNS

Anti-corruption has been a central theme of Xi Jinping's administration. He has vowed to combat corruption by "killing tigers and swatting flies," meaning that corruption at all levels—whether among high-ranking government officials or lower-level bureaucrats—will be targeted. Xi's predecessor, Hu Jintao, had warned in 2012, as he was bidding farewell to his role, that corruption could lead to the collapse of the CCP and the downfall of the state.

In Xi's first speech as General Secretary of the CCP, he highlighted corruption as one of the most pressing problems within the party that needed to be addressed. More than a decade later, Xi continues his anti-corruption campaign. However, there are concerns that this campaign serves as a tool to target dissenters, with some drawing comparisons between Xi and Stalin. Nonetheless, others argue that Xi's fears are not unfounded, as corruption remains an ongoing issue in China.

An article from Foreign Affairs (How Corruption Fuels Inequality in China by Milanovic & Yang), published this past September, stated that corruption in China has been on the rise in recent decades and has significantly contributed to inequality. Corruption has been found to be particularly widespread among the wealthiest individuals in China's cities. Even those with high legal incomes can multiply their earnings by four to six times, with some earning even more. This indicates that the actual gap between the rich and poor in China is much larger than what official reports suggest.

During Xi Jinping's leadership, Zhou Yongkang, one of the most powerful figures in the CCP, was convicted of corruption and sentenced to life in prison. Other Chinese officials arrested for corruption include Sun Zhengcai, Wang Guosheng, and Fu Zhenghua. Notably, Fu Zhenghua had led several anti-corruption campaigns himself. Despite his role in high-profile investigations, Fu later pleaded guilty to accepting 117 million yuan (approximately \$16.5 million USD) in gifts and bribes.

In September 2022, Fu Zhenghua was sentenced to death by a court in Changchun, although the sentence was commuted to life in prison after two years. More recently, Li Quan, a former insurance executive, was arrested on charges of suspected embezzlement and bribery. He is one of the latest prominent individuals ensnared in an extensive anti-corruption initiative targeting China's financial sector.

PROPAGANDA AND MEDIA CONTROL

By utilizing his anti-corruption campaign as a political tool and removing term limits, Xi Jinping has leveraged his control over state media to consolidate his narrative and shape public opinion. Media outlets in China are expected to promote the CCP's ideology, with strict censorship enforced. In addition to CCTV, other major outlets such as Xinhua News Agency and China National Radio are also state-controlled. While the Chinese constitution nominally guarantees the right to free speech, the reality is much different.

Reporters Without Borders, a non-profit organization advocating for freedom of information, has reported that journalists in China are often silenced through accusations of crimes such as espionage or “pocket crimes.” The term “pocket crimes” is deliberately vague, allowing authorities to label virtually anyone as a troublemaker. Furthermore, Xi has fostered the creation and maintenance of a cult of personality. This phenomenon is reminiscent of Mao Zedong’s rule, which Deng Xiaoping opposed due to the dangers it posed to governance and stability.

Deng Xiaoping was acutely aware of the dangers associated with a cult of personality, having witnessed its consequences during the Cultural Revolution under Mao Zedong. As a result, he emphasized collective leadership. In November 2017, party official Xie Chuntao claimed that the cult of personality surrounding Mao would not reoccur, asserting that the admiration for Xi Jinping was natural and not comparable to a cult of personality. However, since Xi assumed leadership, books, songs, and even dance routines have been created in his honor.

The media plays a crucial role in shaping a positive image of Xi, portraying him as a strong and capable leader. Any negative portrayal of him is swiftly censored. One notable example of this censorship is the comparison between Xi and the cartoon character Winnie the Pooh. The association began in 2013 when social media users compared Xi to the bear due to perceived similarities in their physiques. In 2018, a film featuring Winnie the Pooh was banned in China because the character had been used as a symbol to mock Xi.

Last year, public screenings of a film featuring Winnie the Pooh were abruptly pulled from theaters in Hong Kong, prompting speculation that the decision was due to the ongoing comparison between Xi Jinping and the beloved character. This incident has heightened concerns about the increasing censorship in China, which is recognized as having one of the harshest censorship regimes in the world. The Publicity Department of the Chinese Communist Party is a key organ in the CCP’s propaganda apparatus and plays a central role in shaping public discourse within the country. Its efforts ensure that narratives align with party ideology

and suppress dissenting voices.

DOMESTIC POLICY

During his leadership, Xi has focused on “common prosperity,” a key economic policy aimed at reducing inequality and promoting a more equitable distribution of wealth in China. He began introducing the term in August 2021, during the 10th meeting of the Central Committee for Financial and Economic Affairs. While the phrase may have gained prominence recently, the underlying concepts have been part of China’s development narrative for years, including under the leadership of both Mao and Deng. As for Xi, there are concerns about income inequality around the world being a significant issue. During the meeting in August 2021, Xi stated that “in some countries, the wealth gap and middle-class collapse have aggravated social divisions, political polarization, and populism, giving a profound lesson to the world.” Due to such issues, Xi believes that his country “must make resolute efforts” to combat polarization, promote prosperity, and to achieve ‘social harmony and stability.’”

There are efforts being made by Xi to advance common prosperity in phases. By the end of the 14th Five-year Plan (2021-2025), there is the hope that China will progress towards gradually reducing income equality and narrowing consumption gaps. By 2035, the goal is to make more meaningful strides toward achieving common prosperity for everyone and to effectively guarantee equitable access to essential public services. By the middle of the 21st century, the hope is to largely attain common prosperity for all. This will be achieved by narrowing the income and consumption disparities between urban and rural areas to a reasonable level. Under Xi’s leadership, hard work and innovation are to be encouraged, as will the development of the public sector and the nonpublic sector. During Xi’s speech in August 2021, he stated that this goal would not be done overnight. It would take patience and would require long-term efforts.

Although Xi has taken strides to improve the economy, issues

remain. While Chinese authorities have ramped up policy stimulus since September, economic growth has slowed. In October, SCMP reported that China just had its lowest quarterly economic growth since the middle of last year. The country has had ongoing economic struggles in 2024, with top companies downsizing and cutting staff-related expenses. Furthermore, in addition to sluggish growth, China struggles with other economic issues, including an aging population, environmental degradation, and high levels of debt. Despite having the world's second-largest economy, the country's debt-to-GDP ratio reached a record 288% last year. With a struggling economy and a slew of other problems, Xi faces significant challenges in realizing his vision of common prosperity. There needs to be a balanced approach that addresses both immediate economic concerns and the long-term goal of equitable growth, especially in a country where roughly 300 million people are set to leave the workforce and where the population is declining.

FOREIGN POLICY

For the past seventy years, China has emphasized mutual respect, cooperation, and harmony among nations, aiming to create a more interconnected and peaceful world. As this year marks the 70th anniversary of this foreign relations principle, Xi delivered an address at a conference to mark the occasion this past July. During his speech, Xi acknowledged that all countries have a common future and interconnected interests. As today's world is more interconnected, we all share challenges, interests, and responsibilities.

One aspect of this idea of being interconnected, has been the BRI, a global development strategy launched by China in 2013. This plan, which has sometimes been referred to as the New Silk Road, aims to enhance global trade and foster economic cooperation by building a network of roads, railways, and other infrastructure around the world. BRI has garnered attention for allowing participating countries to upgrade infrastructure and stimulate economic growth by facilitating trade. It is not without criticism, however, as

concerns have been raised about the quality of the infrastructure, the debt brought on by the costs of building, and political tensions over countries perceiving BRI as a means for China to expand its influence.

For example, in October, China invited Colombia to join BRI. With Colombia and other Latin American countries showing an interest in the initiative, regional dynamics could shift. The US, which considers the region to be in its “backyard,” tensions could escalate as it seeks to maintain its influence in Latin America. The US has long viewed the region as a key area for its geopolitical interests, and China’s BRI presents a challenge to the status quo.

A 110-year period that is often referred to as the “century of humiliation” (1839-1949) is a significant chapter in Chinese history and one that Xi is fixated on. This era began with the First Opium War in 1839, when China was forced to cede Hong Kong to Britain and open its ports to foreign trade. It was not until the victory of the CCP in 1949, under Mao, that China was able to reassert its sovereignty and independence, marking the end of this era. Throughout the 110-year period, China experienced a series of defeats, territorial concessions, and foreign interventions by Western powers and Japan.

The century of humiliation continues to resonate with the Chinese and has an immense impact on their psyche. For Xi, the period is a substantial focus of his and he aspires to bring back the greatness of China. The country is considered one of the world’s oldest civilizations and has contributed many important inventions, including gunpowder, the compass, and paper money. China is also noted for its architecture, art, medicine, and contributions that have been made to astronomy. By addressing the humiliation that China once suffered, Xi hopes to reclaim what he sees as China’s rightful place in the world.

There has been a noted resurgence in Chinese nationalism under Xi. For example, an increasing number of young people are turning away from Western brands and purchasing Chinese brands instead. However, nationalists have even begun to attack these

brands. An article from *The Economist* (Why are Chinese nationalists turning on Chinese brands?) that was published this past March describes how Chinese nationalists have targeted Western brands such as Nike for perceived insults of Chinese culture. The American brand Nike was once attacked for depicting a man beating a dragon in a game of basketball. Western brands are not the only brands that have been criticized though. Chinese nationalists have even taken aim at Chinese brands.

In March, Nongfu, a bottled water company, was targeted by Chinese nationalists. Their criticism came after the design on a new beverage by Nongfu resembled Yasukuni Shrine. This shrine is controversial in China, as well as in other parts of Asia, as it is the place where Japan's war dead (including people who committed war crimes) are commemorated. During World War II, the Japanese empire was responsible for numerous atrocities across East and Southeast Asia. The painful memories of these years continue to be a source of tension between Japan and other countries, especially China.

The Chinese government has increasingly targeted younger people through education and social media to instill nationalist sentiment. One crucial problem with this is that unemployment rates remain high, particularly among China's youth. In August, the youth unemployment rate rose, reaching its highest level since the new record-keeping system was implemented in December. With millions of young people struggling to find jobs, Xi's push for nationalism and unity is surely being tested.

Outside of China, tensions in the South China Sea are compromising China's emphasis on harmony as it relates to international relations. The Philippines is one country that has especially been at odds with China over this region. In 2013, the country even took legal action against China regarding disputes in the South China Sea. In October, a Filipino lawmaker urged the US to donate one of its guided-missile cruisers. The South China Sea and tensions over this region between China and countries such as the Philippines feed into Xi's broader narrative of reclaiming national pride and sovereignty.

What remains to be seen is whether the growing sense of nationalism and support for the CCP will continue to unify the Chinese or if it will ultimately lead to dissent, especially in the face of ongoing economic challenges and international pressures. Ultimately, the future of nationalism in China under Xi will depend on how effectively the government can navigate these problems. If Xi and his administration can nurture a sense of pride while addressing the concerns of citizens, there may be a solidified sense of national identity that bolsters the CCP's legitimacy. Otherwise, if economic hardships continue and external conflicts escalate, the same nationalism that the government seeks to harness may turn into a source of unrest.

To sum up, Xi's upbringing had a significant impact on his worldview. Despite his father's fall from grace with the CCP, Xi has gone on to become a key figure in the party. His rise to power has been marked by a deliberate consolidation of power. Xi has been especially concerned with corruption, but there are fears that his anti-corruption campaign may be used to eliminate political rivals and strengthen his control over the party. In addition to a focus on corruption, his time in office has been characterized by the promotion of a national rejuvenation agenda that emphasizes nationalism and aims to restore China's historical greatness. Domestically, Xi advocates for "common prosperity" to reduce inequality, while internationally, he seeks to expand China's influence through initiatives like the BRI. His effectiveness in his role as China's leader will be measured by his capacity to maintain stability and support while addressing the aspirations and grievances of the Chinese people while also managing tensions in contentious areas like the South China Sea.

How Could America Recover Its Reputation?

KEITH SONIA

Edwin Lefèvre, who covered Wall Street both in newspapers and as a fiction writer, scrutinized the boom-and-bust cycles of American capitalism, noting that “periods of depression invariably follow periods of overoptimism, when fear replaces hope as the controlling emotion.” The fat years of growth, coupled with the belief that the champagne will never stop flowing and that the good times will never end, often collapse under the weight of the hubris that inevitably defines these periods. Think of *The Big Short*, when a select few spotted what was around the bend, while many others felt the heavy blow of a dramatic correction.

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Though it might not seem entirely generous to observers of American foreign policy to declare that the election of Donald Trump as the 47th President of the United States serves as a proverbial walloping—for the better part of a year, the consensus was that he had something like a 50/50 shot at joining Grover Cleveland as one of the only two-term presidents to serve non-consecutively—it is nevertheless a jarring reminder of the cyclical nature of American politics. Allies, competitors, and others are now more regularly being asked to come to grips with this reality.

For decades, the party in control of the administration or Congress shifted invariably—a natural byproduct of a two-party system—and the domestic policy agenda would pivot depending on whether it was a Democratic victory or a Republican surge. Foreign policy, however, remained largely a bastion of consensus within Washington and across far-flung diplomatic outposts. Perhaps this is because the stakes deemed critical by those in the upper echelons of U.S. foreign policymaking were clearer during the Cold War than they are today. Nonetheless, the two parties regularly shared the burden even during the most contentious interludes.

Nixon inherited the war in Vietnam from LBJ; Biden took the reins of the U.S. conflict in Afghanistan from Trump, who had received the baton from Obama, who carried the torch after George W. Bush launched the “War on Terror.” Both Democrats and Republicans might whine and grumble about partners like NATO and international organizations like the United Nations, but there was broad agreement that these and similar institutions were extensions of American power. Save for modest reforms, U.S. participation and leadership in these organizations were seen as assured.

After a tumultuous four years of Trumpian foreign policy—in which the former-and-incoming president exited the Paris Climate Agreement, ended a long-sought nuclear deal with Iran, and lamented that traditional allies were exploiting the U.S. through security and trade agreements while “not paying their fair share”—Joe Biden’s election in 2020 was seen as a reversion to the mean. Biden, who had previously served as Vice President and as Chair of

the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, was someone you could set your watch to. Accompanied by a Democratic-led Congress in 2021, Biden emphasized familiar themes that were thought to underpin U.S. foreign policy interests and provided a stark contrast to Beijing and Moscow: democracy, human rights, and the rule of law.

It was, some argued, the return to an America you could count on. States around the world once again felt they could trust the United States to, more often than not, do the right thing. Whether or not this trust was justified—given the outbreak of conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza, as well as the U.S.’s hasty and chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan—is largely immaterial. Biden was a conventional operator who signaled that he valued America’s alliances.

Now, with Trump promising the introduction of new tariffs that would, in practice, amount to a trade war—including 25% tariffs on Canadian goods (Canada!)—and with his foreign policy circle confoundingly including figures like Marco Rubio and Michael Waltz on one hand, and Tulsi Gabbard and Pete Hegseth on the other, the return of an adventurous American foreign policy that pushes beyond conventional boundaries has arrived. Boom and bust, indeed.

With this stark reality setting in, how might foreign ministers, corporate executives, heads of intelligence agencies, and NGO chiefs, among others, approach the notion of “trusting” the United States? Do Trump and his cadre care about earning trust? Is a binding trust at the international level even achievable? And, finally, how might the U.S. work to re-establish trust in an era of hyper-partisanship in domestic American governance?

Historically, the U.S. has not always garnered universal acclaim for its foreign policy throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. Despite initiatives like *détente*, historically brief engagement strategies such as “responsibility to protect,” and the promotion of concepts like “democratic peace theory” in academia during the height of American hegemony, American interventions in Vietnam and Iraq, alongside controversial activities in Latin America aimed at

curtailing the spread of communism, have drawn significant criticism from the global community over the years.

Academics have debated whether trust at the international level is achievable, given the anarchic nature of the international system. Within this system, “states might sign treaties with each other, but these do not have the same binding force as domestic contracts.” For instance, Donald Trump could theoretically lose in an American courtroom if he pursues certain policies or amendments that contradict established legislation. However, if he were to once again withdraw from the Paris Climate Agreement, there would be no arbiter to hold him accountable—except, of course, Mother Nature.

Practitioners can approach this challenge in a variety of ways: by accepting that trust is inherently contradictory to the rules of anarchy, or by consistently reinventing those rules to create a more hospitable environment for a trust-based approach to international relations. Indeed, cooperation in international relations has often stemmed from compatible states working together—those with similar political, economic, and cultural identities. Knowing that the person on the other end of the phone represents a country raising its children on Disney films viewed on Sony or Samsung TVs, after picking up groceries in a Volkswagen or Renault, is emblematic of shared values and the likelihood of finding common ground on most issues.

Donald Trump has thrown a wrench into this hypothesis (how can states across the world trust an accused slumlord who proudly boasts about not paying his bills?), but adjustments can still be made to account for his unique approach to policymaking. Despite the structural barriers to building trust within the international system, one need only look back to September and Davos to see how trust remains a priority for members of the global community.

Consider UN chief António Guterres, who has expressed frustration with the current state of global trust: “When global norms collapse, so does trust. I am personally shocked by the systematic undermining of principles and standards we used to take for granted...so let’s be clear: rebuilding trust is not a slogan or a PR

campaign. It requires deep reforms to global governance to manage geopolitical tensions during a new era of multipolarity.”

Unfortunately for Guterres and those advocating for the idea of the U.S. as a reliable, trustworthy hegemon, one word generally encapsulates Trumpian foreign policy—and it does not inspire trust. Quite the opposite. That word? Transactional. Allies and competitors alike are likely to advance or compromise their priorities with the United States on a one-transaction-at-a-time basis, as Trump seeks foreign policy victories through a wheeling-and-dealing approach. Trump views foreign policy as akin to unloading a bad stock or renegotiating a previously settled land deal to secure better terms. What matters is what enhances the Trump brand, who offers a pathway to deals that benefit him both personally and politically, and who is willing to hold their nose and flatter him enough to make him believe he has gained a new ally.

In Europe, where states like Germany have spent the better part of eight decades since the end of the Second World War building a foreign policy rooted in cooperation and predictability, Trump’s tendency to view international relationships through a transactional lens—and his need to feel like he has “won” any deal the U.S. participates in—has the potential to provoke significant changes in approach. Most notably, Trump has repeatedly questioned U.S. participation in NATO and its commitments to Ukraine in defending against Russia. For Europe, the quickest way to earn Trump’s approval might be to allocate more resources to NATO and flatter him enough to make him believe he’s coming out ahead in any negotiation. Similarly, to avoid a trade conflict, Europe should anticipate that Trump will pressure them and come prepared to negotiate on his terms.

However, flattering the U.S. president and confronting existential questions—such as Emmanuel Macron’s European defense initiative—are not synonymous with fostering a trusting relationship. Macron and others have concluded that Europe’s security is “mortal” in light of a sharp shift in U.S. foreign policy circles, recognizing that predictability and guaranteed security are no longer ensured simply by hoping the U.S. will uphold its

commitments. From the U.S. perspective, there is a need for a sober analysis by policymakers who value longstanding alliances and understand the importance of institutions like NATO. This analysis must also consider how that value is being communicated to the American electorate.

In the meantime, there will need to be a mutual understanding between European and American policymakers that greater investment in defense by European states is essential. This may represent the safest route to ensuring the U.S. remains engaged as a fundamental participant in NATO. Ukraine, meanwhile, will have to rely on hope—rather than trust—that Trump will not want to be perceived as being outmaneuvered by Vladimir Putin in any forthcoming peace negotiation. Putin, for his part, has played a shrewd game during the Trump era, positioning himself well to predict Trump's next moves and adjust his expectations accordingly.

In the Middle East, the biggest winners following Trump's victory are the Gulf states—Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE—as well as Israel. While Biden expended significant political capital through his steadfast public support for Israel (possibly contributing to Kamala Harris's defeat in states like Michigan), Trump has shown himself to be far more in sync with Benjamin Netanyahu. His decision to appoint arch-conservative evangelical Mike Huckabee as Ambassador to Jerusalem is further evidence of this alignment. Netanyahu, as a result, is likely to receive an influx of resources and a wide berth in his operations in Gaza, with the expectation that they will conclude as swiftly as possible.

Trump wants Israel to achieve its goals—but in a way that removes the conflict from the headlines. In Gulf relations, the biggest winner is, unsurprisingly, Trump himself, as competition among Gulf states is likely to drive them to offer lucrative transactions to secure his support. This could manifest through diplomacy—such as the Saudis potentially adopting the Abraham Accords as a gesture of appeasement to Trump, balancing their preference to avoid directly confronting Iran—or through favorable trade deals. Iran, meanwhile, is likely to face significant challenges and may adopt a

more cautious approach to foreign policy ventures, as Trump has previously demonstrated his willingness to exert economic and military pressure when necessary.

That said, while Trump may posture with rhetoric about “wiping Iran off the map,” others in his circle have publicly stated that avoiding war with Iran is in the best interest of the U.S. States in the region that work to limit Iran’s capacity for engaging in risky activities are likely to gain favor from Trump. For Trump, the appeal lies in the fact that many of these states can partner with the U.S. to address these concerns unilaterally, without worrying about the electoral consequences that typically influence American decision-making.

In Asia, Trump-aligned Japan may continue to present a “can-do” attitude, as it did during Trump’s first term, by pursuing further security and economic agreements aimed at countering Chinese influence in the region. Few understood how to navigate Trump’s instincts better than the late Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. However, whether Prime Minister Fumio Kishida can demonstrate the same finesse remains to be seen. The Japanese foreign policy establishment is well-versed in Trumpism and may trust in its ability to ride the wave, minimizing exposure to tariffs and other challenges posed by the White House. India also belongs to the short list of states that can feel relatively confident in their standing with Trump. Sharing a mutual concern over Beijing’s influence, New Delhi has successfully positioned itself as a willing partner in defense, security, and trade during previous engagements with Trump.

In what may be the clearest example of how allies cannot rely on trustworthiness in their approach to the U.S. under Trump, the incoming president has repeatedly suggested that he might not guarantee the defense of Taiwan in the event of a Chinese invasion. Despite bipartisan photo ops where Members of Congress visit Taipei to signal their commitment to Taiwan and counter China, Taiwan now finds itself as vulnerable as it has been in years. The only potential silver lining to Trump openly declaring the U.S. an “insurance agency” and voicing skepticism about Taiwan’s defense

is that Taipei can use this time to work overtime in developing alternative strategies to deter Chinese aggression.

Beijing can assume that Trump will continue to oscillate between imposing new tariffs and praising Xi Jinping's leadership style. This dynamic has been something of a gonzo relationship, fueled by Trump's fascination with absolute power. To bypass those Republicans around Trump who view China as a significant threat to American national security, Beijing will likely return to the playbook that once led Trump to declare that he and Xi were friends—flattery. If paired with efforts to assist in winding down conflicts in Europe and the Middle East, and an ability to negotiate a tariff deal that allows both leaders to save face, U.S.-Chinese relations may not crater as widely expected. Instead, competition could remain largely confined to areas such as the South China Sea and the Global South, where China continues its efforts to expand influence.

To sum it up: whether you are the President of South Korea, a diplomat from Honduras, a chargé d'affaires from Estonia, or a Prime Minister from New Zealand, the shortest route to predictability—and thus trust—is to prepare for unpredictability. Under Trump, the U.S. is highly unlikely to act altruistically at the federal level, meaning any agreement will require an appropriate level of flattery and strategic framing to be marketed as a win for Trump. For those who view U.S. global leadership as essential to countering democratic backsliding, protecting press freedoms, deterring aggression from key actors, and advancing human rights, this is likely to be a deeply challenging period.

For those who believe that U.S. global leadership can still be trusted by allies and feared by adversaries, the challenge of maintaining that trust in a Trumpian era will be immense. Worst of all, it may feel positively Sisyphean—if Trumpism is defeated at the ballot box in 2028, it would be unwise to assume, as some did in 2020, that it cannot return in 2032. This cycle—this boom and bust—will be the defining struggle for those working to solidify America's relationships abroad. At the same time, it may present an extraordinary opportunity for those seeking to exploit American weakness.

The EU's Role in America's Greater China Strategy

RACHEL HILE

In the decades following the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Chinese government faced the dual challenges of post-revolutionary reconstruction and the geopolitical tensions of the Cold War. During this period, China's domestic and foreign policies were shaped by a pursuit of sovereignty, ideological preservation, and economic prosperity. National reforms aimed at industrialization and unification were coupled with an international strategy that balanced forming strategic partnerships with maintaining a low profile in world affairs. These efforts collectively set China on a historically unprecedented path of growth.

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By the 1990s, China's position on the global stage had significantly matured. The 1997 Asian Financial Crisis marked a pivotal shift; in its aftermath, China took the initiative to provide aid to its neighbors, emerging as a stabilizing force with the capacity to foster regional economic security. China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 and its elevation to a World Bank donor role in 2007 further signaled its improved international standing. The defining turning point in China's rise came with the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, after which its status as a rising great power was solidified. Today, China has developed beyond being merely an economic powerhouse, with Beijing extending its foreign policy to encompass political influence, global responsibility, and strategic credibility.

The United States' perception of China's rise has evolved significantly over time. During the Cold War, particularly after the Sino-Soviet split, Washington regarded China as a strategic partner, recognizing the importance of maintaining amicable relations to counterbalance Soviet influence. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the 1990s and early 2000s saw the United States aspiring to integrate China into the U.S.-led international order. However, this ambition faltered as the 21st century progressed. China's economic and political trajectory began to diverge from Western neoliberal ideals, leading to skepticism about China's intentions to shape U.S. foreign policy.

The past decade of U.S.-China relations has been characterized by competition and instability. China has embraced its status as a rising superpower, expanding its bilateral and multilateral ties and establishing institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). In response, the United States has sought to counter China's growing global influence, employing strategies such as the Obama administration's "Pivot to Asia," the Trump administration's trade war, and ongoing efforts to decouple technologically and economically.

The future of U.S.-China relations is likely to witness a further escalation of tensions, defined by decisive efforts from Washington

and Beijing to secure their economic, political, and security interests. Both nations will increasingly rely on their connections with other key international players to sustain and expand their global power apparatus. Among the most critical of these players is the European Union (EU), which occupies a unique position in the U.S.-China rivalry.

THE EUROPEAN UNION'S STRATEGIC POSITION

Since its formal establishment in 1993, the European Union (EU) has emerged as a major global actor, encompassing 27 member states across Western, Central, and Eastern Europe. The EU accounts for 14% of global trade and plays a pivotal role in coordinating political, economic, and security efforts across the continent. Its influence becomes even more pronounced when examining its relations with the United States and China.

The EU has long been a core strategic partner of the United States. The Transatlantic Declaration of 1990 and the New Transatlantic Agenda of 1995 established a framework for cooperation on shared interests such as international peace, trade and economic globalization, and democracy promotion. This standardization of relations has yielded substantial economic benefits: in 2023, the United States was the EU's largest export partner and second-largest import partner, with U.S. exports to the EU totaling over \$360 billion and imports exceeding \$750 billion. The two powers also maintain regular political and security coordination, exemplified by the U.S.-EU Security and Defense Dialogue in December 2023, which reaffirmed their joint commitment to Ukraine, defense investments, and deeper security cooperation.

The stability of the U.S.-EU bond, however, has grown increasingly uncertain amid China's expanding presence in Europe. Over the past decade, China has become the EU's second-largest overall trading partner and the largest importer of EU goods, with bilateral trade surpassing \$750 billion in 2023. This trade relationship has been accompanied by a significant increase in China's foreign direct

investment (FDI) in the EU, which reached over \$4.5 billion in 2023. Furthermore, Beijing has secured the support of numerous EU member states for its multilateral initiatives, with eighteen EU countries joining the AIIB and seventeen participating in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

These developments in EU-China cooperation have prompted a critical question: what will the future hold for the European Union's position between the United States and China?

THE FUTURE OF EU-CHINA AND EU-U.S. RELATIONS

To understand the future of the EU's strategic position between the United States and China, it is essential to analyze recent developments in its relations with both countries. The EU's approach to China has shifted significantly since 2019, when it classified China as a "partner for cooperation, an economic competitor, and a systemic rival." In practice, the latter two designations have taken precedence. The EU has been driven by concerns over the fairness of China's trade and investment practices, particularly its substantial trade surplus with Europe. These concerns have hindered cooperation, as exemplified by the European Parliament's decision to reject ratifying the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI), despite its signing in late 2020 after seven years of negotiation.

The EU's relationship with China has been further strained by the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, which sparked criticism of Beijing's ties with Moscow and heightened concerns over the security implications of China's influence in Europe. The conflict has led to calls within the EU to remove or limit Chinese technology in European infrastructure. Tensions have also extended to humanitarian issues, with the EU imposing sanctions on China over accusations of human rights violations, prompting retaliatory sanctions from Beijing. These developments reflect the EU's efforts to distance itself from China, resulting in a closer alignment with U.S. foreign policy trends.

Despite growing apprehension in EU-China affairs, it would be premature to assume that a future of strong EU-U.S. friendship is guaranteed. Foremost, it is important to recognize that the EU is not a monolithic entity. Germany, the EU's most powerful member state, maintains the closest economic ties with China relative to any other EU member. As such, Germany has generally advocated for a cautious, non-confrontational approach to China, characterized by "relatively small policy interventions" aimed at balancing its trade and market relations. Additionally, while some EU states have moved to reduce dependency on Chinese FDI, others continue to welcome it; Hungary, for example, accounted for 44% of all Chinese FDI in Europe in 2023.

Furthermore, the EU's historical alignment with the United States has largely rested on three guarantees: economic growth, physical security, and the ontological framing of the United States as a force that preserves liberal democracy and institutions. However, the reliability of these guarantees is increasingly being questioned. The potential re-election of former President Donald Trump is expected to bring about isolationist and protectionist policies that could weaken EU-U.S. cooperation. Trump's proposed tariff plan, which includes 10 to 20 percent tariffs on all imports and a focus on reducing trade imbalances in the automobile and agriculture sectors, poses a significant threat to Europe's economic stability. This is particularly concerning for Germany, whose economy heavily relies on automobile exports.

It is also anticipated that Trump will reduce U.S. funding for Ukraine and NATO, thereby weakening the United States' role as a security guarantor for EU member states. This is likely to coincide with a broader U.S. retreat from multilateral engagements, echoing actions such as the withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord during Trump's first presidential term. The U.S. adoption of policies rooted in an "America First" vision is expected to amplify calls within the EU for greater strategic autonomy from Washington. As a result, the United States may increasingly be perceived as neither representative of nor aligned with the EU's economic, political, and security interests.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The future of EU-China and EU-U.S. relations will depend on how the EU evaluates the reliability and security of its partnerships with both countries. While the EU has historically aligned with the United States, this alignment can no longer be taken for granted, especially as the EU seeks greater autonomy and member states diverge in their foreign policy approaches. If the United States prioritizes “America First” policies, it should anticipate that the EU may adopt its own “Europe First” agenda, potentially involving deeper engagement with China. However, the United States should avoid punitive measures if the EU does not unanimously support its containment policies toward China, as such actions would only exacerbate divisions between transatlantic partners. Instead, Washington should focus on reaffirming the core principles and shared values between the EU and the United States by establishing mutually acceptable terms for economic, political, and security cooperation.

For China, it would be a mistake to assume that the EU will automatically pivot toward Beijing in response to U.S. retrenchment. The EU’s pursuit of strategic autonomy inherently includes minimizing reliance on China. Additionally, China is likely to continue being viewed as an economic competitor and a security concern. To strengthen ties with the EU, Beijing should prioritize building trust with member states and exploring opportunities for diverse, non-economic partnerships. Areas such as climate change, environmental protection, and people-to-people exchanges present the most promising avenues for collaboration. Initiatives like the EU-China Memorandum of Understanding to Enhance Cooperation on Emissions Trading exemplify the potential for advancing mutual interests. These efforts could establish a foundation of goodwill, creating a platform to address more contentious issues.

Ultimately, the European Union will continue to grapple with the escalating challenge of navigating U.S.-China competition. In this context, the EU may draw inspiration from the strategies of regional blocs like ASEAN, which has recognized both the inevitable

costs of choosing sides and the benefits of maintaining neutrality between the United States and China. The EU should resist adopting a Cold War mentality and, rather than aligning itself with rigid spheres of influence, prioritize mutually beneficial cooperation with both powers while safeguarding its autonomy. This approach calls for the EU to adopt a role of strategic balance in U.S.-China relations, striving to protect its own interests while responding flexibly to the antagonisms of a shifting international order.

Is American Global Leadership in Danger?

WILLIAM CANO

Since the mid-20th century, the United States has been the architect of a world order grounded in the principles of democracy, open markets, and security alliances. Emerging from World War II as a superpower, the U.S. designed and sustained institutions like the United Nations and NATO, championing what became known as the liberal international order. This era of dominance fostered an environment where American values and ideals were perceived as synonymous with global stability and progress.

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Today, however, the influence of the United States is being contested by rising powers, most notably China, and strained by internal challenges such as political polarization and economic inequality. In a shifting global landscape marked by uncertainty and competition, questions about the durability of U.S. leadership have come to the forefront. Constructivist insights into these transformations emphasize that perceptions, identities, and the evolving meanings of power are critical to understanding America's position in the world.

The Cold War solidified the United States' role as a global leader, countering the Soviet Union's ideological and military threats with a robust alliance network and the promise of economic support for allied nations. During this period, American leadership became synonymous with a commitment to containing communism and promoting liberal democracy. This commitment was exemplified by initiatives like the Marshall Plan and the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The U.S. constructed a narrative centered on democracy and freedom that defined its foreign policy, laying the foundation for a values-driven leadership model that persisted for decades.

With the Soviet Union's collapse, the world entered a unipolar era dominated by American power, both economically and militarily. This period of unrivaled influence saw the U.S. championing globalization and technological advancement, presenting itself as the steward of a "new world order." From a constructivist perspective, it was not only the material power of the United States but also its global perception as a "benevolent hegemon" that sustained this order. However, as the 21st century has unfolded, shifts in global norms and the rise of multipolarity have increasingly called this unipolar hegemony into question, challenging the long-standing legitimacy of U.S. leadership.

The divergent foreign policy approaches of recent U.S. presidents illustrate the ideological divides shaping America's global role. President Joe Biden's tenure has marked a return to multilateralism, as seen in his administration's efforts to rejoin the Paris Climate Agreement and re-engage with NATO allies. Biden's approach

underscores the notion that alliances and partnerships are vital to addressing global challenges such as climate change, cybersecurity threats, and authoritarianism.

Conversely, Donald Trump's "America First" policy represented an explicit shift toward isolationism, challenging traditional alliances and prioritizing national sovereignty over cooperative global governance. Trump's criticism of NATO, withdrawal from international agreements, and preference for bilateral over multilateral diplomacy reflected a shift in the identity of American power—from leader of a liberal international order to a more transactional actor. These transformations in leadership demonstrate how domestic ideologies shape and reshape foreign policy, influencing how the U.S. is perceived abroad and challenging the coherence of American leadership.

The divide between multilateralism and isolationism in American politics creates uncertainties about U.S. commitments to global institutions and alliances. This ideological tension undermines both America's credibility and the strength of international norms it once championed. Allies accustomed to U.S. commitments now question its reliability, while rivals perceive opportunities in American hesitation. Constructivist theory, which emphasizes how perceptions and identities shape international relations, provides insight into this phenomenon: the United States' self-image as a "global leader" has evolved, creating a disconnect between its past and present roles on the world stage. The development of these perceptions will ultimately determine whether the U.S. remains a trusted global power or cedes influence to rising challengers.

The U.S. economy has been a central pillar of its global leadership, shaping global markets through trade, investment, and technological innovation. With the dollar serving as the world's reserve currency, the U.S. wields considerable economic influence, allowing it to impose sanctions and incentivize cooperation through its financial systems. Historically, this economic power has reinforced America's diplomatic and military influence, enabling it to shape international norms and standards.

Alas, U.S. economic primacy faces mounting challenges. Globalization has redistributed manufacturing and economic clout, while rising powers like China have leveraged economic interdependence to challenge American influence. As other nations diversify their trade partnerships and currencies, the U.S. risks losing its unparalleled leverage over the global financial system. China's rapid ascent as an economic powerhouse has significantly shifted the global economic balance.

Through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has extended its economic influence across Asia, Africa, and Latin America, creating an economic sphere of influence that rivals U.S.-led institutions like the IMF and World Bank. China's economic rise also enables it to export its governance model, offering a tangible alternative to the liberal-democratic framework championed by the U.S. The constructivist perspective, which emphasizes that power is both material and ideational, highlights the dual significance of China's rise: it is not only a material challenge but also a normative one, as it contests the American-led global governance model.

The U.S.-China trade war underscores the intensifying competition between the two superpowers. Trump's tariffs on Chinese imports, coupled with Biden's continuation of a "tough on China" stance, reflect a bipartisan consensus on addressing China's economic practices. These tensions have had global repercussions, disrupting supply chains, reshaping international trade norms, and impacting the economies of U.S. allies reliant on Chinese markets. The trade war highlights the competing visions of global economic governance: the U.S. advocates for free markets, while China emphasizes state-driven development—a fundamental clash that threatens the cohesion of the global economy.

The U.S. maintains the world's largest defense budget, underscoring its commitment to sustaining a robust global military presence. From NATO to the Indo-Pacific, U.S. military power deters aggression and ensures the security of critical trade routes. However, questions about the sustainability of such spending are increasingly pressing, particularly as domestic challenges and shifting global priorities call for a reevaluation of budget allocations.

Despite these pressures, the U.S. continues to invest in advanced defense capabilities, including cybersecurity and artificial intelligence, to counter emerging threats. Constructivist insights suggest that these investments go beyond material deterrence; they reinforce the U.S.'s identity as a "global protector" and demonstrate its commitment to upholding its leadership role in security. Alliances like NATO have long been central to U.S. security strategy, providing a framework for projecting power while sharing the burdens of global security. However, shifting global dynamics, including a more assertive Russia, demand a reassessment of these alliances.

NATO's expansion, which Moscow perceives as a threat, has contributed to heightened tensions and exacerbated the U.S.-Russia rivalry, as evidenced by the ongoing war in Ukraine. Modern security threats, however, extend beyond traditional battlefields. Cyberattacks, terrorism, and asymmetric warfare require innovative strategies, presenting the U.S. with complex challenges from both state and non-state actors. The U.S.'s ability to address these evolving threats while maintaining global stability will be a critical test of its leadership capacity.

Russia's resurgence as a military power—evident in its strategies in Ukraine and Eastern Europe, as well as its alliances with Iran and North Korea—directly challenges U.S. security interests and the stability of Europe. The Kremlin's willingness to confront the United States to test its defense commitments, coupled with its perceived unpredictability, undermines the stability of existing security frameworks. Russia's actions serve as a stark reminder that, even as new security challenges emerge, traditional great-power rivalries remain a central feature of global security dynamics.

U.S. diplomacy has traditionally relied on strong alliances and partnerships, providing a foundation for addressing global challenges collectively. However, recent tensions—particularly with allies in Europe and Asia—have exposed underlying strains in these relationships. Allies have expressed concerns about the U.S.'s commitment to multilateralism, especially after the Trump administration's emphasis on unilateral decision-making.

Reaffirming alliances and reestablishing the U.S. as a “reliable partner” will be critical for sustaining its diplomatic influence on the global stage.

The U.S. role in international organizations like the UN, IMF, and WTO has been instrumental in shaping global governance. However, recent skepticism about the effectiveness of these institutions—exacerbated by the growing influence of China and Russia within them—poses a significant challenge to American leadership. As these organizations face criticism for perceived inefficacy, the U.S. must advocate for reforms that restore their relevance and reassert its leadership on the global stage.

U.S.-China relations are characterized by diplomatic tensions over Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the Uyghur issue. The U.S. faces a delicate balancing act: championing human rights and democratic values while maintaining a pragmatic approach to its relationship with Beijing. This ideological and policy tension reflects a broader challenge—the difficulty of reconciling America’s values with its geopolitical interests. This dilemma lies at the heart of sustaining U.S. leadership in an increasingly multipolar world.

U.S.-Russia diplomatic relations have reached a low point, strained by Russia’s war in Ukraine, interference in Western democracies, and confrontational posturing. These tensions exacerbate ideological divides and reinforce opposing visions of world order, with Moscow’s actions challenging the liberal norms central to U.S. foreign policy. Maintaining dialogue while deterring aggression is essential to preventing further destabilization. American culture—through Hollywood, tech giants, and the “American Dream”—exerts a profound influence worldwide. This soft power has shaped global perceptions of the U.S. as a land of opportunity and innovation, reinforcing its leadership through cultural appeal.

However, the rise of alternative cultural powerhouses, particularly in Asia, presents growing competition to American cultural dominance. American universities remain centers of innovation and thought leadership, attracting students from around the

world and reinforcing the U.S.'s reputation as a hub of knowledge and progress. Yet, increasing competition from international universities, coupled with restrictive immigration policies, risks diminishing the global influence of American educational and research institutions.

The United States has long promoted democracy, human rights, and individual freedoms as core values of its foreign policy. However, inconsistencies in applying these principles—such as supporting autocratic allies or engaging in selective humanitarian interventions—have fueled global criticism. Many countries question whether American ideals are genuine universal principles or tools for strategic gain, eroding the U.S.'s credibility as a moral leader. Constructivist insights emphasize the importance of consistent identity and norms in maintaining international influence. For the U.S. to continue shaping global values, it will be crucial to align its actions with its stated principles.

The deepening social and political polarization within the United States poses a significant challenge to its global leadership. Domestic strife undermines the cohesion and resilience of U.S. foreign policy, as shifting administrations signal unpredictable policy reversals to the international community. These internal divisions risk projecting an image of instability, making allies wary of U.S. commitments and emboldening rivals. For American leadership to remain effective, achieving national unity on fundamental foreign policy priorities—such as climate action, security commitments, and support for international institutions—will be essential in navigating the complexities of global politics.

The era of unipolar American dominance is waning, giving way to a more multipolar landscape where the U.S. must contend with other centers of power. As China, Russia, the EU, and regional players assert themselves on the global stage, the U.S. faces a strategic choice: adapt to this new balance of power through diplomacy and coalition-building or risk becoming isolated. While the U.S. remains influential, its leadership will likely evolve into a more collaborative role, emphasizing partnerships rather than outright hegemony.

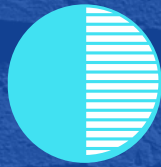
China's economic influence, Russia's military assertiveness, and the EU's commitment to multilateralism present credible alternatives to a U.S.-led order. Each brings unique strengths and ideologies that challenge the established norms of international relations. This multipolar world complicates the traditional binary of "U.S. leadership versus autocratic alternatives," requiring the U.S. to engage in nuanced diplomacy and influence-building with diverse actors. As constructivism suggests, the competition among these powers is as much about ideas and identities as it is about material capabilities. To navigate this new landscape, the U.S. must redefine its leadership to accommodate diverse perspectives while remaining a steadfast advocate for democratic values.

The United States stands at a pivotal moment in its leadership journey, confronted by both external challenges and internal uncertainties. While the foundation of American power—its economy, military, and cultural appeal—remains formidable, the country urgently needs to address its ideological and strategic vulnerabilities. A commitment to consistent values, collaborative alliances, and pragmatic adaptation will determine the extent to which the U.S. can continue to influence global governance and uphold the norms it helped establish.

Ultimately, the question of American leadership is not solely one of resources or strategic assets but of identity and vision. As constructivist perspectives suggest, the meanings and values associated with American power are as critical as its material foundations. In adapting to a multipolar world, the U.S. has an opportunity to lead by example—upholding democratic principles, fostering equitable economic growth, and addressing global challenges in a spirit of cooperation. By doing so, it can retain a vital role, not through dominance, but by championing a world order that reflects both American ideals and the aspirations of a diverse global community.

In this evolving global landscape, U.S. leadership is no longer inevitable; it must be earned. By prioritizing partnership over unilateralism, the U.S. can establish the foundation for a resilient, adaptable, and enduring presence on the world stage—one that

aligns with the complex realities of the 21st century. Whether this vision of American leadership is realized will depend on the nation's ability to navigate shifting global dynamics with humility, consistency, and a forward-looking approach.



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