

Preface

Nicholas Burns

Aspen Strategy Group Executive Director

Anja Manuel

Aspen Strategy Group Director

When the nonpartisan Aspen Strategy Group (ASG) met virtually in the summer of 2020, it was amidst a global pandemic, an economic crisis, and racial and political turmoil on the home front. In these extraordinary circumstances, we felt it wise to dedicate our time to four pressing national security issues: the rising domestic tensions in the United States; the future of U.S.-China relations given China's increasing assertiveness; the global economic fallout from the pandemic; and the top foreign policy priorities for the U.S. going into 2021 regardless of the outcome of November's election. This book encapsulates the main points of our discussions and outlines concrete policy recommendations from several of our participants. Each chapter offers insights into one of our four main themes.

1. Race, Democracy, and Political Divisions in America

In May 2020, as the pandemic was unfolding, the killing of George Floyd by police officers in Minneapolis sparked a summer of protests and riots over racial inequalities in America. Outrage over the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor earlier in the year, and the shooting of Jacob Blake in August, added to the demands for the American people to confront our difficult history of racial injustice. The pandemic itself exposed further racial disparities, as minorities had considerably worse health outcomes from COVID-19 infections and notably less financial resiliency in the economic downturn.

Given the long history of racial tensions in America, we thought it important to begin our summer meeting by grounding ourselves in the historical context of the current moment. The Ernest R. May Memorial Lecture this year took the form of a moderated conversation between our Co-Chair Condi Rice and Harvard historian Jill Lepore, who provided an overview of where we have been to help us understand where we are. As Dr. Lepore summarized, America was born with contradictions, proclaiming the values of liberty and self-determination while practicing slavery. We tend to characterize America's history as either one of consistent progress or one of constant atrocities, she explained, and neither of these narratives provides the full picture. Progress has been made, but much more must be done. She further noted that new "populisms" tend to arise when there is a technology revolution in communication, such as with the penny press, radio, and now social media.

We wrestled with how to address broad systemic issues to fix what is broken in our institutions and promote justice and equality at home. Across the political spectrum, many participants agreed that it's time to take down the most egregious confederate flags and monuments, and that all people should be able to and encouraged to vote. On reparations, some members expressed the view that "writing a check and pretending that solves everything" would not be enough; systematic change is needed in how congressional districts are drawn, how public schools are funded, and how communities are policed. As Diana Farrell writes in her piece in this volume, Black and Hispanic family spending is more sensitive to short-term income fluctuations than that of White families, so they have been disproportionately

affected by COVID-19's economic downturn. Thus, government programs aimed at restoring lost income are especially critical for these families. Ayaan Hirsi Ali argues that, while discussing racism and other issues is important, on some college campuses and at other liberal elite institutions it is no longer possible to have an objective, honest conversation. She argues that those putting forth "critical" theories of systemic racism, colonial oppression, and so forth are often unwilling to critically examine their own assumptions.

In addition to racial unrest, America is also facing extreme political polarization as the size of the partisan divide on political issues in the U.S. has more than doubled since 1994.¹ The more divided we become, the more we risk opening ourselves to exploitation by foreign powers along race and party lines. Several of our participants commented that America's divisions on the home front are also weakening our international reputation and ability to achieve our goals abroad. If we lose our credibility as a democracy and capacity to inspire other nations, we weaken ourselves.

One suggestion to heal internal divisions that gained broad consensus was the revitalization of voluntary national service programs. Animosity is fueled by unfamiliarity, and Americans of all faiths, colors, and ethnicities must find ways to get to know each other again. Shared, meaningful experiences of a broad range of young people through national service would go a long way toward reaching that goal. Our participants pointed out that this effort should be supplemented with strong civics education to shape a more engaged and informed generation of Americans who feel invested in our democratic institutions. Many of our members collaborated after the meeting to draft a joint, bipartisan statement supporting national service, which you can find on the Aspen Strategy Group's website.

2. The Future of U.S.-China Relations

The second major theme addressed in this volume is the complexities around the U.S.-China relationship. The ASG dedicated the entirety of our 2019 conference and subsequent policy book, *The Struggle for Power: U.S.-China Relations in the 21st Century*, to this very topic, and its ongoing importance warranted more of our attention this year. The challenges of this critical relationship encompass several key components of national security, including technological innovation, military capability, and global trade.

Today, there is widespread, nonpartisan disappointment and anger in the United States about China's actions to strangle democracy in Hong Kong, its re-education camps in Xinjiang repressing hundreds of thousands of Uighurs, as well as the illegal activities of the People's Liberation Army in the South China Sea and its dangerous border standoff with India. Shankar Menon explains in his chapter that India and China have a history of misreading each other, and this conflict may yet become very dangerous.

As Joe Nye sets out in this volume, it is crucial for America to rebuild our confidence and avoid overestimating China's strengths while underestimating our own. Neither "being tough on China" nor simply hoping for better relations meets the standard of a coherent, long-term strategy that is necessary to tackle this challenge. A "cooperative rivalry," he argues, is closer to the right approach.

Several participants called for strengthening ourselves in key ways at home. Tom Pritzker argues here that a specific tool the United States has so far undervalued is our economic leverage. While we often highlight our military prowess or diplomatic skills, the U.S. government is less adept at integrating economics and our business community into a coherent foreign policy. Kurt Campbell explains that we are just in the beginning stages of understanding, and preparing for, the competition with China. The Aspen Strategy Group can play a key role here by convening expert foreign policy strategists, business leaders, and experts in technology and other fields that will be critical to understanding and competing with China. Anja Manuel explains that the race for advanced technology is where the competition between the U.S. and China will be joined, arguing that the U.S. should form a robust international innovation partnership among countries that share the same values in tech development: a "Technology 10."

America's open and democratic system, Naima Green-Riley points out, is one of our strengths, and we should foster it by monitoring influence from authoritarian states like China and Russia and ensuring we have a well-informed citizenry. Finally, Mike Green explains that the U.S.'s network of alliances is a strategic advantage that China lacks.

Participants in our discussion noted that we should not make our allies and partners choose publicly between the two sides, but instead strengthen our relationships with them and actively present a preferable alternative to China. Many argued that the most important step the U.S. can take to compete with China is to get our own house in order.

While it will be vitally important to devise a clear strategy to compete with China, there are also areas where the need for cooperation is undeniable, such as climate change, pandemics, and refloating the global economy. Getting the balance right between competition and cooperation with Beijing will be a central question for policy makers for the foreseeable future.

3. The Global Economy

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, unprecedented lockdown measures were implemented to flatten the curve of infection rates, forcing businesses to close their doors. Debates about reopening pitted the need to protect public health against the need to boost the economy. We are now in the midst of one of the worst recessions in the past 100 years, with fourteen million additional Americans unemployed from February to May 2020.² Despite the historic levels of this economic downturn, no effective global response has been mounted. This is in sharp contrast to the international cooperation we saw after the 2008 recession, leading many to argue that America must do more to lead an international effort to lessen the effects of this crisis for the most vulnerable developing nations. Adding to this, there is no clarity on when this recession might pass, as a vaccine may not be widely available for some time. As David Petraeus points out, “until a treatment and/or a vaccine are found and administered broadly, the economic revival in many sectors and industries is likely to be slow, halting, and far from a return to pre-pandemic conditions.” In this climate, businesses are fundamentally rethinking how they operate, with more people working from home than ever before.

This economic fallout from the pandemic has also revealed the holes in America’s social safety nets and exacerbated existing opportunity gaps. These gaps will continue to worsen unless we invest in equipping our workers and future generations with the skills and education they need to be successful. Zoë Baird believes we need an “intentional effort to make sure that the jobs that come back are good jobs with decent wages, benefits, and mobility.” Many of our Aspen Strategy Group participants agreed that preparing our citizens for the job markets of the future is key to our national security. For our democratic capitalist society to offer a compelling alternative to China’s authoritarian capitalism, it must work better for more Americans.

To further safeguard our national security, the U.S. must make strong investments in research and development programs that protect our place as a leader in science and technology. America cannot hope to maintain our competitive edge without better incentives for innovation. National security should not be disconnected from economic policy. As David McCormick points out, “other countries, especially China, have a well-documented strategy for winning this [international economic] competition, and the United States must likewise develop a plan to stay in the game.” Aditi Kumar emphasizes the link between America’s national security and its economic strategy. To achieve these twin goals, policy makers must set regulatory standards that all tech companies must follow as a condition for doing business in the United States.

4. U.S. Foreign Policy in 2021

We concluded our meeting, and this volume, by examining the U.S. foreign policy priorities we anticipate for 2021 and beyond regardless of the results of this November’s elections.

A majority of our participants agreed that our first priority must be to set our own house in order. Demonstrating that we can credibly deal with racial injustice, political polarization, and income inequality is necessary to restore the international community’s faith in our values and leadership. Defeating the COVID-19 pandemic and getting past the turmoil on our home front will require flexibility, strong leadership at all levels, an innovative spirit, and a willingness to continually strive to live up to our ideals as a nation. John McLaughlin believes another “key objective for American leadership in 2021 is to correct the confusion and disorientation—worldwide—about whether and how the U.S. intends to lead.”

In addition to all that we need to achieve domestically, we must also remain vigilant in managing the rise of China, climate change, the global assault on democracy, the ongoing threat of terrorism, and our tense relationships with Russia, Iran, and North Korea. As Madeleine Albright says in her chapter in this volume, “it has never been in America’s interest to withdraw from the world, and it is especially counterproductive to do so in this era of borderless threats.”

The issue of nuclear proliferation will only grow in importance too, as in early 2021, the New START Treaty with Russia will expire, creating—for the first time in decades—an environment in which there will be no limits in the nuclear arena. At the same time, cyber threats are increasing significantly, and Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea are all exploiting technologies in this domain. A well-calibrated U.S. foreign policy will need to weigh each of these threats and balance them accordingly.

The transatlantic relationship was another focal point of the discussion. Wolfgang Ischinger contends that the European Union needs to develop a clear-eyed position of its own strength in an era of great power competition. Kay Bailey Hutchison argues that “in our increasingly complex world, the United States must remain the strong glue that holds our transatlantic bond together.” Clearly there is work to be done to strengthen U.S. commitments to our partners and allies in 2021.

Conclusion

Despite the current crises and mounting foreign policy challenges, it is important to remember that America has faced—and survived—historic challenges before. The Civil War, the Great Depression, the First and Second World Wars, and the events of 1968 all presented momentous, if not existential, tests for our nation. Yet, each time, the U.S. found a way to rebound through courageous and informed leadership and a commitment to unity as a nation. Our nonpartisan discussions at the ASG Summer Workshop and the chapters in this volume make us hopeful that we can again come together as a nation and rise successfully to the challenges of this moment domestically and internationally.

The coming year promises many challenges. It is reassuring that our Aspen Strategy Group community has a shared love of our nation at the core of our work.

We hope the ideas shared in this volume will contribute meaningfully to a resilient, stable, prosperous, and secure future for our country and the world.

¹ “In a Politically Polarized Era, Sharp Divides in Both Partisan Coalitions,” Pew Research Center, December 17, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/12/17/in-a-politically-polarized-era-sharp-divides-in-both-partisan-coalitions/>.

² Rakesh Kochhar, “Unemployment Rose Higher in Three Months of COVID-19 than It Did in Two Years of the Great Recession,” Pew Research Center, June 11, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/06/11/unemployment-rose-higher-in-three-months-of-covid-19-than-it-did-in-two-years-of-the-great-recession/>.