2026 AMBASSADOR WILLIAM C. BATTLE SYMPOSIUM ON AMERICAN DIPLOMACY
APRIL 16–17, 2026

MEMORANDA

In the second quarter of the twenty-first century, the world and U.S. foreign policy are in turmoil. The country and the political parties are already looking toward the next administration and the world we will have in 2029.

Because mainstream thinking is straining to keep up with the changes, we have gathered a wide range of thinkers to consider three fundamental questions for the United States in the world ahead:

1. What are the most pressing U.S. interests?
2. What is the main threat to those interests?
3. What will be the most effective U.S. strategy?

Memos appear in the order of the experts' participation in the symposium panels.

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MEMORANDUM
by Alexander Bick

Uncertainty is a perennial feature of world politics. And yet there are moments when events cast into doubt a comparatively broader range of assumptions, relationships, and expectations. John Kenneth Galbraith analyzed one such period in the early 1970s, when the oil crisis shattered a set of economic pieties that had organized Western economic policymaking for decades. He called it an "Age of Uncertainty."[1] We have entered another such age.

There is as yet no consensus on what might replace the teleology toward democracy, free markets, and global integration that characterized post–Cold War thinking, or indeed whether any single vision will be able to play such a role. This has profound implications for the way we conceive of U.S. national security and the formulation of grand strategy. While our interests—security, prosperity, preserving the American way of life—have remained relatively stable, the strategic environment we confront is changing rapidly. That requires a strategy for transition.

A new age of uncertainty

At the level of the international system, rising powers are challenging U.S. leadership. The outcome could be a more multipolar world, a Sino-American bipolarity, or a reconfigured U.S.-led order built on a narrower but more durable coalition of allies and partners. The consequent uncertainty, compounded by doubts about the reliability of U.S. commitments, is encouraging states to test their strength and ability to shape outcomes in their favor. This is fueling conflict and a conventional arms race, adding urgency to conversations about acquiring nuclear weapons, and creating new alignments among U.S. adversaries. All of these make the recent past a poor guide to future behavior and significantly increase risks for the United States.

At the same time, artificial intelligence (AI) is already beginning to redefine how we fight, work, and socialize in ways that are likely to disrupt established institutions and industries, accelerate battlefield dynamics, and, over time, shift the balance of power. There is sharp disagreement among technologists, market analysts, and national security professionals over the speed and depth of the changes to come. Who will "win" the competition for frontier AI, how it will transform national militaries and economies, and how governments will cope

with potentially large-scale labor disruption are all basically unknown. What is clear is that the choices we make today likely will have major long-term implications, for good or ill.

Globally, and across an unusually wide range of issues, we are therefore witnessing the rapid renegotiation of relationships and commitments. This increases the difficulty for strategists who must weigh discrete choices and anticipate their consequences for one another, and it raises the stakes of potential missteps—even as it creates a genuine opportunity for the United States to renegotiate its global relationships on better terms and reimagine institutions that may be more fit for the current moment.

In this light, the core challenge is not to craft an idealized grand strategy that answers every question. It is to navigate a period of acute uncertainty and rapid transition, with an eye toward the commitments that best consolidate U.S. competitive advantages, enable us to shape emerging institutions and norms, and be more resilient to inevitable surprises.

Strategic priorities

A strategy for this transitional moment would focus in four areas.

First, we should double down on domestic investment, with an emphasis on maintaining our edge in frontier technologies, accelerating adoption across the public and private sectors, building our research base, and restoring a sense of economic opportunity. The greatest challenge here will be to ensure that investments are felt widely and early, helping to sustain political support and cushion what could be severe economic and labor market disruptions. Without a credible domestic foundation, no foreign policy can be sustained across electoral cycles, and no ally or partner can be confident in the durability of U.S. commitments.

Second, we should work with our closest democratic allies to develop more robust cooperative mechanisms, in essence to create the foundations for a new economic and security commons. There is no going back to the status quo ante. Trust has been severely tested and will be difficult to restore. But this equally presents an opportunity, both to reestablish relationships on a more equal footing and to refocus on a smaller number of core objectives—for example, collective security, defense production, supply chain resilience, and technology governance. The goal is not simply to coordinate policies, but to build enduring, shared institutions and standards.

Third, we should take steps to buy down catastrophic risk. President Obama's first lesson of foreign policy, "don't do stupid shit," applies here.[2] But that is not enough. We need to lead coalitions strong enough to deter Russian and Chinese aggression; in Europe, we need to help our allies build the capacity and will to resist on their own terms and convince Moscow it cannot achieve its objectives militarily; and in the Indo-Pacific, we need to maintain a presence and partnership architecture coherent enough to raise the costs of Chinese revisionism to prohibitive levels. We also need to open or renew dialogue with Beijing on strategic stability and AI safety—not as a concession, but because these areas pose major risks to us.

Fourth and finally, our ability to do all of these things will depend, fundamentally, on restoring trust in government. Hyperpolarization and deep frustration with what many Americans perceive as a string of foreign policy disasters over the past two decades will make this incredibly difficult. A transitional strategy requires leveling with the American people to make an honest case for why strategic engagement is less costly than the alternatives, and how ordinary Americans stand to benefit from a more ordered world.

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[1] *The Age of Uncertainty*, written and presented by John Kenneth Galbraith, aired 1977 on BBC, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KGSID_Uyw7w.

[2] Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic*, April 2016, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/.

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MEMORANDUM

by Stephen Wertheim

I have nothing remarkable to say about the fundamental interests that should guide U.S. foreign policy. Security and prosperity sum them up well. At a minimum, the United States must ensure the physical existence of its state, territory, and people. Not only that, it must safeguard the constitutive elements of the U.S. polity, including its Constitutional order and republican form of government—all that composes the American "self" that is to be secured. Prosperity, for its part, involves the international conditions that allow the United States to provide for the economic well-being and societal harmony of the nation and its people. "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness" is another fine way to render these most basic interests.

In translating those interests into core objectives, I also take a fairly conventional view. In addition to safeguarding the Western Hemisphere against external competitors, the United States should seek to prevent the domination of Europe and Asia by an anti-liberal power or alliance of powers. The emergence of such a rival likely would not, it is true, render the United States indefensible in its North American setting, where weak neighbors, wide oceans, and nuclear deterrents pose insurmountable barriers for the foreseeable future. But it could undercut American democracy and diminish American prosperity, while technological advances might one day create vulnerabilities in American security as well.

Where I diverge from today's still potent bipartisan consensus is at the level of strategy. Since the end of the Cold War, successive administrations have pursued U.S. interests in a way that subverted them, making the United States less safe, less free, and considerably less happy, in the Founders' sense as well as our own. In short, America's default grand strategy of global primacy has been an engine for generating security problems detached from U.S. interests that the United States nonetheless becomes responsible for solving. Today the greatest threat to American interests comes from within, from the United States' dogged pursuit of a misguided approach. Changing course will not be easy. The degradation of America's political system now compounds the pathologies of primacy, each feeding off the other.

* * *

During World War II and the Cold War, the United States overcame its historic aversion to "entangling alliances," in Thomas Jefferson's phrase, because it faced great powers in Europe and Asia that attempted to expand their totalitarian systems through mass conquest. After the Cold War, by contrast, peer competitors were no more, much less great powers bent on propagating anti-liberal orders. Yet successive administrations chose to retain America's defense obligations and political-military responsibilities, and add a host of new ones in Europe and the Middle East. The quest for primacy has divided much of the world into allies and adversaries, encouraging the former to outsource their defense to the United States and the latter to threaten American positions and preferences, even if they do not threaten America's interests.

In the short term, unipolar primacy appeared, if not strictly necessary, then at least low in cost and risk. No one else was left to do the United States serious harm, it seemed, whereas American power might do plenty of good. On this basis, U.S. elites forged a new, implicit bargain with the public: America would police the world so long as ordinary citizens paid little price. As a country, that is, the United States agreed to bear minimal burdens in proportion to the negligible threats it faced. For example, a succession of presidents and senators brought ten countries into NATO in 1999 and 2004, less because they, let alone the general public, deemed the new allies worth fighting for if attacked, than because they expected no such defense to become necessary.[1]

It was not strictly impossible for primacy to have worked to benefit U.S. interests, providing global security at a low overall level of cost and risk to Americans. Primacy could have succeeded if non-allied actors either perpetually bandwagoned with Washington or stayed so pitifully weak that they could not obstruct U.S. policies or challenge America's far-flung positions. Accordingly, from 1991 to 2016, primacists rested their case on one of two propositions. Either American dominance was enduringly attractive to other countries, because the United States took everyone's interests into account and led an international order that benefited them (the liberal-internationalist face of primacy). Or American dominance was so overpowering as to make potential adversaries unable or unwilling to balance against the sole superpower (the realist-hegemonic face). In practice, the two arguments blended together into a single, irresistible primacist conventional wisdom.

Neither hope came to pass. Global primacy engendered a world of resistance, first from small states and terrorists and then from an aggrieved Russia and a rising China. The 9/11 attacks alone, which killed 2,977 Americans on the U.S. mainland, should have demonstrated that the U.S. military presence in the Middle East compromised rather than enhanced U.S. security. Instead, it sent the United States on an even deadlier quest to root out terrorist groups and remake whole countries.

The overt balancing behavior of Moscow and Beijing, however, has rendered the decisive verdict on primacy. This presents Washington with the realistic prospect of fighting major-power wars, perhaps several simultaneously, over stakes and locations favorable to the adversary. As many analysts now recognize, a "Lippmann gap" has opened up between the

nation's commitments and resources. But overstretch is a manifestation of the deeper problem: overcommitment. Not only does the United States lack the capacity to fight in three theaters with a one-war military; it also lacks both the national interests and the political will to make good on many of the defense obligations it has assumed. So it should not mobilize the resources needed to close the Lippmann gap. Nor will it, unless compelled by a massive war that itself would constitute an unacceptable strategic failure.

During the past decade, U.S. policymakers have geared up for great-power competition, but their political system has held firm to the post–Cold War social contract forged in the 1990s. The American people simply do not think foreign policy goals warrant large sacrifices. Iraq, Afghanistan, Ukraine, Gaza—each conflict lost public support well before losing elite backing and fueled populist resentment. When mainstream politicians come together to wage and sustain one dubious war after another, while they cannot even begin to address unmet needs at home, democracy suffers. When democracy suffers, demagogic leaders can harness popular discontent without putting U.S. foreign policy on a sounder course.

* * *

If I have dwelled on diagnosis, it is because appraising America's ongoing mistakes strikes me as more important than laying down any specific blueprint for a fast-evolving future. That said, my own prescription proceeds from the premise that the public is correct to demand a less costly foreign policy. To bring its commitments into line with its interests, the United States should systematically reduce the former rather than persist in inflating the latter. It should do so, in short, by disentangling from the Middle East, shifting defense burdens onto European allies, and seeking competitive coexistence with China in Asia.

In the Middle East, the United States has few permanent vital interests, as opposed to "interests" circularly created by U.S. involvement there. What vital interests America does retain, such as keeping economically important waterways open, are best secured by a more neutral political stance and largely offshore military posture. Consider the current war with Iran. One of the only circumstances that could cause Tehran to block the Strait of Hormuz would be if stronger powers waged war to destroy or incapacitate the regime. The United States, in tandem with Israel, chose to do just that. The attack may be strategically illogical, but it is also a logical conclusion of dividing the region for decades into friends and enemies and thereby taking on the region's quarrels as America's own (while adding its own outsize share to the mix).[2]

In Europe, a strategy of primacy has produced exactly the outcome it incentivized: democratized but demilitarized and dependent allies facing a hostile Russia that poses acute threats near its borders but cannot dominate the region. If Moscow tests NATO's security guarantee, it should be European states that directly fight Russian forces. They have greater interests in ensuring security and prosperity across the continent than does the United States, and ultimately greater resources to devote to European deterrence and defense. The alliance should shift most conventional burdens onto Europeans themselves

over the next decade, while gradually identifying and implementing a way for European countries to handle nuclear deterrence independently of the United States.[3]

Only in the Asia-Pacific could a single, illiberal state possess the material capacity to establish hegemony if Washington were absent from a counterbalancing coalition. For that reason, the United States should maintain a large military presence in the region. Still, it should seek to balance rather than exceed Chinese power and act to reduce the risk of war. In addition to returning to the One China policy and "dual deterrence," future presidents should push Taiwan to become capable of holding off invading forces with U.S. military aid and economic support but without kinetic intervention.[4] U.S. regional strategy should focus on denying regional dominance to Beijing, placing higher premium on strengthening allies' and partners' self-defense than on fighting a cross-strait conflict.

A strategy of selective retrenchment, prioritizing security in Asia and democratic flourishing at home, is not without downsides. A smaller American presence will impose more burdens on allies and partners. It may cause short-term instability, especially in the Middle East, before new equilibria are found. But the same problems are occurring because the United States pursues primacy. Allies face rising costs in return for increasingly dubious protection. Washington is destabilizing international order through illegal wars and economic coercion. And primacy makes the United States directly responsible for a bevy of global ills, while putting it on the front lines of larger conflicts to come.

Persisting with primacy courts strategic disaster. What worked poorly in the unipolar moment of a robust democracy won't somehow fare better now. An overburdened America is a danger to the world and itself.

Because this essay covers extensive argumentative terrain very briefly, the footnotes contain sources that further explicate my views on various aspects, and nothing more.

[1] Stephen Wertheim, "The End of Illusion: Why Europe Needs Independence from the United States," *Survival* 67, no. 2 (2025): 39–54.

[2] Robert Malley and Stephen Wertheim, "Of Course Trump Bombed Iran," *The New York Times*, March 5, 2026, https://www.nytimes.com/2026/03/05/opinion/iran-trump-war-foreign-policy.html.

[3] Emma Ashford, Joshua Shifrinson, and Stephen Wertheim, "Does America Still Need Europe?" *Foreign Affairs*, May 22, 2023, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/responses/does-america-still-need-europe.

[4] Jennifer Kavanagh and Stephen Wertheim, "The Taiwan Fixation: American Strategy Shouldn't Hinge on an Unwinnable War," *Foreign Affairs* 104, no. 2 (2025): 90–105.

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MEMORANDUM

Power, credibility, and competition: America after Trump

by Afreen Akhter

The defining problem for American foreign policy today is a crisis of continuity. Foreign policy now swings sharply between administrations, leading allies and adversaries alike to hedge. American credibility, the central currency of statecraft, has steadily eroded.

Simply restoring the pre-Trump foreign policy consensus, however, is neither possible nor desirable. That consensus collapsed because it was not responsive to the American public. It assumed Americans would either support or ignore policies—such as endless wars, unfair trade arrangements, and unaccountable alliances—that did not serve their interest.

Durable foreign policy requires democratic legitimacy, and democratic legitimacy demands a clear connection between strategy abroad and the well-being of American citizens at home. A thinner but more durable strategic framework is needed. Four principles should guide that framework: competition without panic, strength without hegemony, accountability for allies and partners, and engagement with limits.

Competition without panic

Competition between the United States and China will shape the international system for decades. The Biden administration framed its approach as "competitive coexistence," but in practice, the policy was closer to maximal coercion. Export controls, sanctions, and investment screening broadened steadily, driven in part by a fever in the U.S. Congress, expanding well beyond narrow technologies into entire sectors.[1]

Some of this was justified. Protecting frontier technologies with clear military applications is prudent statecraft, and diversifying supply chains is sound policy. The problem was the relentlessly widening aperture.

"Strategic competition" gradually became a catch-all organizing philosophy—capturing activities large and small, from fertilizer deliveries in Sri Lanka to English language programs in Tunisia. Punitive measures had no offramp dependent on behavior change. China was the

next forever war, though a cold one. Every commercial tie, educational program, and development initiative was a front in an undifferentiated struggle.

That approach carries real costs. Broad economic decoupling fragments markets, raises prices for American consumers, and accelerates the emergence of parallel technological ecosystems beyond U.S. influence. The second Trump term has layered additional instability onto economic coercion.

Competition without panic requires precision. Guardrails should focus narrowly on frontier technologies with clear national security implications. The United States does not need a theory of restriction for every domain of economic exchange. It should not, for instance, be severing commercial ties in mature consumer goods or non-sensitive trade where the main effect is higher prices for Americans. Washington should keep sanctions tied to concrete harms, such as fentanyl precursor networks, and resist sweeping measures with no offramp. Tariffs should be phased down on consumer goods and industrial inputs that function primarily as a tax on Americans.

Stable rivalry also requires identifying areas where cooperation is not optional: climate mitigation, pandemic surveillance, and nuclear nonproliferation among them. China strategy should be able to distinguish between what must be denied, what can be traded, what should be rebuilt at home, and where cooperation remains in the American interest.

That still leaves the hardest question: how to address American economic dislocation. China's integration into the global trading system accelerated American industrial decline and fomented the political backlash that helped produce Trump. Rebuilding industrial capacity, however, requires doubling down on domestic initiatives: increased investment in infrastructure, research and development, workforce capability, and modern manufacturing. Attempting to compensate for those failures through broad economic warfare risks confusing a partial cause with the remedy.

Strength without hegemony

Strength without hegemony demands discipline in the exercise of American power. The second Trump presidency has demonstrated the opposite approach. Its war of choice on Iran has created mass civilian casualties, an energy crisis, and a broader regional conflagration. Threats to seize Greenland from Denmark shook alliances without advancing U.S. interests. The capture of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro was a dramatic act that left his regime firmly in power.

This is the essence of hegemony without purpose—the optics of power absent a coherent theory of change. Concurrently, guardrails governing force have steadily eroded. Successive administrations have stretched the 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force far beyond its original scope. The War Powers Resolution has never stopped a president from continuing military operations. Congress has repeatedly shirked its obligations, eroding

democratic accountability for decisions with enormous human, fiscal, and strategic consequences.

Strength without hegemony requires a restoration of those guardrails. While presidents must retain the ability to act quickly in moments of crisis, future administrations should prioritize congressional authorization for sustained military operations. Without that discipline, temporary interventions inevitably metastasize into prolonged conflicts without public support.

Accountability for allies and partners

Durable strategy requires confronting an uncomfortable but obvious truth: unconditional support for allies and partners undermines American interests. The U.S.-Israel relationship is the clearest example.

For decades, Washington has treated Israel as exceptional, driven by political coalitions and entrenched interest groups. Israel receives $3.8 billion annually in military assistance and enjoys carte blanche in its use.

This arrangement never reflected U.S. interests, which is increasingly impossible to ignore. Today, Israel is a wealthy country with a sophisticated economy and a defense industry that directly competes with American firms. There is no strategic rationale for U.S. taxpayers to continue to subsidize Israel.

Unconditional aid has also produced profound moral and strategic hazard. The war in Gaza has inflicted catastrophic damage and severely undermined American credibility. The Biden administration's response exposed its hypocrisy—repeated rhetorical appeals for restraint accompanied by the continued provision of weapons used to inflict mass civilian casualties. Israeli leaders drew the obvious conclusion; American support would continue regardless of their actions. The Trump administration has since removed even modest guardrails. The broader regional consequences have been disastrous, most notably in the war of choice with Iran, another example of America bending to Israeli decisions. For too long, the tail has wagged the dog.

The solution is straightforward: end Israel's exceptional status. Security, economic, and political cooperation should continue where they clearly advance American interests. No country should enjoy unconditional U.S. support.

Engagement with limits

The Indo-Pacific is where long-term competition with China will be most consequential. However, partnerships there, and across the world, must be grounded in a realistic assessment of their strengths and limitations.

India is important to any Indo-Pacific strategy. Yet India's commitment to strategic autonomy is structural, and suggestions that America can form a genuine alliance with New

Delhi are delusional.[2] India will cooperate where interests converge; it will not subordinate its policy to America.

The Biden administration ignored that reality. When the Indian government was credibly linked to a murder-for-hire plot on American soil, the administration subordinated U.S. interests to the broader relationship—reflecting the belief that nearly any behavior by non-adversaries should be tolerated so long as they remain loosely aligned against China.

That logic is self-defeating. Foreign partners respect power exercised consistently and manipulate power exercised selectively. A more sustainable relationship would include friction by design—on Russia, on trade, on elements of India's domestic politics. Engagement with limits means recognizing both the value and the boundaries of partnerships.

Conclusion

Restoring credibility depends on durability, and durability requires a foreign policy that is disciplined and responsive to the needs of the American people. A targeted strategic framework—grounded in calibrated competition, disciplined use of force, accountability in alliances and partnerships, and engagement with limits—offers a more sustainable path. It focuses on what matters most: protecting American prosperity, preventing unnecessary wars, and ensuring that the burdens of international leadership remain justified to the citizenry.

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[1] Geoffrey Gertz and Thomas Krueger, "Export Controls and U.S. Trade Policy: Making Sense of the New Terrain," *Just Security*, October 14, 2025, https://www.justsecurity.org/121725/export-controls-trade-policy-new-terrain/.

[2] Kurt M. Campbell and Jake Sullivan, "The Case for a U.S. Alliance with India," *Foreign Affairs*, September 4, 2025, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/india-alliance-jake-sullivan-kurt-campbell.

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MEMORANDUM

by Alexander B. Gray

In the years ahead, the most pressing U.S. foreign policy interest will be preventing the People's Republic of China (PRC) from gaining hegemony over the Eurasian landmass and projecting power into the Eurasian littoral so as to limit American commerce and strategic projection into the region. Alongside this overriding strategic objective, the United States has a similar imperative to prevent the PRC (or other powers, acting in alignment or independently) from threatening the two geographic nodes underpinning core U.S. power: the United States homeland (both the contiguous, continental United States, but also U.S. territories more broadly) and the extended Western Hemisphere. Ensuring that the United States can act defensively in regard to PRC threats to the homeland and the Hemisphere while maintaining a more robust, "balancing" approach in the extended Indo-Pacific will be the primary objective and challenge of U.S. foreign policy in the decades ahead.

While the United States will face other regional challenges, whether a terminally declining Russian Federation or an Islamic Republic of Iran likely still determined to gain predominance in the Middle East, these challenges by themselves will pale in comparison to the strategic threat posed by the PRC. Even as the PRC seeks convergences of convenience with Moscow and Tehran, the U.S. will need to build upon the 2025 National Security Strategy's ruthless prioritization of core U.S. interests and dedicate shrinking comparative resources to the PRC's preeminent threat. While regional nuisances like Tehran and Moscow may attempt extra-regional activities adverse to U.S. interests, American statecraft will require laser focus on the PRC's ultimate aim of denying U.S. freedom of action in the Indo-Pacific and expanding its own power projection capacity beyond the Eurasian landmass.

Despite this Indo-Pacific focus, and needed rejection of oft-repeated temptations to intervene in regions of lesser strategic priority, Washington must refortify its areas of strategic strength and depth while avoiding PRC efforts to degrade those competitive advantages. For example, PRC influence operations in the U.S. homeland and Western Hemisphere; economic warfare targeting the U.S. defense and manufacturing industrial base; and exploitation of U.S. weaknesses in areas like narcotics importation, agricultural land acquisition, and porous border enforcement all must be guarded against in order to sustain the comprehensive national power required for significant Great Power competition.

In summary, while the United States must prioritize competition with the PRC principally in the Indo-Pacific and avoid resource-intensive engagement in extraneous regions peripheral to core U.S. strategic goals, the U.S. must strengthen its inherent sources of power and power bastions in the homeland and Hemisphere. This combined defensive-offensive strategy seeks to secure essential American interests in the Indo-Pacific while simultaneously preventing Beijing from weakening the sources of U.S. power that will sustain such a long-term power projection effort.

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MEMORANDUM

The case for consolidation in U.S. grand strategy

by A. Wess Mitchell

U.S. national interests have changed very little in the roughly hundred years since the American Republic emerged as a global power. But our ability to secure those interests faces serious challenges due to unforced U.S. policy errors after the Cold War and ongoing shifts in the international balance of power. The errors included military overstretch, fiscal overextension, and deindustrialization. The shifts include the reemergence of great-power rivals with the ability and will to dominate vital regions and, in particular, the ascent of China as a peer competitor with the capability to become the world's strongest power.

In response to this state of affairs, the United States should pursue a consolidationist strategy aimed at replenishing the foundations of its strength as a great power. The goal is to shore up our position in ways that increase disposable U.S. power over time. Doing that will require us to prioritize among the interests competing for our attention and accept the tradeoffs that that entails, while mounting a sustained national effort at economic, technological and defense-industrial revitalization to mitigate or transcend those trade-offs in the future.[1]

American interests

The national interests of the United States are, as they have long been, to ensure that the homeland is secure from attack or coercion, the Western Hemisphere is amenable to U.S. supremacy, and the Eurasian landmass is not dominated by a hostile rival or coalition. The latter means maintaining favorable balances of power in the strategically most important regions of Eurasia, which are Europe, East Asia and the Middle East. Doing that implies an enduring interest in controlling the seas, which is a prerequisite to power projection outside the Western Hemisphere. Pursuit of all of the above implies an abiding interest in maintaining a global balance of power that favors the United States and complicates hostile combinations.

In order to secure these interests, the United States needs a secure resource base, large domestic market, and strong manufacturing core. It needs to stay at the frontier in key technologies that underwrite geopolitical dominance. And it needs to be able to finance at

scale, through deep capital markets and access to cheap borrowing, as well as through access to abundant energy from indigenous sources, with supporting infrastructure.

Undergirding all of this there must be a numerous, skilled, virtuous and patriotic citizenry unified by a common sense of identity and purpose whose cohesive qualities exceed the schismatic tendencies inherent to an ethnically heterogenous republic.

Threats to America

The main threats to the United States come from the actions of the large Eurasian powers which possess the capability and will to dominate their respective regions.

Of these, China is by far the most formidable. Its latent power is greater, in relative terms, than any U.S. rival to date. China is engaged in the largest military buildup in human history, is racing to nuclear parity, and already possesses an air, sea and land-power advantage over the United States in East Asia. If China were able to subjugate or co-opt its littoral neighbors, it would command the combined resources of the wealthiest and most populous region.

Russia possesses the world's largest nuclear arsenal, poses a standing threat to U.S. allies and interests in Europe, and is an abettor of other enemies of the United States. Iran's strength has been greatly diminished by recent U.S. and Israeli military operations; a nuclear-armed Iran would pose a serious threat for both the United States and its regional allies.

The greatest danger that America could face would be a multi-front war involving all or most of these opponents simultaneously. The last three National Defense Strategies have stated that the U.S. military is not equipped or postured to handle more than one large opponent at a time. The U.S. defense-industrial base was downsized after the Cold War. Most U.S. allies allowed their defenses to weaken over the same period and are unready for war. In a multi-front war, the United States would struggle to defend its interests in all regions concurrently.

America's strategic dilemma is aggravated by several domestic factors. One is the depleted state of American manufacturing, which atrophied in the years after China entered the World Trade Organization. The national debt now exceeds 100 percent of GDP and is on track to hit $130 trillion by 2050. The combination of persistent deficits, ballooning interest payments, and large mandatory social commitments constrain America's fiscal space for sustaining defense buildups of the kind that won the Cold War.

Strategic approach

For the foreseeable future, the United States should pursue a consolidationist strategy aimed at shoring up its power base for a protracted era of great-power competition. Consolidation is not retrenchment; the latter sees American power as exhausted and seeks a remedy by discarding international commitments, while the former sees American power as still vital but improperly managed. A consolidationist strategy would seek to (1) retain but

rebalance U.S. overseas commitments so that they are more sustainable while (2) replenishing the domestic power core from which U.S. power ultimately derives. This corresponds to the logic of the 2025 National Security Strategy and 2026 National Defense Strategy.

The main thrust of (1) should be to renegotiate the post-1945 bargains with allies in favor of greater reciprocity in security and trade. Having allies that are capable of self-defense, especially in Europe and the Middle East, is essential for enabling the United States to concentrate its strength on the Indo-Pacific. Having allies that grant access to their home markets is essential for achieving reindustrialization to a sufficient degree that the United States can defend itself and its allies long term. The goal should be to preserve U.S. alliances but shift the balance of benefits and burdens in a way that is more favorable to the United States.

In parallel, Washington should be willing to pursue compartmentalized détentes with its main rivals. With China, the goal should be a geoeconomic modus vivendi that stops short of full decoupling while erecting restrictions in high-tech areas to protect key competitive advantages. With Russia, the goal should be to end the Ukraine war with an intact Ukrainian glacis that deters future westward advances and to deflect Russia's focus toward Asia. With both rivals, the goal is not to find harmony but to arrive at a degree of strategic stability and buy time for the United States to strengthen its overall power posture.

The main thrust of (2) should be to rejuvenate American power at home. The primary goal is to re-industrialize in key sectors—semiconductors, shipbuilding, advanced manufacturing, etc.—that are fundamental to national power, while propelling dominance in emerging technologies. Excellence in artificial intelligence (AI) is especially important, as it holds the potential to bring the productivity gains that will be needed to outgrow or heavily offset the debt. Achieving that will require a sustained focus through multiple administrations on deregulation, increased domestic energy production, and strategic infrastructure investments.

In both cases (allies and domestic growth) the United States enjoys enormous competitive advantages vis-à-vis its Eurasian rivals. Consolidation is the optimal strategy for replenishing U.S. vitality and recovering the ability to secure national interests into the 21st century.

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[1] This essay draws on the author's forthcoming article in the April/May 2026 edition of *Foreign Affairs*, as well as an earlier article he published in *Foreign Policy* on January 14, 2026 entitled "The Grand Strategy Behind Trump's Foreign Policy."

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MEMORANDUM

by Melanie W. Sisson

The United States needs a foreign policy that underwrites national economic productivity and defends U.S. territory. The belief that the post-war order is responsible for domestic economic ailments and international military overreach—and should therefore be discarded—threatens both. The most effective strategy is one that uses America's advantaged position to operate within the post-war order, not against it: coupling free trade with selective industrial policy, and deploying America's military not to impose its preferences but to dissuade other powers from attempting to impose theirs.

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Navigating today's debate about international order is like surveying the spread at a Las Vegas buffet: the writing is voluminous, the quarrels showy, and the convictions as cemented in place as peel-and-eat shrimp encased in a bowl of ice. The America First table is dishing out disdain for a post-war order it derides as a sovereignty-pooling fantasy that defends allies at America's expense, and leeches the United States of its industrial vitality. Trans-Atlanticists and China hawks want to convince anyone with appetite that the United States needs the expansively conceived U.S.-led "liberal international rules-based order" as a meaty defense against illiberal foes. Restrainers are trying to persuade otherwise: that the order's fat-marbled primacy is unhealthy, and an ascetic definition of national interests is enough to satiate.

These positions mistake what the order is for how the United States has used it. Properly understood, the post-war order is none of these things. It is a tool to facilitate productive forms of interstate competition and to corral its dangerous energies. The most urgent threat to U.S. prosperity and security today is that so many are forgetful of this purpose, and so quick to blame the order for America's domestic economic ailments and excessive overseas activism. The United States does not need liberation from the post-war order. It needs a strategy that operates effectively within it: one that couples widespread free trade with selective industrial policy, and uses America's military might not to impose U.S. preferences but to dissuade other powers from attempting to impose theirs.

The worst order except for all those others

The order that began with the U.S.-U.K. Atlantic Charter in 1941 was spare and self-serving. The founders' intent was to prevent their countries from having to fight another war like the war they had just won; it was not accidental that the means they devised for doing so would work to their own economic and political advantage. To achieve both aims, they sought to address the dynamics that had led to war: unilateral tariffs and other forms of economic protectionism that were mutually destructive; and the perception that militarily strong states could attack militarily weaker ones without fear of collective response.

The founders therefore designed the order's core economic institutions to support free trade by expanding the global supply of viable markets, stabilizing interstate currency flows, and providing venues for addressing disputes about trade policy. The United Nations was meant to encourage negotiation of conflicts and to facilitate multilateral resistance to threats and acts of aggression. These mechanisms were to be impediments to wars of choice that killed people, destroyed property, and disrupted interstate commerce. The goal, in other, more grandiloquent words, was for the post-war order to end the system of unilateral action, the meddling in each other's internal affairs, the secret alliances, "the spheres of influence, the balances of power, and all the other expedients that have been tried for centuries—and have always failed."[1]

Free trade

Eighty years later, consistent access to global markets remains essential to America's economic productivity and national power. Bespoke deals that attempt to strike just the right balance of conditions —for instance on adherence to labor requirements—are unduly demanding, especially when China offers a ready alternative.[2] Unilateral tariffs suppress imports and exports alike, causing hardship for partner economies while expecting Americans to be satisfied with having fewer consumables and paying more for them.[3] Both approaches invite the kind of economic nationalism that preceded the world wars.

The United States does not have to choose among protecting workers, defending against strategic economic vulnerabilities, and preserving open markets. It can pursue targeted industrial policy in strategic sectors while working within—and strengthening—WTO frameworks. And it can invest in the AI era's demand for infrastructure and research networks without fracturing the global trading system. The United States has a creditable record of doing exactly this: federal funding built the interstate highway system, launched the internet, and sustained decades of scientific research that decoded the human genome.[4] Replicating that success does not require dismantling free trade. It requires dispensing with self-imposed orthodoxies about what liberal economics permits. This is not a turn toward Chinese-style party-state capitalism.[5] It is a pragmatic and calibrated approach to reinforcing critical sectors and diversifying supply chains to deny China, and every other state, the option of taking advantage of U.S. dependencies.

Impediments to the use of force

The absence of a coordinated international response to the U.S. intervention in Venezuela and its war of choice in Iran is a reminder that America has long been the primary guarantor of the order's deterrents against unilateral uses of force. Returning to this role serves U.S. national interests better than does allowing the principle of non-aggression to dissolve entirely. The United States already has in place much of what it needs to do so: a permanent seat on the U.N. Security council, a nuclear triad that ensures secure second-strike capability, a global network of defense alliances, and a professionalized military with broad domestic support. Provided that the war in Iran remains geographically limited and does not escalate to nuclear use, the United States can repair its diplomatic standing while modifying its global posture to signal that its military's mission is to deter aggression, not to engage in it.

This is viable even in East Asia, despite China's military advances. The United States cannot recapture decisive regional military superiority over the People's Liberation Army (PLA), and attempting to do so would be prohibitively expensive and dangerously provocative. The United States can instead achieve its longstanding objective of maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and in other of the region's maritime spaces by prioritizing resilience, situational awareness, and rapid response. In Europe the United States can contribute to NATO's strategy to deter Russian aggression by supporting allied development of the local infrastructure, logistics, and sustainment capacity required for U.S. forces to respond quickly when threats emerge. The United States will also need to stop making investments in systems, like Golden Dome, that undermine nuclear stability by seeking to deny China and Russia their own secure second-strike capability.

Strategy, not structure

Blaming the post-war order for the outcomes produced by U.S. foreign policy is self-indulgent. The order did not require the United States to forgo stockpiling strategic goods, and it did not insist that the United States refrain from industrial policy. There is nothing in the order that impelled the United States to embark on a War on Terror, wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, or regime change in Venezuela and Iran.

The desire to dispense with the post-war order arises from the illusion that doing so will free the United States from the constraints of globalization and the burdens of collective defense. But it is these very constraints and burdens that have created an international environment that is largely protective of U.S. interests and pliable to its preferences. The post-war order, that is, gives the United States good choices—it is up to America to make them.

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[1] Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Address to Congress on the Yalta Conference," March 1, 1945, American Presidency Project, University of California, Santa Barbara, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-congress-the-yalta-conference.

[2] Jake Sullivan, "The Biden Administration's International Economic Agenda: A Conversation with National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan," transcript of remarks at the Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., April 27, 2023, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/es_20230427_sullivan_intl_economic_agenda_transcript.pdf.

[3] The White House, "Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Declares National Emergency to Increase Our Competitive Edge, Protect Our Sovereignty, and Strengthen Our National and Economic Security," April 2, 2025, https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/04/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-declares-national-emergency-to-increase-our-competitive-edge-protect-our-sovereignty-and-strengthen-our-national-and-economic-security/.

[4] Gary Clyde Hufbauer and Megan Hogan, *Industrial Policy through the CHIPS and Science Act: A Preliminary Report*, PIIE Briefing 25-1 (Peterson Institute for International Economics, January 2025), 3, https://www.piie.com/sites/default/files/2025-01/piieb25-1.pdf.

[5] Margaret Pearson, Meg Rithmire, and Kellee S. Tsai, "Party-State Capitalism in China," *Current History*, September 2021, pp. 207–213, https://www.hbs.edu/ris/Publication%20Files/CURH120827_01_Pearson_4ea34a0b-21d5-45af-a51a-c938eeeb6380.pdf.