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The Age of America First: Washington's Flawed New Foreign Policy Consensus.

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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.

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 SQUANDERING

As with any paradigm shift, the one taking place now is possible only because of the failures--both real and perceived--of much of what came in the years before. The Cold War ended 30 years ago, and the United States emerged from that four-decade struggle with a degree of primacy that had few, if any, historical precedents. U.S. power was immense in both absolute and relative terms. It

may have been an exaggeration to hail a "unipolar moment," but not by much.

Historians who look back on these three decades will be rightly critical of a lot that the United States did, and did not do, with its position. There were some important accomplishments: the reunification of Germany within NATO, the disciplined handling of the 1990-91 Gulf War, the U.S.-led military and diplomatic effort to help end the war and slaughter in the former Yugoslavia, the fashioning of new trade agreements, the millions of lives saved thanks to the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, known as PEPFAR.

But these achievements must be weighed against American failures, both of commission and omission. Washington managed little in the way of relationship and institution building, lacking the creativity and ambition that characterized U.S. foreign policy in the wake of World War II. It wasn't considered much of a stretch when Dean Acheson, who was secretary of state during the Truman administration, titled his memoir *Present at the Creation*; no recent secretary of state could credibly include the word "creation" in his or her memoir. Despite its unmatched power, the United States did little to address the widening gap between global challenges and the institutions meant to contend with them.

The list of missteps is long. Washington largely failed to adapt to China's rise. Its decision to enlarge NATO, in violation of Churchill's dictum "In victory, magnanimity," fanned Russian hostility without sufficiently modernizing or strengthening the alliance. Africa and Latin America received only intermittent, and even then limited, attention. Above all, the post-9/11 wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were failures of both design and execution, resulting in costly overreach, part of a broader U.S. focus on the greater Middle East that defied strategic logic. The George W. Bush and Obama administrations dedicated a high percentage of their foreign policy focus to a region home to only about five percent of the world's population, no great powers, and economies dependent on the wasting asset of fossil fuels.

The word that comes to mind in assessing U.S. foreign policy after the Cold War is "squander." The United States missed its best chance to update the system that had successfully waged the Cold War for a new era defined by new challenges and new rivalries. Meanwhile, thanks to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the American public largely soured on what was widely seen as a costly, failed foreign policy. Americans came to blame trade for the disappearance of millions of manufacturing jobs (despite new technologies being the main culprit), and growing inequality, exacerbated by both the 2008 financial crisis and the pandemic, fueled populist suspicion of elites. In the face of looming domestic problems, including decaying infrastructure and faltering public education, foreign involvement came to be viewed as a costly distraction. The stage for a new foreign policy paradigm was set.

EXTREME COMPETITION

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." Biden himself has spoken of "extreme competition" with China, and his coordinator for Indo-Pacific affairs has proclaimed that "the period that was broadly described as engagement has come to an end." This new posture reflects the pervasive disillusionment in the American foreign policy establishment with the results of efforts to integrate China into the world economy and the broader international system, along with heightened concern about how Beijing is using its growing strength abroad and engaging in repression at home.

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. Far from rescinding a policy introduced in the final weeks of the Trump administration that removed restrictions on official U.S. interactions with Taiwanese officials, the Biden administration has actively implemented it, publicizing high-level meetings between U.S. officials and their Taiwanese counterparts. Just as the Trump administration worked to improve U.S.-Taiwanese ties, the Biden administration has repeatedly stressed its "rock solid" support for Taiwan and has inserted language emphasizing the importance of cross-strait stability into joint statements not just with Asian allies, such as Australia, Japan, and South Korea, but also with global bodies, such as the G-7.

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. It has doubled down on criticism of China's refusal to allow an independent investigation into the origins of COVID-19 and given credence to the possibility that the new coronavirus leaked from a laboratory in Wuhan, China. Like its predecessor, it has called Beijing's repression of the Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang a "genocide" and denounced its violation of the "one country, two systems" principle in Hong Kong. It has strengthened efforts to upgrade the Quad, a dialogue meant to enhance cooperation among Australia, India, Japan, and the United States, and launched a complementary strategic initiative with Australia and the United Kingdom. It has also continued to use the term "Indo-Pacific," first brought into common official usage by the Trump administration.

To be sure, there are differences in the Biden administration's approach in some important areas, including a focus on finding ways to cooperate on climate change, the decision to refrain from echoing the call by Trump's secretary of state Mike Pompeo for regime change in Beijing, and an effort to build a common stance with allies. Yet the view that China is the United States' chief competitor and even adversary has become widespread and ingrained, and the similarities in the two administrations' approaches far outweigh any differences.

Much the same can be said of the administrations' policies toward the United States' other great-power competitor. Since Biden took over, U.S. policy toward Russia has changed little in substance. Gone is Trump's inexplicable admiration for Russian President Vladimir Putin. But whatever Trump's personal regard for Putin, the Trump administration's posture toward Russia was in fact fairly tough. It introduced new sanctions, closed Russian consulates in the United States, and enhanced and expanded U. S. military support to Ukraine all of which has continued under Biden. The common view between the two administrations seems to be that U.S.

policy toward Russia should mostly consist of damage limitation--preventing tensions, whether in Europe or in cyberspace, from deteriorating into a crisis. Even Biden's willingness to extend U.S.-Russian arms control pacts and start "strategic stability" talks is mostly about preventing additional erosion, not making further progress. The days of seeking a "reset" with Moscow are long gone.

AMERICAN NATIONALISM

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.

"America first" tendencies also characterized the Biden administration's initial response to COVID-19. U.S. exports of vaccines were limited and delayed even as domestic supply far exceeded demand, and there has been only a modest effort to expand manufacturing capacity to allow for greater exports. This domestic focus was shortsighted, as highly contagious variants were able to emerge in other parts of the world before coming to do immense damage in the United States. It also forfeited an opportunity to cultivate goodwill internationally by demonstrating the superiority of American technology and generosity in the face of Chinese and Russian vaccine diplomacy. 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.

WITHDRAWAL AT ANY COST

Central to the new foreign policy is the desire to pull back from the greater Middle East, the venue of the so-called forever wars that did so much to fuel this paradigm shift in U.S. foreign policy. Afghanistan is the most striking example of this shared impetus. In February 2020, the Trump administration signed an accord with the Taliban that set a May 1, 2021, deadline for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from the country. The negotiations cut out and undercut the government of Afghanistan, and the agreement itself failed to call for the Taliban to lay down their arms or even to commit to a cease-fire. It was not so much a peace agreement as a pact to facilitate American military withdrawal.

By the time Biden assumed the presidency, the overreach that had once characterized U.S. strategy in Afghanistan was a thing of the past. U.S. troop levels, which had hit 100,000 during the Obama administration, were down to under 3,000, with their role largely limited to training, advising, and supporting Afghan forces. U.S. combat fatalities had plummeted with the end of combat operations in 2014 (years before the U.S.-Taliban accord). The modest U.S. presence provided an anchor for some 7,000 troops from allied countries (and an even larger number of contractors) and a psychological and military backstop for the Afghan government--a sufficient presence, that is, to avert Kabul's collapse, but not enough to achieve victory or peace. After 20 years, the United States seemed to have found a level of commitment in Afghanistan commensurate with the stakes.

Yet the Biden administration rejected the options of renegotiating or scrapping the accord. Instead, it honored Trump's agreement in every way but one: the deadline for a full U.S. military withdrawal was extended by some 100 days, to September 11, 2021 (and then the withdrawal was completed ahead of schedule). Biden rejected tying the removal of U.S. troops to conditions on the ground or to additional Taliban actions. Like Trump before him, he considered the war in Afghanistan a "forever war," one he was determined to get out of at any cost. And Biden didn't just implement the Trump policy he had inherited; his administration did so in a Trumpian way, consulting minimally with others and leaving NATO allies to scramble. (Other decisions, including supplanting French sales of submarines to Australia or being slow to lift covro-related restrictions against European visitors to the United States, have likewise set back transatlantic ties.) Multilateralism and an alliance-first foreign policy in principle gave way to America-first unilateralism in practice.

In the rest of the greater Middle East, the Biden administration has similarly continued the Trump approach of reducing the U.S. footprint. It has resisted any temptation to get more involved in Syria, much less Libya or Yemen; announced it will maintain only a small, noncombat military presence in Iraq; embraced the Abraham Accords while participating only reluctantly in diplomatic efforts to end the fighting between Israel and Hamas; and eschewed launching any new attempt to reach an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal.

At first glance, Iran may seem like a glaring exception to the broader similarity. Trump was a fierce critic of the 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran (negotiated when Biden was vice president) and unilaterally exited the accord in 2018; by contrast, the Biden administration (which is staffed at the senior level by several officials who had a large hand in negotiating the pact) has made clear its desire to return to the agreement. But restoring the deal has proved easier said than done, as the two governments have been unable to agree on either specific obligations or sequencing. In addition, a new hard-line Iranian government has shown no interest in signing on to the sort of "longer and stronger" pact the Biden administration seeks. As a result, the Biden administration may well face the same choices its predecessor did, with Iran advancing its nuclear and missile capabilities and its influence throughout the region. Even if Iran once again accepts time-limited constraints on its nuclear activities, the United States will still have to decide how to respond to other Iranian provocations.

QUESTIONS OF VALUE

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. He lavished praise on Putin and exchanged "love letters" with North Korea's Kim Jong Un. He spoke highly of China's Xi Jinping, Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and Hungary's Viktor Orban, while denigrating the leaders of democratic allies, including German Chancellor Angela Merkel, French President Emmanuel Macron, and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. He even levied tariffs on Canada and the European Union.

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. Myanmar in the wake of a military coup is a textbook example: the United States sanctioned members of the regime, but Chinese largess and diplomatic support have helped the military weather the sanctions. Washington has offered only a minimal response to incidents such as the Cuban government's brutal reaction to protests last summer or the assassination of Haiti's president. Whatever concerns Washington may have about Saudi human rights violations, it's unlikely that those concerns would prevent cooperation with Riyadh on Iran, Yemen, or Israel if, for example, Saudi Arabia's leaders showed an interest in joining the Abraham Accords.

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.

With its poorly executed withdrawal from Afghanistan, and the abandonment of many Afghans most vulnerable to Taliban reprisals, Washington further forfeited the high ground: the United States walked away from a project that, for all its flaws and failings, had done much to improve the lives of millions of Afghans, above all women and girls. And of course, the sad reality of the fragile state of democracy in the United States--particularly in the wake of the January 6 insurrection--has further undercut Washington's ability to promote democratic values abroad.

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.

THE PROBLEM WITH CONTINUITY

In theory, more continuity in U.S. foreign policy should be a good thing. After all, a great power is unlikely to be effective if its foreign policy lurches from administration to administration in a way that unnerves allies, provides openings to adversaries, confuses voters, and makes impossible any long-term commitment to building global norms and institutions. The problem with the emerging American approach to the world is not an absence of domestic political consensus; to the contrary, there is considerable bipartisanship when it comes to foreign policy. The problem is that the consensus is woefully inadequate, above all in its failure to appreciate just how much developments thousands of miles away affect what happens at home.

It is also rife with self-defeating contradictions, especially when it comes to China. Deterring China will require sustained increases in military spending and a greater willingness to use force (since successful deterrence always requires not just the ability but also the perceived will to act). Many Republicans but few Democrats back the former; few in either party seem ready to sign up for the latter. Both parties favor symbolically upgrading U.S.-Taiwanese relations, even though going too far in that direction has the potential to trigger a costly conflict between the United States and China. As much as the United States sees China as an adversary, Washington still needs Beijing's support if it is to tackle a host of regional and global challenges, from North Korea and Afghanistan to global health. And while the Biden administration has talked much about its support for alliances, U.S. allies are in many cases unprepared to do what the administration believes is necessary to counter China. Indeed, when it comes to both China and Russia, most U.S. allies resist U.S. calls to limit trade and investment ties in sensitive sectors for geopolitical reasons. A posture does not a policy make.

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.

The contradictions go on. The war in Afghanistan revealed limits to Americans' support for nation building, but building up the capacity of friends is essential in much of Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East if the governments in those regions are to become better able to meet local security challenges, a prerequisite for their becoming more democratic and for the United States' shouldering less of the burden. Participation in trade blocs is desirable not just for economic reasons but also to help rein in China's unfair trade practices and mitigate climate change. Economic nationalism (especially "Buy America" provisions) sets a precedent that, if others follow, will reduce global trade and work against collaborative approaches to developing and fielding new technologies that could make it easier to compete with China. And in the Middle East, for all the focus on limiting U.S. involvement, it is not clear how pulling back squares with U.S. commitments to counter an Iran intent on developing its nuclear and missile capabilities and on expanding its regional influence, both directly and through proxies. Even a successful effort to revive the 2015 nuclear deal would not change this reality, given what the agreement does not address and given the sunset provisions for its nuclear restrictions.

AMERICA ALONE

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.

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.

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Caption: Contrasts and continuities: Trump and Biden debating in Cleveland, September 2020

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