

U.S. Foreign Policy in 2021: Reconceiving America's Place in the World

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We are living through a transitional period of world history. As it did at the beginning of the 1990s, in the early 2020s the United States should help define a new agenda for common international and transnational action. This new agenda implies a different system of world order and institutions to go with it.

In doing this, the U.S. should maintain a deep engagement in tackling global problems that matter most to Americans. Yet this engagement need not, and should not, be very costly or militarized. Thus, the U.S. will also need to reconceive its own institutions for accomplishing foreign objectives, both civilian and military, for this different age.

Part One: Historical Context

The transition in world history has two dimensions. We are living through a transition in world history. And we are assessing a transition in the structures of world order.

World history. We are in the early stages of the third great era of modern world history over the last 250-plus years.

- The first era, which I date from about 1760 to about 1870, was marked by radical changes in material conditions of human existence and ideas about governance. Historians tend to associate these changes with the democratic revolutions in the Atlantic world, the first industrial revolution, and the ways these changes rippled into the major civilizations throughout Asia.
- The second era began taking form during the 1870s and took defining form in the last quarter of the 19th century. This era also lasted for about a hundred years, until the last quarter of the 20th century—1890-1990 is not a bad simplification. This was the age of industrial behemoths, the global organization of supply chains to fuel them, and corresponding changes in the organization of society and economic life, including urbanization. It was an age that historians often associate with the second industrial revolution, advanced nation-states, and their more intensively globalized domains. With these material changes came the emergence of rival systematic ideologies contesting how to organize such societies, including the beliefs that led to gigantic industrial wars among the leading powers.
- The third era began toward the end of the 20th century and it is still taking shape. It is marked, among other things, by the digital revolution touching and reshaping many aspects of society, the decomposition of the older ideologies of the industrial age, and much larger human impacts on the global biosphere.

Meanwhile, alongside these macro evolutions in world history there has been a parallel struggle to find ways to organize states to attempt some common efforts among them.

World order. Until the First World War, despite a couple of European experiments, there were no truly *global* efforts to organize purposeful structures of cooperative world order. The First World War was such an obvious global disaster that governments and peoples were inspired to try to do better.

Any cooperative system of world order is no more than a group of governments (or other powerful institutions) that try to work together to accomplish certain purposes.

There have been three such efforts in the last hundred years. All three tried at least to do a few basic things:

- indicate the major powers who accept some responsibility for the effective operation of the system;
- prevent or manage the danger of aggressive armed conflict, including by organizing to deal with common enemies; and
- set up a working basis for global commerce, including any common rules for trade and finance.

The United States of America became the largest economy in the world during the 1870s and the world's most capable military power during the 1940s. For better or worse, the United States has played a central part in all three of these past efforts.

The first system was set up between 1919 and 1925. From the start it had some significant handicaps and limitations, but perhaps it could have lasted for a little while. But it soon collapsed amid a series of ill-managed crises between 1930 and the end of 1933.

The second system, the Cold War system, was a system for a divided world. It was set up mainly between 1944 and 1951. It lasted for a generation. It was cooperative, but only within the two principal confederations. These confederations organized themselves for global war and competed for advantage in the uncommitted "third" world. The economic side of both confederations began unraveling during the 1970s. The entire Cold War system disintegrated between 1988 and 1990.

We are now living through the declining years of the third system of world order. This system, meant to provide the foundation for a growing global commonwealth, was mainly set up between 1989 and 1994. (The global financial structures began being created in 1978.) This system too has lasted for a generation.

Even as it fades, this third system is still poorly understood. It is often believed, even by scholars, to be the same system as the one created in the late 1940s. It is not. Some of its institutions are entirely new, like the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE)/Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)/Open Skies system or the World Trade Organization (WTO). Some are informal, like the central bank structures for international financial cooperation. Some institutions kept the same reassuring names and outlines, like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), while the institutions themselves were gutted and transformed to do quite different things.

Part Two: The Crisis of the Old Order: No Longer So Good at the Old Problems

The current system of world order is breaking up. The old system is no longer so good at handling the old problems. And the old system has not adapted well to handle the *new* problems.

As for old problems, remember that there are three classic jobs for such a cooperative system to perform.

First: "Indicate the major powers who accept some responsibility for the effective operation of the system."

The original American creators of the system in the early 1990s believed the American role in it would be central but not dominant. Unfortunately, many Americans thought they were in a prolonged "unipolar moment" and drifted complacently into unipolar habits of thought. As I pointed out in my recent book with Condi Rice, even from the start, even at the supposed peak, this so-called "unipolar moment" was, all along, really a "unipolar mirage."¹

The temptation to try to be not just central, but truly dominant, rose during the 1990s and then started failing almost as quickly. The whole cycle of Icarus trying to fly, then falling painfully back to Earth, happened within less than ten years (about 1997-2006). America has now fallen back to Earth. But it turns out that the reality back on Earth need not be so bad.

The U.S. did make a serious effort, beginning especially during 2005 and several years afterward, to welcome China and India into the ranks of the great powers and invite them to accept some responsibility for the effective operation of the system. For quite different reasons, and in quite different ways, neither of these efforts has been very successful.

Russia's place in this third system has been a difficult problem. The most important phase to have addressed this issue would have been during the 2000s, as Russia recovered political and economic stability. The United States did not give adequate attention to the emerging crisis with Russia at a crucial point, especially in 2006-2008. However, even if it had, there was an important dynamic emanating from Russia's own circumstances, and so it is not clear that the escalating problems since 2007 could have been averted.

The multiplying issues in major power relations since 2016 are so recent and well known that they require no comment. It is worth noting, though, that transatlantic policy toward Russia has been mainly on autopilot for the last five years. The bottom line is that, at the end of 2020, all of the major powers feel that they are mostly on their own.

Second: "Prevent or manage the danger of armed conflict."

The system set up in the early 1990s was oriented to a set of newly prominent dangers. These were entirely different from the missions of the Cold War system, dominated by its preparations to wage global war, including global thermonuclear war.

The new missions began picking up more and more attention through the 1980s and then stood alone as the gigantic older missions dissipated. As all the mountains disappeared, the remaining foothills seemed like mountains.

These new missions were to police the emerging global commonwealth in at least a few ways regarded as basic. The focus was on what the United States and some of its friends regarded as the most dangerous global outlaws. These "rogues" were weapons of mass destruction (WMD) outlaws, terrorist outlaws, and a couple of especially egregious or intrusive local aggressors—such as Iraq in 1990 and Serbia during most of the 1990s.

The system substantially contained these threats. But it allowed the catastrophic failure represented by the 9/11 attack. That failure was traumatic.

In the aftermath of that trauma, the U.S. and its friends catastrophically misjudged the Iraqi situation in 2002 and thereafter. Dominated by narrow-minded military and intelligence arguments and estimates, the U.S. badly misjudged the gravity of the local situation and badly misjudged its capacities to manage the aftermath of its military operations.

Through prolonged and painful trial and error, many in the U.S. government eventually learned more about how to conduct effective local partnerships in the damaged societies in which it now finds itself enmeshed. But the U.S. government is still far too reliant on a narrow spectrum of military and intelligence instruments, the only ones in which it has invested a large effort.

Third: "Set up a working basis for global commerce, including trade and finance."

This system is also degrading. The operation of the WTO is coming to a halt. Both the IMF and the World Bank are weaker now than at any time in the last thirty years. Governments around the world are considering how to further renationalize their economies and supply chains.

Through able management around the world, the dollar-dominated global financial exchange system survived the serious American and European financial crises of 2008-2012. Although that system still seems to be working, this is only because the dollar's value is still stable and the search for an alternative to the dollar-based system is therefore not yet urgent. But the U.S. has put the dollar's future under enormous strain. It is using the dollar as a principal tool of unilateral power while it is undermining the dollar with unprecedented and problematical levels of debt and money creation. The resulting risks seem so large and incalculable that it is only sensible to start hedging against the survival of this part of the old order.

Part Three: Toward a New Agenda

To repeat what I said at the top: we are in a transitional period in world history. Some old concerns about war and peace, trade, and finance continue. But even there, the nature and purposes of future warfare and the future of global capitalism appear to be changing in very deep ways.

There are particular regional dangers. Each needs to be analyzed on its merits, in detail. Where there are dangers of conflict, the system of the early 1990s seems, at the moment, to have entirely collapsed. Discussions among the major powers about current and possible armed conflicts seem almost nonexistent. The main arms control structures are in poor shape. Limited wars are proliferating. Russia is currently actively involved in at least three of them, although right now the ceasefire seems to be holding in the Donbass. The main point is that the policy design work cannot be done by just pulling out the familiar Cold War playbook, or even the 1990s playbook.

In the United States, the usual argument is framed as “restore liberal international order” on one side, with “restraint or offshore balancing or America First” on the other. This framing of the argument is reactionary—on both sides. It is a culture war about attitudes, toward foreigners and foreign problems.

This culture war looks backward, not forward. It is not focused on the problems most Americans agree that their country should tackle.

The U.S. administration that takes office in 2021 should regard it as a time to help found another, a fourth, system of world order, as was done at the beginning of the 1990s. There is a domestic companion, a new era of American opportunity related to the digital revolution.²

The United States could work with partners around the world to set some basic directions on an agenda emphasizing (in no particular order), the following seven themes:

- Biological security (including future developments in biotechnology)
- Environmental security (including the oceans)
- Digital security and innovation
- Inclusive economic recovery, opportunity, and security
- Future of freedom
- Future of China
- Strengthening a coordinated rule of law among those who want one: Versus terrorism, transnational corruption, and other transnational threats to public order

It is still unclear how globally inclusive this new system can be. The adapted or new institutions will have to start from a practical understanding, on each of these vectors, of which nation-states or subnational entities or nongovernmental institutions can muster the capability to accomplish the desired effects and are willing to join in a common effort.

Some people imagine a new system for a divided world, with “democracies” in one camp and outsiders in the darkness. This reminds me of the worst features of the “Versailles system.” The proponents, of course, see it as a new Cold War system.

Yet, that Cold War system was not a system in which the United States recruited the principal partners. Instead, the principal partners tended to recruit the United States. It was the partners who did much of the work to defend themselves and organize the loose confederations that defined that system of anti-Communist kinship.

Today, in most of Europe and most of Asia, other important powers are not so reactionary. They are not nostalgic about the Cold War system, and they do not wish to re-create one.

There are also experts around the world who envision, even welcome, a multipolar world, perhaps more like the world of the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries, but with China becoming the new paramount power, as Britain sometimes was back then.

Both of these alternatives, of polarizing rivalry or multipolar anarchy, are really no system of world order at all. They cannot go far to accomplish any large, worldwide results. They are systems of disorder, preparing for constant conflict and imperial rivalry.

Maybe this is our fate. I am not so sure. I have not yet given up on a system of world order, adapted for the challenges of the twenty-first century.

Part Four: Reconceiving America's Role in World Politics

My generation formed habits of thought about America's role in the world, habits of thought that were formed in an exceptional time. For most of its history, the United States was not deeply engaged with world politics. American public engagement with global problem-solving is the exception in our history, not the tradition.

In the last 244 years, the only times there has been a broad consensus in the country in favor of costly international action was in the year and a half surge in 1917-18; the reaction to world war between about 1941 and 1945; the sustained reaction to the danger of World War III between about 1950 and 1985; and then as a reaction to 9/11, between about 2002 and 2008.

My generation came of age during that uniquely long consensus, sometimes under great strain, that held up between about 1950 and 1985. But that was a distinct period of history. The anti-communist glue that created a degree of consensus in foreign and defense policy dissolved along with the Soviet Union. It has really never returned, in either party.

Large defense spending continues. But it is sustained by inertia, the powerful domestic interest groups that now find identity and sustenance in the defense-intelligence behemoths, and some shared desire to patch up the battlements of a Fortress America in a world that seems strewn with obscure pathologies.

The current time reminds me of American attitudes in the 1920s, after the bitter disillusionment with the intervention in the First World War and its aftermath. Then and now, Americans in both parties are deeply suspicious of any foreign commitments. Also, as was the case then, when Americans were reacting to a previous generation of mass immigration, a significant fraction of Americans are uneasy about foreigners and wish (as Americans did then) to severely restrict such flows. Many Americans, across parties, are also anxious about the future of their communities. They search for community even as the digital revolution makes them feel more globalized and rootless, in other ways, than they have ever felt before.

But I encourage you to reexamine the list of seven global themes I suggest for a future agenda. Now, even in these times, Americans *do* care about all seven of those global problem sets. They often do not perceive them as being global. The problems often present themselves locally, from the fires burning in the next county, to the pandemic sweeping the country, to the cyberattack that just disabled your husband's machine.

Americans are interested in tackling those problems. They are open to people who can make a practical case for how to do that, which—in all cases—necessarily involves global partnerships.³

If those seven themes form the core of a new security agenda for the twenty-first century, our legacy institutions are strikingly ill-adapted to address them. I define power dynamically, as a capability to attain desired results. Our institutions are not adapted to achieve desired results on the agenda of this emerging era of global problems.

Americans are sometimes proud to point to how much more “hard” power we have, as if military instruments and the related intelligence support provide the brute force to attain the desired results in this new era. A major part of U.S. “hard” power and most defense and intelligence spending are substantially irrelevant to this new security agenda. This is true even if one is concerned, for instance, about the nature of relevant military readiness against dangers from China or Russia. One of the ironies of the U.S. criticism of European defense spending is that the traditional U.S. security approach is so anachronistic that the Europeans now have a quite comparable share of what is really the “hard” power to attain results on the problems in today's world, especially those that now specifically beset Europe and the Mediterranean world.

America's institutions for wielding twenty-first century power have atrophied. If the United States tripled its Foreign Service, which it should, the budgetary impact would scarcely be noticed. But pushing more money into the State Department is not the core problem. The core problem is reconceiving that and other deeply neglected institutions in order to attain American objectives outside of the United States. Congress is not likely to make a radical commitment of new resources into the same old vessels.

That reconception of American foreign service should also be an agenda for action, to rebuild better, as candidate Biden has put it. That agenda should have at least four parts (in no particular order):

- Redefine and broaden the concept of foreign service beyond a single department of the government, to become an interdepartmental foreign service, while narrowing the focus of the traditional Department of State.
- Restore the State Department's capacity to play a central role in providing day-to-day analysis of developments around the world.
- Reduce reliance on outside contractors and maintain professional expertise for critical problem-solving and policy implementation inside the government. Create a foreign service reserve of expertise, available as needed, around the country.
- Overhaul and strengthen professional training, including training in policy design and key policy areas, in a greatly enlarged foreign service.

Back in 1974, my former colleague at Virginia, Mel Leffler, wrote an essay called, "Political Isolationism, Economic Expansionism, or Diplomatic Realism: American Policy Toward Western Europe, 1921-1933." His essay was about the problem of constructing a new kind of American engagement in a troubled continent, even though Americans were wary of any foreign entanglements or military commitments. So, "the United States became, in the words of Henry Stimson, the champion of a 'commercial and non-military stabilization of the world.'"⁴

What the American internationalists attempted to do back then, in the early 1920s, was to help build a system that had deep engagement with European politics. It had deep engagement with East Asian politics. It had deep engagement with what then was the global balance of military power. But they tried to do so in a way that grew out of American objectives at home.

Such a system need not be very expensive, in the sense of traditional military spending. And the system designed back then suffered from too narrow a toolkit. It was, for example, too reliant on Wall Street and it had too weak a base in domestic and congressional support.

But it is time to update that general theme for another America wary of foreign entanglements and military commitments that is seeking a "non-military stabilization of the world." It cannot be exclusively non-military (and it was not then). But at this point, in 2020, the twenty-first century toolkit, for the twenty-first century security agenda, can be predominantly non-military.

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¹ Philip Zelikow and Condoleezza Rice, *To Build a Better World: Choices to End the Cold War and Create a Global Commonwealth* (New York, NY: Twelve, 2019), 364.

² I was the managing director for a group called "Rework America" that published both a diagnosis and set of prescriptions for such an agenda. *America's Moment: Creating Opportunity in the Connected Age* (New York, NY: Norton, 2015). The group's arguments remain valid in 2020.

³ See, for instance, the way the argument is put in Robert Zoellick, "Biden's Domestic Priorities Should Guide His Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs*, September 8, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/north-america/2020-09-08/bidens-domestic-priorities-should-guide-his-foreign-policy>.

⁴ Melvyn Leffler, "Political Isolationism, Economic Expansionism, or Diplomatic Realism: American Policy toward Western Europe, 1921-1933," republished in *Safeguarding Democratic Capitalism: U.S. Foreign Policy and National Security, 1920-2015*, ed. Melvyn Leffler (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 82. Robert Zoellick stresses the achievements of the early 1920s system in disarmament, East Asia, and international law in his chapters on Charles Evans Hughes and Elihu Root in *America in the World: A History of U.S. Diplomacy and Foreign Policy* (New York, NY: Twelve, 2020). The limitations and failures of this system are also drawn out in Adam Tooze, *The Deluge: The Great War, America, and the Remaking of the Global Order, 1916-1931* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2015).