

The Age of America First

Washington's Flawed New Foreign Policy Consensus

{Edited}

By Richard Haass



Donald Trump was supposed to be an aberration—a U.S. president whose foreign policy marked a sharp but temporary break from an internationalism that had defined seven decades of U.S. interactions with the world. He saw little value in alliances and spurned multilateral institutions. He eagerly withdrew from existing international agreements, such as the Paris climate accord and the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, and backed away from new ones, such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). He coddled autocrats and trained his ire on the United States' democratic partners.

At first glance, the foreign policy of U.S. President Joe Biden could hardly be more different. He professes to value the United States' traditional allies in

Europe and Asia, celebrates multilateralism, and hails his administration's **commitment to a "rules-based international order."** He treats climate change as a serious threat and arms control as an essential tool. He sees the fight of our time as one between democracy and autocracy, pledging to convene what he is calling the Summit for Democracy to reestablish U.S. leadership in the democratic cause. "America is back," he proclaimed shortly after taking office.

But the differences, meaningful as they are, obscure a deeper truth: there is far more continuity between the foreign policy of the current president and that of the former president than is typically recognized. Critical elements of this continuity arose even before Trump's presidency, during the administration of Barack Obama, suggesting a longer-term development—a paradigm shift in the United States' approach to the world. Beneath the apparent volatility, the outlines of a post–post–Cold War U.S. foreign policy are emerging.

The old foreign policy paradigm grew out of World War II and the Cold War, founded on the recognition that U.S. national security depended on more than just looking out for the country's own narrowly defined concerns. Protecting and advancing U.S. interests, both domestic and international, required helping shepherd into existence and then sustaining an international system that, however imperfect, would buttress U.S. security and prosperity over the long term. Despite missteps (above all, the misguided attempt to reunify the Korean Peninsula by force and the war in Vietnam),

the results largely validated these assumptions. The United States avoided a great-power war with the Soviet Union but still ended the Cold War on immensely favorable terms; U.S. GDP has increased eightfold in real terms and more than 90-fold in nominal terms since the end of World War II.

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The new paradigm dismisses the core tenet of that approach: that the United States has a vital stake in a broader global system, one that at times demands undertaking difficult military interventions or putting aside immediate national preferences in favor of principles and arrangements that bring long-term benefits. The new consensus reflects not an across-the-board isolationism—after all, a hawkish approach to China is hardly isolationist—but rather the rejection of that internationalism. Today, notwithstanding Biden’s pledge “to help lead the world toward a more peaceful, prosperous future for all people,” the reality is that Americans want the benefits of international order without doing the hard work of building and maintaining it.

The hold of this emerging nationalist approach to the world is clear, accounting for the continuity across administrations as different as those of Obama, Trump, and Biden. Whether it can produce a foreign policy that advances American security, prosperity, and values is another matter entirely.

The first and most prominent element of continuity between Trump and Biden is the centrality of great-power rivalry—above all, with China. Indeed, U.S. policy toward China has hardly changed since Biden became president: as Matthew Pottinger, a senior official on the National Security Council during the Trump administration who was the lead architect of that administration’s approach to China, rightly noted in these pages, “The Biden administration has largely maintained its predecessor’s policy.”

The continuity between the two administrations can be seen in their approaches to Taiwan, the most likely flash point between the United States and China.

The continuity goes beyond Taiwan. The Biden administration has kept in place Trump-era tariffs and export controls and is reportedly looking into launching an investigation into China’s large-scale industrial subsidies.

Accompanying this focus on great powers is a shared embrace of American nationalism. The Trump administration eagerly adopted the slogan and idea of “America first,” despite the label’s origins in a strand of isolationism tinged with sympathy for Nazi Germany. The Biden administration is less overt in its nationalism, but its mantra of “a foreign policy for the middle class” reflects some similar inclinations.

U.S. trade policy has been shaped by similar forces, demonstrating further continuity between Trump and Biden. The latter has avoided the hyperbole of the former, who savaged all trade pacts except for the ones his own

administration had negotiated. (No matter that the Trump administration’s agreements were mostly updated versions of existing pacts: the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement, for example, largely followed the much-denounced North American Free Trade Agreement and, in modernizing certain elements, made generous use of the text of the equally denounced TPP.) But the Biden administration has shown little, if any, interest in strengthening the World Trade Organization, negotiating new trade accords, or joining existing ones, including the successor agreement to the TPP, the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, or CPTPP, despite the overwhelming economic and strategic reasons for doing so. Staying outside the agreement leaves the United States on the sidelines of the Indo-Pacific economic order and also means missing opportunities in other areas, such as advancing global climate goals through cross-border carbon taxes or using the deal to provide an economic counterweight to China.

Even on those issues on which Biden’s rhetoric starkly differs from Trump’s, the policy shifts have been more modest than might have been expected. Consider the two presidents’ views on the role of values in foreign policy. Trump was a transactional leader who often seemed to consider democracy a hindrance and tried to establish close personal relationships with many of the world’s dictators.

Biden, by contrast, has declared that the United States is in “a contest with autocrats,” announced plans to hold his Summit for Democracy, and pledged

to prioritize relations with countries that share American values. Yet such commitments, however sincere, have hardly made human rights and democracy promotion a more prominent part of U.S. foreign policy. Well-warranted expressions of outrage have not led to significant changes in behavior by others; the targets of such outrage are generally willing and able to absorb U.S. criticism and increasingly even U.S. sanctions, thanks to the growth of alternative sources of support.

Of course, U.S. presidents have always allowed professed commitments to human rights and democracy to be set aside when other interests or priorities have come to the fore. The “free world” of the Cold War was often anything but free. But the broader shift in U.S. foreign policy today, with its stress on both great-power competition and short-term domestic priorities, has made those tradeoffs more frequent and acute. In China’s neighborhood, for example, the Biden administration set aside concerns about human rights violations by Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte in order to make it easier for the U.S. military to operate in his country, and it has worked to bolster ties with Vietnam, another autocracy ruled by a communist party. With Russia, it signed an arms control accord while overlooking the imprisonment of the opposition leader Alexei Navalny. It has largely ignored the rise of Hindu nationalism in India in favor of stronger ties with the country to balance China.

None of this is to say that there are not important areas of difference between the Trump administration and the Biden administration on foreign policy—

consider climate change, for example: climate denial has given way to new investments in green technology and infrastructure, the regulation of fossil fuel production and use, and participation in the Paris process. But these areas of difference have rarely taken priority when other issues, many of which reflect more continuity, are at stake. Washington has been unwilling to use trade to advance climate goals, sanction Brazil for its destruction of the Amazon, or make meaningful contributions to help poorer countries shift to green energy.

Competing with China is essential, but it cannot provide the organizing principle for American foreign policy in an era increasingly defined by global challenges, including climate change, pandemic disease, terrorism, proliferation, and online disruption, all of which carry enormous human and economic costs. Imagine that the United States successfully deters China from using aggression against its neighbors, from Taiwan to India and Japan, and in the South China Sea. Better yet, imagine that China even stops stealing U.S. intellectual property and addresses U.S. concerns about its trade practices. Beijing could still frustrate U.S. efforts to tackle global challenges by supporting Iranian and North Korean nuclear ambitions, conducting aggressive cyberattacks, building more coal-fired power plants, and resisting reforms to the World Health Organization and the World Trade Organization.

Whatever the failings of this new paradigm, there is no going back; history does not offer do-overs. Nor should Washington return to a foreign policy

that, for much of three decades, largely failed both in what it did and in what it did not do.

1. **The starting point for a new internationalism should be a clear recognition that although foreign policy begins at home, it cannot end there.** The United States, regardless of its diminished influence and deep domestic divisions, faces a world with both traditional geopolitical threats and new challenges tied to globalization. **An American president must seek to fix what ails the United States without neglecting what happens abroad.** Greater disarray in the world will make the task to “build back better”—or whatever slogan is chosen for domestic renewal—much more difficult, if not impossible. Biden has acknowledged the “fundamental truth of the 21st century . . . that our own success is bound up with others succeeding as well”; the question is whether he can craft and carry out a foreign policy that reflects it.

The United States also cannot succeed alone. It must work with others, through both formal and informal means, to set international norms and standards and marshal collective action. Such an approach will require the involvement of traditional allies in Europe and Asia, new partners, countries that may need U.S. or international help at home, and nondemocracies. It will require the use of all the instruments of power available to the United States—diplomacy, but also trade, aid, intelligence, and the military. Nor can the United States risk letting unpredictability give it a reputation as unreliable; other states will determine their own actions, especially when it

comes to balancing or accommodating China, based in no small part on how dependable and active they believe the United States will be as a partner.

In the absence of a new American internationalism, the likely outcome will be a world that is less free, more violent, and less willing or able to tackle common challenges. It is equal parts ironic and dangerous that at a time when the United States is more affected by global developments than ever before, it is less willing to carry out a foreign policy that attempts to shape them.