



THE END OF THE END OF HISTORY: REIMAGINING U.S. FOREIGN POLICY FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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Americans lack a shared vision of what the role of the United States ought to be in the world. It's time for America to start asking itself some tough questions about the future of American leadership and for U.S. leaders to rethink how to persuade the American people of the value of an American-led, American-powered global order.

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America is facing a crisis in its foreign policy imagination. This is not just a crisis among academics, although they are obviously a vital part of the conversation. Nor is this crisis restricted to career foreign policy hands. And it is definitely not limited to politicians. This is a crisis among the American people.

The American people do not have a shared sense of what America is trying to accomplish in the world with its foreign policy. And if U.S. politicians and practitioners don't recognize that reality here at home, then the United States cannot effectively advance its agenda abroad.

Properly diagnosing this crisis — and locating a solution — means making some strong criticisms of recent American foreign policymaking. The goal is not to lay blame. Rather, it is to answer an urgent question: How did the United States get to a place where so many Americans seem open to taking an isolationist posture toward the world? Why is there such a strong impulse to disengage?

One of the clear lessons of 2016 is that the public hasn't wholly embraced America's major foreign-policy decisions over the last several years — and perhaps even the last few decades. Many Americans believe that, since the end of the Cold War, the United States has failed to articulate a shared foreign-policy vision that's bigger than this or that administration's re-election plan. In fact, most Americans have come to treat foreign policy as just another Republican-versus-Democrat issue. In fairness, after the fall of the Soviet Union, the American people have had some luxury to do so. In this respect, America is a victim of its own success.

It takes a big foreign-policy vision to draw 320 million people spread across a continental nation together into a common, enduring commitment. If America is going to send its children into harm's

way, it has to have a shared reservoir of ideas, a shared vision, a shared imagination of what its role on the global stage should look like. That's a big challenge, especially at a time of intense disagreements in domestic policymaking, stoked by a media that profits from polarization. But in spite of that — or perhaps because of it — America needs a vision that is big enough to hold across election cycles.

I am an unstinting advocate for American engagement in the world, and I think the impulse to withdraw from America's important, longstanding commitments is a very bad thing. U.S. global leadership is indispensable, not only for the security of America's friends and partners, but for protecting America's own interests. When hell breaks loose on the other side of the world, it inevitably boomerangs home. When the United States doesn't lead, chaos inevitably follows. If America continues to drift toward global disengagement, it will be sucked into all sorts of troubles that it can't envision right now.

The lesson of the two World Wars and of the Cold War is that the United States cannot avoid the world. America ultimately must lead a system of alliances. When it does otherwise, the consequences for the United States and its partners are much worse than policymakers are liable to anticipate in the short term, when disengagement can seem appealing.

I have four objectives in this essay. First, I want to examine why so many Americans, on both sides of the political aisle, seem to be open to a U.S. policy of retreat.

Second, I want to begin the work of "translating" the next era of U.S. engagement. Every acronym-agency report that has come out over the last 18 months has talked about the "return of great-power conflict," and they are right. But there has been a failure to communicate that reality in terms that will persuade and build the support of millions of Americans. For example, America is clearly in a long-term tech race with China. But it's just as

clear that the American people either don't realize it or are not convinced that it matters.

Third, I want to suggest a few concrete steps that America can pursue as it continues to think about how to modernize U.S. intelligence, defense, and diplomacy for the digital era.

Lastly, I want to offer some encouragement, because despite the fact that the United States faces big challenges, I'm confident that America can rise to meet them.

There is a lot of talk about the "unprecedented" nature of the threats America faces today. Human beings tend to emphasize the discontinuity between historical periods, because we're narcissists and we think, "We're here, so this must be the inflection point of all history!" But it's usually not true, and it's the job of the historian to step in and say, "Sorry, everyone, but in fact there's far more continuity than discontinuity at this moment."

However, there's a case to be made that this is, in fact, one of the turning points in 230 years of American history, akin to America's opening to global engagement at the beginning of the 20th century, or to the emergence of the Cold War. America's complex security considerations are downstream of the digital revolution that the world is living through right now, which truly is changing everything. For all of human history, economics has been about atoms; looking forward, economics is going to be largely about bytes. And that change has all sorts of implications for intelligence, defense, and diplomacy.

There is as much opportunity as chaos in this revolution. But only if America leads.

The Rush to Retreat

To begin, it's important to look sympathetically at the position of the many American citizens who are increasingly skeptical of the post-World War II consensus position on U.S. global engagement and



leadership. Many U.S. citizens aren't exactly sure what they get out of America's continued global engagement or what America's goals are in the world. And perhaps it's not so hard to see why they feel that way.

America has endured nearly two decades of war, and there's little end in sight to its involvement in the Middle East, the president's recent announcements of troop withdrawal notwithstanding.¹ In Afghanistan, the Taliban is so bold that late last year they attacked the head of the American forces.² Three American soldiers were wounded in that ambush. A few weeks later, in a separate attack, four American servicemen were killed.³ Some have hailed the ongoing negotiations between the United States and the Taliban, but given the Taliban's refusal to negotiate directly with the government in Kabul, they are unlikely to be fruitful in the long term.

American allies increasingly choose to free-ride under America's security umbrella, instead of contributing meaningfully to their collective

1 Dan Lamothe and Josh Dawsey, "Trump Wanted a Big Cut in Troops in Afghanistan. New U.S. Military Plans Fall Short," *Washington Post*, Jan. 8, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/new-plans-for-afghanistan-would-have-trump-withdrawing-fewer-troops/2019/01/08/ddf2858e-12a0-11e9-a896-f104373c7ffd_story.html?utm_term=.bb2d0a11731f.

2 Pamela Constable and Sayed Salahuddin, "U.S. Commander in Afghanistan Survives Deadly Attack at Governor's Compound that Kills Top Afghan Police General," *Washington Post*, Oct. 18, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/gunfire-erupts-in-afghan-governors-compound-after-meeting-with-us-commander/2018/10/18/109fc5e0-d2ce-11e8-b2d2-f397227b43f0_story.html?utm_term=.c7984c5eca35.

3 Ryan Browne, "Fourth U.S. Service Members Dies After November IED Attack in Afghanistan," *CNN*, Dec. 3, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/12/03/politics/pentagon-afghanistan-ied-explosion-fourth-death/index.html>.

defense. American troops are currently stationed in more than three-quarters of the countries on the planet — more than 160 out of 195 — including many nations that have very significant economic and military resources.⁴ Many of my constituents ask, “Why are we there? Why aren’t they paying their fair share?”

In the eyes of many American citizens, the global financial system that the United States built increasingly seems not to be working in their favor. Again, that system is regularly exploited by free-riders, but especially — and more importantly — by bad actors like China. Outsourcing has upended longstanding job paths, and many American workers think that the financial system benefits a class of elites — a top 1 percent, or 10 percent, or 25 percent — whose interests are not those of the median worker.

America has a broken immigration system and weak border security. The inability to assimilate new immigrants in a lawful, orderly way is undermining America’s national cohesion. I am a defender of America’s immigration tradition, but it’s important to recognize that there is a higher percentage of foreign-born residents living in the United States than at almost any time in American history — about 13 percent. The high-water mark was 14.5 percent between 1890 and 1920, a period of massive economic, political, and social disruption. America needs to have a national conversation about whether it’s making it possible for millions and millions of newcomers to become a part of the single American community.

Moreover, the refusal to secure the U.S. border is a refusal to take seriously the national-security implications of a porous border. America’s adversaries around the world know that the U.S. border is penetrable. People in Washington tend to exaggerate particular threats, but the United States has plenty of adversaries that are well aware that its unsecured northern and southern borders and its shrugging approach to visa overstays are weaknesses to be exploited.

This is just a sampling, but the takeaway is plain to see: The dissatisfaction of so many millions of Americans is a result of a failure by American leaders to persuade them that the United States has a coherent, long-term foreign-policy vision that gathers all the different parts of its national-security apparatus into one clear, definable whole.

To understand how this has come about, take a look at recent history. Since the end of the Cold War and the fall of America’s last great adversary, the American people have seen their country’s

foreign policy upended in important ways every time one party takes over from the other.

When the Berlin Wall fell and the Soviet Union collapsed, it was heralded as the “end of history” — the final triumph of liberal democracy over other political and economic systems and the vindication of the American way of life.

The 1990s enjoyed the peace dividend of the Cold War: economic growth, worldwide stability, and a military drawdown. Under President George H.W. Bush, the United States waged a quick and relatively painless war to push Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait, and over the following decade America’s most significant military engagements were in places like Bosnia and Serbia — tiny, perennially dysfunctional corners of Eastern Europe. There were individual tragedies and hardships, to be sure, but overall — and against the backdrop of a bloody 20th century — this was an unbelievable decade of peace and prosperity, and many American policymakers began to talk as if (and perhaps believe that) the happiness of the post-Cold War peace dividend would last forever.

A single event ended that fantasy. On Sept. 11, 2001, America found it had a new enemy: not a great power, but pockets of fanatics associated with no state, wearing no uniform, willing to kill in the name of religion, and dedicated to the death of ordinary Americans.

Quite understandably, American foreign policy was reoriented toward this real and urgent threat. Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and, later, the Islamic State posed a unique concern to American security, and to U.S. friends and allies. Political, national-security, and intelligence-community conversations turned to the challenge of non-state actors. But, as became apparent, this reorientation was done to the exclusion of almost everything else, and it took for granted that the American people were committed to this new mission. The public broadly supported more engagement, it’s true. Unfortunately, however, that effort to combat non-state actors was never integrated into any long-term vision of America’s role in the world, or of America’s responsibilities for managing the international system as a whole. The public lost the thread, and the United States took its eye off the threat posed by rising powers like China and resurgent powers like Russia.

So now, America, as a nation, finds itself caught off guard yet again.

America has been surprised by Russia’s aggressive expansionism, not only in its own neighborhood but across Europe and the Atlantic. It is also surprised by China’s heavy hand over not only its

4 “Our Story,” Department of Defense, accessed April 23, 2019, <https://www.defense.gov/our-story/>.



Pacific neighbors but far afield — in places like Africa, where an increasing number of countries could be considered Chinese vassal states, and even in Central and South America. Who, in recent years, predicted the need for an updated Monroe Doctrine?

America has been distracted with its own political short-termism. The country stumbles from agenda to agenda, seized by candidates' and officials' short-term political interests. There isn't a shared sense of what America is doing in the long term, and why. On the whole, there are only those in power and those trying to displace those in power, and that's not enough reason for Americans to support larger outlays or send their kids into harm's way.

America has lost any sense of a shared vision of its role on the global stage. Ultimately, this is unsustainable, and the American people are right to say that the inchoate status quo is not working.

To his credit, President Donald Trump has intuited some of these problems. Because he thinks his mandate is, in part, to disrupt, he has been willing to call out the tendency of some foreign-policy experts to recycle old, tired rhetoric and ideas, and to pretend that old framings of problems are eternally valid — that the same appeals can be used in 2018 that were used in 1988. Candidate Trump sensed that a lot of Americans wanted someone to stand up to a foreign-policy establishment that, in their eyes, had grown lazy and distant.

Unfortunately, I don't think President Trump has solutions to the problems he has identified. He wants to disrupt, but toward no clear end. The suggestion that the United States should return to isolationism should prompt Americans to ask: "What has happened when we've tried isolationism in the past?" The plain answer is that it has never been good for the American people, let alone for America's allies and neighbors. "America First" is a 1920s slogan for a 1920s policy. It didn't work then, and it won't work today. The great lesson of America's interwar isolationism 100 years ago — when the United States won the "Great War" and then retreated, failing to secure the peace — is that it left the country woefully unprepared when another war broke out.

America has a better historical example to guide its path today: the period following World War II. In the 1940s, America won a war, but then decided to "win the peace" as well. Instead of retreating after victory, America set out to build a new global order designed to prevent yet another catastrophic war. It established and led institutions, such as the

United Nations, that were dedicated to securing diplomatic solutions to simmering conflicts. It established new financial institutions and trading regimes to secure the global financial order. The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade ensured a rules-based trading order that endures to this day in the form of the World Trade Organization. Most importantly, America formed security alliances such as NATO — arguably the most important and significant military alliance in two millennia — with friends who were dedicated not just to shared interests but to shared principles.

At the heart of all these efforts was the recognition that a peaceful and prosperous world would redound to the benefit of Middle America. If the United States had not created that world, no one would have created it, and all nations would have suffered — including America.

Everyone involved in American foreign policymaking needs to think again about how to persuade the American people of the value of an American-led, American-powered global order.

The Return to Great Power Competition

The contours of the era in which America now finds itself become clearer by the day. The "end of history" has come to an end.⁵

The world is returning to the great power competition that for so long defined international relations. The United States needs to prepare for another long contest of nation-versus-nation, and the only way to prepare for a contest of that kind is by persuading Americans that it's necessary. But America's leaders have not been doing that.

It is clear that Russia is on the move. President Vladimir Putin is hard at work trying to make his country great again. He and his circle of kleptocrats are looking for opportunities to reassert Russia's traditional role as the hegemon that can dictate the fate of Europe and the Far East. Over the past decade, Putin has proven himself willing to take big risks to make that happen: annexing Crimea, invading Ukraine, facilitating the Assad regime's atrocities in Syria (and committing some of Russia's own atrocities), launching cyber attacks across Europe, and of course deploying the campaign of disinformation and hacking that disrupted the 2016 elections in America — something that will surely be resurrected for the 2020 elections.

Putin is an evil man. But let's not overstate his powers. He presides over a shrinking, aging

5 See, Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

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population and a collapsing economy that is built largely around a single resource. But he is playing his bad hand very well, and he will be able to increase his winnings if the United States forgoes its role in Europe. America can no longer afford to be *reactive* to Putin's aggressions — the time has come to be *proactive*.

That said, U.S. leaders need to turn the attention of the American people to the coming long-term struggle with China. Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party leaders have created a hybrid system of communism and techno-mercantilism that brings together almost absolute state control and enormous economic power. It has been said that present-day China is what Stalin always intended to create, but was never able to manage.

China is already making increasingly expansive territorial claims. Its navy is taking control of strategically important sea lanes and trade routes, in an effort to exercise control over more than \$5 trillion of global annual trade, as well as military routes used by neighboring countries and the U.S. Navy. Beijing is making massive investments in the developing world, especially across Asia and Africa, but — as mentioned above — increasingly also in Central and South America, in an effort to crowd out American economic power.⁶ China wants to make itself the partner of choice in the developing world, especially in those parts of the world that have historically been understood as falling within America's sphere of influence.

The massive Belt and Road Initiative is not only a project to expand Chinese economic power, but a way of fracturing the sovereignty of nearby states and turning them into outposts of Chinese interests.

In the Western world, China uses its Confucius Institutes as propaganda outlets for party interests. In the United States, these institutes are present on a number of university campuses, and many academic leaders have been very naïve about the strings that are attached to them.

China has dedicated itself to being the world's go-to high-tech manufacturer by 2025, and its leader in artificial intelligence by 2030. If China can gain an edge in artificial intelligence research, as many experts believe it can, it will hold the whip hand over the next-generation tools that will be necessary for America's national economic growth, as well as for its military and national security.

China doesn't want to end up in an open competition with the United States. Its goal is rather to win the battles of the future before they reach the battlefield. China is willing to play a decades-long, maybe even century-long, game to reclaim what it sees as its historic position as the "Middle Kingdom" — that is, to make itself once again the center of the world.

Right now, most countries don't want to be on "team China." They know that it is bad for them. But many of them are telling American leaders that they can't hold out for long. They know that the future in the Pacific — as well as globally — is going to be either America-led or China-led, and they're beginning to place their bets. When the United States abandons the world stage, it strengthens China's hand.

It's worth pointing out that China is not doing this alone. It's getting a leg up from many American companies in Silicon Valley. These companies have shown a willingness to help the Chinese Communist Party perfect its security state in exchange for access to Chinese markets. This should be stated clearly: There are American companies that are tacitly undermining America's national-security community at precisely the time when public-private, digital-technology partnerships are becoming essential for America's economy, security, and politics.

It's clear that the American intelligence community is not adequately equipped to meet the challenges of the next century's great power competition.

I don't want to paint a picture of doom and gloom — and I'll explain why below — but I do think America is in a critical period, and it doesn't have a vision to guide it through the challenges that it is about to face. The United States has an adversary that is willing to move quickly, quietly, and cleverly, as well as operate on a very long timeline. China knows what it wants the world to look like in 25 and 50 years. Does America?

The answer is clear: No. The American people have not been brought into a conversation about what the world might look like, for good or for ill, in

6 Kartik Jayaram, Omid Kassiri, and Irene Yuan Sun, "The Closest Look Yet at Chinese Economic Engagement in Africa," McKinsey & Company, June 2017, <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/middle-east-and-africa/the-closest-look-yet-at-chinese-economic-engagement-in-africa>.

25 or 50 years. China has no such problem.

The last century of American engagement in the world led to an extraordinary period of peace and prosperity. America's refusal to continue to lead will threaten those achievements. A world in which America withdraws is a world in which America and its allies are in ever-present and increasing danger. Every alternative to American leadership will put U.S. interests in jeopardy, threaten U.S. security, and endanger America's freedom to live by and promote its values. A world where the United States sits on its hands is a world where China, Russia, and others will exploit its weaknesses. That will be bad for America. Eventually, hell abroad will find its way to America's shores.

The Need for Imagination

America needs a new way forward. It can't retreat, but the above-mentioned problems people sense are real and can't be ignored. U.S. policymakers can't pretend the American voters will go along with a program of vigorous engagement without being persuaded, courted, and wooed. The challenge, then, is for policymakers to be honest about American foreign-policy failures — and also to make clear the opportunities available to America, as a nation, if together it is clear-eyed.

In short, American foreign policy is suffering from a failure of imagination. The policymaking class has failed to get the American people to really imagine the *possibilities* of American leadership — or to imagine a world without it. The United States need a foreign-policy imagination that is broader, more adaptive, and more creative — an imagination suited to the digital age and to an era in which threats are more complex than they were in 1941, 1950, 1963, 1988, or 2001. America needs a foreign-policy imagination that can comprehend the new era of challenges it faces.

I'm a rookie in politics. I've only been in my office for three and a half years, and I'm one of only eight people in the Senate who has never been a politician before. So I want to suggest a few ideas, although I don't pretend that this is a sufficient menu. Nevertheless, I think these are examples of creative, concrete ways that those of us specially tasked with thinking carefully about America's role in the world might move forward, and my hope is that they will spark other ideas and further discussion.

Hybrid Warfare

In an age of hybrid warfare, more and more of America's contests will take place on servers and digital networks, rather than on traditional battlefields. This means the United States needs to rethink and reorient on multiple fronts. There is not one single place to start. Often, the debates about bureaucratic reorganization in the intelligence community (which I support) incapacitate substantive policy discussion, and prevent *any* forward progress. What the entire national-security apparatus should be able to do is take steps across different domains at the same time, rather than first figure out the exact proper sequence of every incremental change.

It's clear that the American intelligence community is not adequately equipped to meet the challenges of the next century's great power competition.

One potential step toward readiness would be to establish a Hybrid Threat Center, perhaps housed within the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (although those specifics are best left for a future bureaucratic tussle). Like the National Counterterrorism Center, the Hybrid Threat Center would bring together experts from across different domains in the intelligence community — cyber, finance, info-ops, and more — to provide policymakers with an aggregated view of how China and Russia in particular, but also North Korea and Iran, are using asymmetric tools to influence the United States and undercut U.S. interests — including in domains that typically are not seen as political. This center would not replace the work being done at China and Russia desks. Rather, it would concentrate dispersed resources in an urgent direction.

The Hybrid Threat Center would emphasize open-source analysis and technological trends like the spread of "deepfake" technology. It won't be long before hackers with relatively simple tools will be able to fabricate convincing audio or video of things that were never said or didn't happen. This is going to cause enormous chaos. It's going to destroy lives and roil financial markets — and it might well spur military conflicts. America will need the resources to assess and react urgently. It will also need people who retain some public trust, who can say with authority what is real and what isn't. Some of them will have to come from the national-security world. It will be important to think about what that entails for how these institutions operate day-to-day, amid so much political polarization.

The center would be a key intelligence resource

to help policymakers address the challenges America faces more swiftly. There are many areas right now where America is superior to China in theory but not in operational effectiveness, because America's bureaucratic and legal cultures are messy and slow.

Additionally, given that there is no widespread agreement in U.S. intelligence and national-security communities about the security and military implications of China's Belt and Road Initiative, America needs a National Intelligence Estimate that can shape that kind of consensus. During the Cold War, these estimates about the Soviet Union were hardly perfect, nor wholly immune from politicization, but they performed the crucial task of helping thoroughly inform policymaking conversations, and so they became a launch-point for meaningful debate. A National Intelligence Estimate on the Chinese initiative could be a valuable tool to spur and inform debates that have so far been avoided, or conducted largely as political point-scoring exercises.

Cyber Warfare

The Hybrid Threat Center would, of course, touch deeply on cyber security policy, but much more than that is needed. We are a quarter-century into the era of cyber war, and America has only just begun to think about what this means for its long-term strategic interests and how that will guide America's current operational and tactical posture.

Russia's exploits in the 2016 election demonstrated how vulnerable America's critical infrastructure is to attack. No one in the U.S. government was thinking about election systems as part of critical infrastructure even just a few years ago.

There are many more failures of imagination like that. America faces the prospect of modes of information warfare that it has not taken the time even to attempt to imagine. The United States needs to be able not just to parry but to go on the offense against China and other sophisticated actors who won't just be posting Facebook ads, but will use their capabilities to undermine America's defense capabilities and to (quite literally) change numbers inside U.S. financial institutions. Imagine the chaos when middle-class Americans' checkbooks stop balancing — even by just a few dollars. That kind of attack is not at all hard to imagine, but what the resulting turmoil would look like and how to

address it is not part of any public discussion.

The most recent National Defense Authorization Act established a Cyberspace Solarium Commission modeled after President Dwight Eisenhower's Solarium Commission, which brought together public- and private-sector experts to formulate defense policy for the nuclear age.⁷ America needs that kind of initiative for the cyber age, and it's my hope that the new commission will be just that.

The current administration's new National Security Presidential Memorandum 13, which replaces Presidential Policy Directive 20, delegates authority to the military and other agencies to conduct cyber operations, allowing quicker responses to cyber threats.⁸ The Cyberspace Solarium Commission will hopefully forge consensus about taking more steps like this that can empower the people doing the frontline fighting in cyberspace.

It's clear that efficient lines of communication to inform the president about cyber issues have not yet been established. This president and future presidents need to have ready, regular access to cyber intelligence. How to fix this problem ought to be part of a broader delayering inside the intelligence community as a whole — where, again, a clumsy bureaucracy limits operational effectiveness.

China is extorting intellectual property from American companies, especially in the tech sector. The U.S. Government Accountability Office should assess all collaborative technology initiatives between the United States and China to better understand what America is losing and how rapidly, and where the biggest exposures are. Lawmakers should direct the chief information security officer at the Office of Management and Budget to provide annual reports on where China is intentionally causing vulnerabilities in U.S. supply chains.

Political Warfare

For years, the United States has only reacted to a combination of cyber and information operations. That is unsustainable. America must be on defense *and* on offense. To that end, the U.S. government should make better, more robust use of organizations like the U.S. Agency for Global Media and establish some sort of political-warfare agency that can serve as a coordinating hub for American offensive activities and information

7 "H.R. 5515 – John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019," 115th Congress (2017–2018), <https://www.congress.gov/bills/115th-congress/house-bill/5515/text-toc-HEDF86C877B1B46F49F2D9039A895923D>.

8 Ellen Nakashima, "White House Authorizes 'Offensive Cyber Operations' to Deter Foreign Adversaries," *Washington Post*, Sept. 20, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-authorizes-offensive-cyber-operations-to-deter-foreign-adversaries-bolton-says/2018/09/20/b5880578-bd0b-11e8-b7d2-0773aa1e33da_story.html.

operations across the globe.

If there's anything America's adversaries hate, it's transparency. The United States should make Xi's and Putin's finances unmistakably clear to their people and to the world. It should use government agencies' social-media reach to amplify the work of non-governmental organizations and other groups and actors that expose the corruption of

If the U.S. government can apply that cultural and economic power to the challenges America faces, it can win — just as it won the industrial race and the space race against the Soviet Union.

authoritarian regimes. America has a giant bully pulpit — it should use it. The U.S. government should fast-track asylum claims by whistleblowers who expose corruption in authoritarian regimes, and it should figure out ways to reward more of that work by America's friends abroad.

The National Counterintelligence and Security Center should produce an unclassified report on China's influence and propaganda activities in the United States, especially on American campuses. And it should be publicized far and wide, so the American people know.

Alliances, Old and New

Finally, policymakers need to communicate more thoughtfully with U.S. citizens about the value of alliances. In the last couple years, there has been a lot of talk about the costs of alliances. Yes, it's true, they are expensive. But, to invoke former Defense Secretary James Mattis, the only thing more costly than having alliances is *not* having them.⁹

The United States needs to rebuild the institutions that support these alliances. When America pulled out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, it ceded economic influence to China. It should re-engage. Nobody was happier about America's retreat from that trade agreement than Beijing.

Despite some technical concerns about the BUILD Act, America should continue to find creative ways

for the U.S. public sector to encourage private-sector investment across Asia, as a counterweight to China's Belt and Road Initiative.

America needs to rethink its Pacific engagement in terms of multilateral institutional relationships, rather than the default hub-and-spoke configuration. China and Russia are flexing their muscles in the Pacific and the United States needs something more like a "NATO for Asia" that could turn America's bilateral alliances into multi-party partnerships.

The bottom line is that many of the institutions America helped to create or has used to safeguard its interests abroad, such as the U.N. Security Council, have grown sclerotic. That's undeniable. But the solution is not to scrap institutional solutions altogether. The conversation that ought to take place is about what kinds of new institutions can be built in the present circumstances to serve America's long-term goals. The word "reset" has become a bad word, but America does, in fact, need a sort of institutional "reset," because right now many Americans think the choice is between retreating or clinging to every existing institution with a death grip. That's a false choice. If they're smart, America's leaders ought to do three things at the same time, and as part of one coherent strategy: stop investing in any institutions that are obsolete or counterproductive, revamp institutions that are useful but need an update, and create new institutions where they are needed. It's not necessary to embrace the idea that the only two choices are a reflexive defense of every jot and tittle of the current order, or global retreat.

These are just a handful of possibilities. None of them is a silver bullet. Many of them would likely require serious tweaking, and some of them may sound good in theory but would prove impractical. That's okay. What the country needs is more debate about new institutions that can support global engagement. It needs to start imagining new ways of seeing and organizing the world that are conducive to advancing U.S. interests.

America: Imagination as a Resource

I have spilled a lot of ink pointing out the failures of imagination in the U.S. foreign-policy establishment — how it has grown beholden to stale approaches and has defended confusion and incoherence and therefore ended up unprepared. It has not done anything to build a consensus about

⁹ "Remarks by Secretary Mattis on the National Defense Strategy," U.S. Department of Defense, Jan. 19, 2018, <https://dod.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1420042/remarks-by-secretary-mattis-on-the-national-defense-strategy/>.



America's role in the world over the next 25, 50, and 100 years.


Nonetheless, I am very confident in the American imagination, because it's an inexhaustible resource.

In very practical, down-to-earth ways, America has unquestionably the greatest entrepreneurs, innovators, and creative thinkers on the earth. People who grow up in America grow up in an environment where they're supposed to challenge the received wisdom — where they're supposed to build the new mousetrap, the revolutionary app. People across the world — the 96 percent of the world that doesn't live in the United States — know that if you're an entrepreneurial, innovative thinker, America is the place to be. If the U.S. government can apply that cultural and economic power to the challenges America faces, it can win — just as it won the industrial race and the space race against the Soviet Union.

But the American imagination is extraordinary in another way. America is the only modern nation founded on the idea that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with inalienable rights. The country hasn't always lived up to that belief, but over 230 years it has managed to steward it pretty well. And in the process, it has helped millions upon millions of people around the world realize that they don't have to live under the thumb of tyrants. Continually striving to meet U.S. commitments to liberty and justice under changing circumstances has been a source of promise to the world. That's still true today. That is why people suffering under repression still look to the United States as a beacon — and not to Russia or China. It isn't a coincidence that just before the tanks rolled in, that group of students in Tiananmen Square in 1989 had built their own Statue of Liberty in the middle of the square. They didn't do that because they wanted to go to Silicon Valley to build a new company. They did that because they knew that American principles hold not just for 320 million Americans, but for every person across the globe.

There are important debates to be had about where American foreign policy ought to be situated along the idealist/realist continuum, but when the rubber meets the road, the single greatest asset for deploying a realist foreign policy continues to be the idealist commitment America has to universal human dignity. The American moral imagination elevates every human being.

When America chooses to lead, peace, prosperity, liberty, and dignity follow — maybe not immediately, and maybe not easily, but eventually. But U.S. leadership is not an inherent law of the world. U.S. leadership isn't guaranteed by fate or destiny.

We the people — Americans at every level — are tasked with renewing that leadership in each generation. And so, the questions Americans should be wrestling with today are: Will we hand the reins to someone else? Will we retreat? Or will we do the hard work of re-envisioning American leadership for the 21st century and beyond? 

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