



MARSHALL PAPERS

Renewing the American Regime

U.S.–China Competition beyond Ukraine

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THE ISSUE

EDITORS' NOTE

Edited by Jude Blanchette of CSIS and Hal Brands of SAIS, the Marshall Papers is a series of essays that probes and challenges the assessments underpinning the U.S. approach to great power rivalry. The Papers will be rigorous yet provocative, continually pushing the boundaries of intellectual and policy debates. In this Marshall Paper, Ashley Tellis looks at the broad sweep of America's grand strategy in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and argues that policymakers must remain committed to preserving U.S. hegemony in order to "shape evolving trends to its advantage."

The Russian invasion of Ukraine represents a painful blow to the international order. That a major power is seeking to change through the naked use of force what is a settled border guaranteed by previous interstate agreements and eviscerate an independent country threatens a return to the disorder that marked European history for centuries. It also represents a blatant challenge to the "liberal international order" that the United States has constructed since the end of World War II. This order represents an American regime insofar as it is grounded on Washington's power, upon which the larger set of global rules, institutions, and patterned interactions survive. That power, in turn, is produced by an American regime at home: built upon strong individual rights, liberal democratic institutions, a sense of community, and free markets, the United States has furnished an example of how freedom and prosperity can be intimately intertwined to produce the material

capabilities that are necessary to maintain a global order, which even as it serves American interests produces more benefits for others than any conceivable alternative. The external and internal faces of the American regime are, accordingly, mutually reinforcing.

The energetic U.S.-led pushback against Vladimir Putin's aggression in Ukraine is therefore essential both to protect the ordering superstructure that safeguards American security and to defend myriad concrete interests: assisting Ukraine's defense represents a direct investment in protecting Europe—a core interest of the United States—especially when Putin's ambitions to retrieve the lost Soviet empire portend further threats to U.S. allies. Simultaneously, it also signals Washington's resolution to protect other critical interests in the face of the growing Chinese threats in Asia. These include the dangers posed to Taiwan—a state which, like Ukraine, is also viewed as having a problematic entitative status by its assailants—as well as to other U.S. allies and partners in the wider Indo-Pacific region. By thus protecting Europe and the Asian

Rimland, the United States defends itself at a distance and thereby enables its own domestic regime to thrive within a secure geographic sanctuary.

All the same, the threats to the United States are legion. That they emerge concurrently from declining powers such as Russia and rising powers such as China confirms the expectation that, even when physical dangers are not at issue, U.S. hegemony is, and will be, threatened by multiple challenges. These encompass the perils posed by aggressive or reckless states, America's relative decline in the face of diffusing power internationally, the spread of new technologies (including those that embody either new coercive potential or the promise of driving new economic revolutions within U.S. competitors), and the attacks on liberal ideas as ordering principles in national and international politics.

Faced with these challenges, the United States cannot jettison its hegemonic role because doing so would deny it the freedom to shape evolving trends to its advantage. Nor can it settle for a strategy of selective disinterest because to do so would create opportunities for America's rivals to exploit any abandonment of particular regions, institutions, or issue areas to Washington's detriment. Consequently, the United States must reinvest in protecting its hegemony: it should strive to remain the largest single concentration of material power in the international system; it should protect its position as the most fecund center of technological innovation worldwide; it should retain the globe-girding military capabilities that underwrite its command of the commons and mark its superiority over its rivals; it should preserve its ideational and exemplary attractiveness because of their intrinsic merits, because they facilitate the production of material power, and because they enhance American influence abroad; and it should pursue a prudent strategic course that avoids squandering blood and treasure on causes that are peripheral to the maintenance of its power and influence and not overly injurious to the health of the international system.

At a time when U.S.-China competition is certain to dominate international politics for at least the next few decades, sustaining American hegemony promises to be the most effective strategy for coming out ahead in comparison to all the other alternatives, such as retreating to isolationism, fostering multipolarity, or hoping for the emergence of collective security arrangements. It also offers the best hope of limiting the dangers posed by the bipolarity that could emerge as a result of China's rise.

Nonetheless, it might seem odd that the preservation of American hegemony is defended here as a viable goal despite the larger realities of the country's relative decline. After all, the U.S. share of the global economy has nearly halved since 1960 and today subsists at roughly a quarter of the world's product in nominal terms. Although there is nothing in economic theory that suggests that the United States is perpetually locked into this fraction—after all, U.S. relative decline has in fact been slow, uneven, and caused mainly by developing countries growing faster (because they are much farther away from the global production-possibility frontier than the United States)—the goal of protecting American hegemony is nonetheless tenable despite its smaller share of the global product.

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Although the annual output of the United States undeniably constitutes the foundations of its influence in the international system, the sources of its power extend beyond its economic capabilities. They include its unique geopolitical assets (such as alliances that add to U.S. capabilities while often freeing Washington to apply its own resources toward advancing its own particular interests); striking institutional dominance (which reflects a form of "structural power" that often and silently "decides outcomes—both positive and negative—much more than relational power does"); remarkable ideational attractiveness (which, as expressed through its political values, national culture, and global engagement, still remains extraordinarily appealing, despite recent battering); and, finally, unparalleled military capabilities (that permit the United States to enforce its will when necessary over the entire globe in a manner that no other

state currently can).¹ For all its relative decline, an outcome that has actually been fostered significantly by the success of the American regime abroad, the United States alone possesses—to use a Chinese term of art—“comprehensive national power.” When power is thus assessed in its multidimensionality, no other rival yet comes close, thus permitting the United States to viably maintain its hegemony *should it so choose*.

The character of American hegemony only makes this goal plausible. American hegemony, at least in the first instance, does not require Washington to enforce its control over the sovereignty of other states but rather to preserve an international order that fundamentally serves its core interests. This burden entails three different but complementary tasks.

First, it involves preserving liberal democracy at home and abroad and promoting it as a universal ideal both because of its intrinsic value and because the expansion of the liberal democratic universe—with all its myriad associated regional and functional international institutions—protects American security and prosperity better than other alternative political orderings. This ambition is best advanced by exemplary conduct at home, though it must be supplemented by political engagement abroad. Whatever the means employed, the costs of supporting the entrenchment and the spread of liberal democracy and its associated institutions are modest and should rarely, if ever, require the use of deadly force.

Second, it involves upholding the open international economic order because ever-freer trade between states, when complemented by free and efficient markets at home, remains the best means of increasing universal (including American) prosperity. The United States has made unique contributions to creating such a global system in the postwar era. Continuing to sustain this order, again, requires primarily political engagement, which is not particularly costly in any pecuniary sense. To the degree that meaningful costs are entailed, these arise mainly in the distribution of relative gains between the United States and its trading partners, and Washington should not be shy about demanding greater reciprocity in its trade agreements, including by regulating access to its large and wealthy market as a means of securing enhanced market access in other countries. Negotiating these arrangements, however, does not impose any significant burdens on the U.S. Treasury, and because the United States is still largely a self-sufficient economy, the country can even bear significant trade losses, when necessary, with greater

equanimity compared to other countries.

Third, and finally, it involves protecting the physical security of the United States and its many allies and partners around the world through a variety of instruments, not least of which is the military. This is the costliest of the three tasks, yet it remains the foundation on which the previous two responsibilities are discharged. Although fielding the military capabilities required to defend American interests—which also includes upholding the rules and institutions pertaining to international behavior—is expensive in absolute terms, the specific costs of defense and foreign policy lie well within the capacity of the American economy. The unnecessary frittering away of national resources on elective “wars of choice,” however, contributes more toward provoking domestic (and international) opposition to the American regime abroad than the responsible exercise of hegemony itself.²

All told then, the United States must preserve its hegemony in the international system—meaning its leadership of the liberal order that flows from its unique concatenation of national and international power—simply because this positional ordering and the activities associated with sustaining this ordering best preserve its security, prosperity, and interests while also protecting its allies and friends worldwide. Because it is also affordable, the case for holding on to hegemony, rightly exercised, is all the more compelling.

The liberal international order created by American hegemony, undoubtedly, has universal aspirations. These hopes find reflection in the many international institutions that even non-liberal states find useful to participate in, even when they do not share the fundamental values animating these bodies. Despite such successes, the liberal international order, when conceived of as a Kantian “pacific union” of democratic states, is not yet (and may never become) a political macrocosm that is coterminous with the world itself. Consequently, it will remain under threat from without and, as recent Western experiences have illustrated, possibly also from within. The United States, accordingly, has to strengthen both the liberal foundations of its own polity, thus protecting the American regime at home, even as its partners work toward strengthening liberal democracy within their own countries. Simultaneously, the United States must reinvest—albeit in concert with its allies and friends—in indurating its own hegemony abroad because only American power can protect the existing liberal international order—the face of the American regime outside its borders—in exceptional ways.

In the near term, the most significant threat to this order is posed by China's ascendancy. This danger is far more consequential than even Russia's invasion of Ukraine because it triply targets the universalist claims of liberal democracy, often exploits unfairly the opportunities afforded by the open trading system, and threatens the security of key American partners directly in the Indo-Pacific and, more indirectly, in Europe. Even more to the point, these dangers arise fundamentally from Beijing's superior power and its still growing strength. While the United States must, therefore, defeat the Russian invasion of Ukraine in order to preserve good order both locally and internationally, it must concurrently gird its loins to meet the dangers posed by China, which will persist for many decades.

This essay explores what responding to the Chinese challenge entails in terms of the imperatives, opportunities, and risks facing the United States. Consistent with Andrew Marshall's injunction to avoid the obvious and the immediate, the discussion that follows embeds the challenge of U.S.-China competition in a larger set of structural issues that must be engaged for success before turning to the more practical current problems that are associated with this rivalry. A discussion of these structural problems cannot be avoided because, although they seem far from the current war in Ukraine, they bear on the fundamental strategic challenges facing the United States, problems that have not been erased by Russia's wanton aggression in any consequential ways.

PROTECTING THE AMERICAN REGIME ABROAD

Preserving American hegemony entails preserving the liberal international order. The relationship between the two is dialectical. Without a powerful United States, the open international order cannot survive. Not only is no other nation capable or committed enough to substitute for the United States in preserving the liberal regime globally, but that order (despite its limitations) also cannot be maintained merely because other states also have a vested interest in its endurance.³ Although many states benefit from the liberal international order, the costs of preserving that order often exceed the gains accruing to any given state, thereby ensuring that weaker countries will not contribute enough to preserving the system that they most profit from—thus ensuring its enervation and eventually its demise.

Only an enormously well-endowed state, what Mancur Olson famously called in another context a “privileged” provider, can bear these “uncovered” costs of system

maintenance, and the United States has done so since the end of World War II because a liberal international order is fundamentally in American self-interest.⁴ A flourishing liberal order, fundamentally grounded in a Kantian “respect for persons,” diminishes the threats that could arise against the United States; it spawns allies whose interests are served by bandwagoning with a powerful protector (while concurrently providing national contributions) against those perils that may threaten the liberal coalition (as the Soviet Union once did during the Cold War); and it creates opportunities for increasing prosperity both within the United States and among its liberal partners insofar as it expands the opportunities for deeper specialization that arises from free trade. For all these reasons, the open international order contributes toward enhancing American security and affluence, and to the degree that it cements a coalition of capable and reliable partners who share both interests and values, it also congeals American hegemony and bolsters its capacity to deal with diverse threats.

Upholding the liberal order to protect U.S. interests, however, requires consistent attention by Washington because hegemonic stability is not automatically self-sustaining. It requires investments and attention on the part of the hegemon if the outcomes of peace and stability are to obtain. Equally, it requires statesmanship, that is, the virtue of possessing a “comprehensive or ‘architectonic’ perspective” so that the wisest course of action, invariably rooted in moderation, may be discerned in order to keep “an oft-times rattled humanity from seeking, sometimes with the encouragement of very great thinkers, the (false) comfort of various extremes.”⁵ Therefore, protecting the liberal order—and even more so the quest to enlarge it—perpetually requires prudent statecraft that is sensitive to the costs and benefits of various political choices when considered against the widest “stream of contingencies.”⁶

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Unfortunately, the last two decades have not witnessed this kind of statesmanship consistently, and as a result, American hegemony has faltered at great cost both to the United States and to the credibility of its international order. The arrival of the unipolar moment after the end of

the Cold War should have been a golden opportunity for the consolidation of American global hegemony. And in the 1990s, it seemed as if this objective might have been within reach because U.S. power seemed unrivaled and its international stature unchallenged.

All that slowly changed after the new millennium began. The hopes for a liberal democratic Russia gradually dissolved amid the rise of a revanchist Putin regime. Believing that “the demise of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century,” Putin set out to retrieve whatever remnants of the erstwhile Soviet empire he could through a combination of “gray-zone” aggression or simple usurpation.⁷

At about the same time, China emerged on the international scene as a new great power. Thanks to its deep integration within the global trading system—while resolutely remaining a model of state capitalism—China gradually became “the new workshop of the world” and used its growing economic power to steadily build a formidable military machine.⁸ The advent of Xi Jinping energized the ambition of restoring China’s historical greatness, which engendered the goal of transforming Beijing’s military capabilities into “world-class forces” by mid-century.⁹ As part of this “rejuvenation,” Xi—although more subtly than Putin—also began to implement a new assertive foreign policy that included renewed confrontations with China’s neighbors, increased territorial aggrandizement, and bold demands for a “new type of great-power relationship” that entailed Washington’s recognition of China’s parity with the United States.¹⁰

The United States failed to mount an adequate response to these challenges. Although the George W. Bush administration had perceived China’s emergence as a great-power rival clearly, it was misled by Putin and, worse, was distracted by the militarized global war on terror that ensued after the 9/11 attacks on the United States. The two-decade-long campaign in Afghanistan that followed ultimately failed because Washington pursued a flawed, and visibly self-defeating, strategy. But even this setback paled in comparison to the financial, human, and reputational losses ensuing from the U.S. invasion of Iraq, which arguably will be judged by history not merely as a colossal political misjudgment but also as an utterly expensive and unnecessary one. It cast a shadow over Bush’s other achievements and, more corrosively, sapped the nation’s appetite for undertaking those hegemonic responsibilities that might legitimately require the use of force. It also fueled the calls for “restraint” that now mark the unholy marriage

of the American right and the American left on the core question of grand strategy, namely, how should the United States conduct itself in the world?¹¹

The pressures for retrenchment were exacerbated by the global financial crisis that originated in the United States and consumed Barack Obama’s first term in office. Disenchanted with Bush’s wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and facing a severe economic crisis, Obama sought to exit both conflicts in order to “reinvest at home.”¹² He also sought to negotiate with adversaries (even if it meant alienating friends) while seeking to minimize any external activism that would require the use of force. Accordingly, he risked discrediting U.S. hegemonic stability when he reneged on his threat to bomb Syria after Bashar al-Assad had crossed his own “redline” against using chemical weapons, when he settled on a “too slow and too incremental” response to Russia’s annexation of Crimea, and when he failed to confront Beijing’s militarization of the South China Sea.¹³ On all these counts, Obama’s reluctance was largely shaped by the apparent economic and political constraints facing the United States, but it did not reflect a desire to simply abjure either traditional U.S. internationalism or U.S. global leadership.

His successor, Donald Trump, however, seemed to have little interest in either. Radically departing from Washington’s postwar commitment to uphold the American regime, Trump declared his fealty to protecting U.S. interests narrowly conceived and nothing beyond. On the strength of a populist nationalism at home, Trump promised to safeguard American security but was opposed to the burdens of defending its allies; he sought increased prosperity but despised the multilateral trading system as the means to that end; and he had little time for defending liberal values either at home or abroad. Although Trump did the nation and the international system a favor by calling China out as a strategic competitor—which his predecessors had studiously avoided—his presidency marked the most serious crisis facing the American regime not just because he reneged on diverse U.S. international commitments but because he disavowed these obligations as a matter of principle even as he was busy destroying American democracy at home.

The suspicion that the United States might be losing its liberal credentials thus intensified, but from the perspective of the international system, the fear that it might be tiring—and might actually be incapable—of bearing the burdens of global leadership further solidified. That American democracy survived despite Trump’s bruising is ultimately a testament to the resilience of its

political mores. And that the United States continued to maintain the international order in the face of Trump's disinterest, if not animosity, is partly a function of path dependency and equally a tribute to some of his officials who fought rearguard actions internally to prevent a comprehensive retrenchment that would have destroyed it irreparably. Without these guardrails, the consequences of his convulsive term in office might have been even greater. His successor, Joe Biden, promises a return to traditional American internationalism and hegemonic leadership, but it will require many years of success to prove that the United States has the capacity and will to discharge these responsibilities.

The last two decades have thus been marked by dramatic oscillations in regard to American efforts at protecting the liberal international order. From the high point of Bush's energetic, though sometimes misdirected, and often costly activism, the pendulum has progressively swung since in the opposite direction, with Trump's term representing the nadir as far as the acceptance of hegemonic responsibilities is concerned. For all the pressures to retreat, however, it is not obvious that the United States will enhance its security, increase its prosperity, or strengthen the international order against its adversaries by pursuing such a course. One close reading of the larger postwar historical record in fact notes that although retrenchment has been a regular antidote to U.S. foreign policy excesses, only the "maximalist" exercise of U.S. leadership has "kept American adversaries permanently under pressure and on the defensive, limited their influence, challenged their legitimacy, and tipped the balance of power in the right direction."¹⁴

None of this implies that the United States should behave like a bull in a china shop, but a committed and judicious hegemony that applies American power appropriately to a prioritized set of critical objectives promises greater benefits for American interests than a restraint that assumes that the international system will provide gains for the United States equally well without Washington's consistent management. The onset of real multipolarity will not make things any better because the threat of constantly revolving coalitions only increases the likelihood of buck passing, and collective security arrangements that are not underwritten by a single hegemonic power or by a small group of powerful states that share both interests and values are simply likely to be stillborn. Only a concerted effort to protect American hegemony can in fact ward off the emergent arrival of bipolarity, but even if that is not possible, the investments

made toward that end remain the best guarantee that the bipolarity arising with China's arrival as a superpower will not fundamentally undermine the American international regime in ways that threaten the interests of the United States and its partners.

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PROTECTING THE AMERICAN REGIME AT HOME

If preserving the liberal international order requires American hegemony for its success and vice versa, protecting American hegemony requires attention equally to matters at home. The relationship between the successful exercise of hegemony abroad and the condition of America's domestic polity is not anchored merely in exemplary considerations. It is widely appreciated that a vibrant American democracy validates U.S. credentials when promoting liberal values abroad; it serves as an important instrument of American soft power; and it functions as proof that countries do not need authoritarian regimes in order to nurture economic success.

But the success of the American democratic experiment—the internal face of the American regime—is equally essential for more substantive reasons. If there is anything that the Trump years taught the international community about the United States, it is that all claims about the American commitment to sustain its hegemonic responsibilities will always be suspect if they are not corroborated by evidence that the populace supports this role. Even today, Biden's assurances that "America is back," though welcomed by U.S. allies, are still met with skepticism because of the uncertainties surrounding their strength and durability.¹⁵ After all, as long as there remains a non-trivial possibility that Trump might return to office as quickly as two years from now, and the striking

divisions in American politics exist plainly for all to see, the fears that domestic developments will undermine Washington's capacity to play its traditional hegemonic role corrosively threaten confidence in the stability of the American regime abroad.

Preserving the success of the liberal international order, therefore, requires attending to the health of American domestic politics along three dimensions: overcoming the extant polarization; addressing slowing domestic social mobility; and reimagining the American experiment as a pursuit of the common good. These tasks are enormous and involve fundamental transformations that transcend the life of any single administration. Moreover, they are not easily susceptible to quick success through discrete policies. Yet engaging them is essential, if the United States is to avoid the danger of losing its hegemony, not because of weakening capabilities but because its domestic preferences about protecting the American regime abroad may have changed.

Overcoming the polarization that currently ails American democracy is a fearsome challenge for a polity that is marked by “a deep divide between two dominant visions for the country, one progressive and the other conservative.”¹⁶ No easy exits appear in sight, but the element that matters importantly for the U.S. ability to uphold the hegemonic order concerns the breakdown in the domestic coalitions that traditionally supported an activist U.S. international role. While American internationalists can be counted on to support the exercise of U.S. hegemonic responsibilities (even if there are differences on specific policies), the critical swing constituency remain the nationalists (if truly diehard isolationists are excluded). In general, the nationalists are willing to make great sacrifices to directly protect U.S. security but are less persuaded of the need to uphold the American world order as a means to that end. Partly because the benefits of that order have never been as transparently clear as its costs, partly because many citizens have lost out economically as a result of the globalization engendered by American hegemony, and partly because key electorally important constituencies find themselves culturally alienated from their internationalist peers, reenlisting the broad support of the citizenry for Washington's exercise of hegemony remains a critical element of maintaining the American regime abroad.¹⁷ Overcoming the current fragmentation (and sometimes alienation) is equally critical to protect liberal democracy at home.

This task was simpler when the Soviet Union threatened the United States and its diverse allies directly with military

instruments. The threats posed by China are often more subtle and the issues that dominate the competition with the United States will frequently be more rarified, which makes the task of mobilizing a strong, resilient, and unified domestic base of support more challenging but nonetheless just as critical as it was during the Cold War. At a time when the temptation for many Americans to support isolationism is real—because the domestic problems are not insignificant—doubling down on the effort to persuade them that American security is intimately linked not merely to the absence of direct threats but rather to the viability of its primacy itself is both necessary and urgent.¹⁸ Because of the failures of the last two decades, this task will be challenging, but it can be achieved. In part, this is because the burdens of exercising American hegemony routinely are actually quite modest and largely involve sunk costs. Moreover, the body politic at large is usually content to defer to elites on the broad direction of national strategy, and as long as the chosen course does not precipitate costly and unsuccessful wars, whose aims are hard to discern when matched against popular understandings of the national interest, American citizens are content to support (or at least are not opposed to) the international leadership that is exercised on their behalf.¹⁹

All the same, making the case for the benefits of continued American hegemony remains an important responsibility for holders of public office. Despite the deep divides on many issues of national politics, it is possible to construct a minimal bipartisan consensus on the importance of preserving U.S. leadership, especially when the dangers that appear far away today could quickly come home to threaten the United States if not confronted. Communicating this reality obviously requires statesmanship, deliberation, and thoughtful communication, and both the executive and legislative branches have important roles to play in this regard. Because it is likely, as past history suggests, that problems not averted often precipitate national overreactions that prove far more costly in retrospect, it is necessary to persuade the polity that steady U.S. global leadership is a much more responsible and economical way of protecting its interests. To the degree that material deprivation contributes toward the alienation of some citizens, amelioration by concerted state intervention also becomes indispensable to remedy the immiseration and thereby bolster support for broader U.S. international engagement.

Because competitive international politics is an elite rather than a mass interest, it may appear as if working to buttress the domestic foundations of support for U.S. hegemony is not

particularly important. After all, Trump was able to pursue contradictory policies—disrupting the international order while cozying up to Russia and China before he eventually confronted the latter—with nary a peep from his populist base. The danger, however, is less that a mass upsurge will force changes in U.S. external obligations from below. Rather, an unpersuaded populace could easily validate a future decision by an idiosyncratic president or an irresponsible legislature to walk away from protecting the American regime abroad at great long-term cost to the nation. Strengthening the domestic consensus to overcome polarization on at least this count offers the hope that the United States will be able to consistently protect the liberal international order that serves its interests—while conveying that resolve credibly to friends, adversaries, and bystanders alike. If the country can at the same time stay reliably liberal and democratic as well, these commitments will only enjoy greater confidence.

The aim of securing broad domestic support for a grand strategy centered on preserving the American regime abroad will not succeed if that order does not provide sufficient material benefits for the populace, especially to those constituencies whose political support is necessary to uphold it. The open international economic system engendered by U.S. power fostered a productive wave of globalization that increased aggregate U.S. growth as well as the growth of many other countries, including U.S. competitors such as China. What globalization failed to do, however, was to ensure equitable growth within national boundaries—as indeed it naturally cannot. That responsibility falls upon national governments. The United States is particularly susceptible on this count because it lacks the strong social safety nets found within its G7 partners and because its culture of “social Spencerism” often prevents the state from undertaking extensive corrective economic remediation.²⁰

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Despite these limitations, the United States has avoided acute societal instability in part because of the remarkable absence of social envy despite sharp economic inequalities, which are among the highest in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) network. The elevated levels of economic freedom in the United States have in fact ensured that the popular “attitudes towards the rich are . . . more positive.”²¹ In other words, even poorer Americans, far from despising the wealthy, actually seek to emulate their achievements. This outlook is grounded in the conviction that wealth is invariably a reward for hard work and that social mobility awaits those who make the necessary effort.

The evidence, however, refutes this mythology. The United States actually offers less social mobility than many of its European peers, Australia, and Japan, subsisting below the OECD average.²² In the United States, as in other peers with restricted mobility, the quality of one’s parents’ education, their socio-economic status, and in general one’s economic endowments at birth still seems to bear heavily on the reproduction of inequality and stunted mobility. This means that many poorer Americans are unlikely to enjoy as much social mobility as the American dream implies because their parents’ lower earnings and lower education often combine with constrained occupational status and sometimes substandard health to prevent them from climbing the social ladder as their wealthier peers, who profit from the increased embeddedness of the United States in the globalized world, can more easily do.

Because spreading economic opportunity more widely remains a necessary—even if not a sufficient—instrument for securing mass support for a policy of hegemonic leadership, U.S. internationalists must first pursue sensible macroeconomic policies at home. As part of this endeavor, Washington must focus on investing more in human capital, increasing retraining and employment mobility, rectifying the tax system, and providing expanded and more efficient public services. Absent such investments, the incentives for ordinary Americans to consistently support a grand strategy centered on the maintenance of U.S. primacy will be weak or precarious. To its credit, the Biden administration has begun to move in this direction, but its work here is far from complete.

Finally, renewing the American regime at home by recentering its political life on the pursuit of the common good is long overdue for both instrumental and substantive reasons. The challenges here cannot be overstated. The

Founding Fathers created a constitutional system that was competitive by design and characterized by divided government, which served as a perpetual “invitation to struggle for the privilege of directing . . . policy.”²³ The domestic economy was similarly structured as a competitive system where utility- and profit-maximizing entities jostled in the marketplace and thereby helped to create the most productive system witnessed in history. For all of its failures regarding equitable distribution and the production of collective goods, the free market system has provided an effective solution to scarcity because the impersonal bargains struck among numerous interacting agents generate effective cooperation out of competitive maximizing behaviors.

The political marketplace, in contrast, appears to be dreadfully battered because the rise of absolutist “winner take all” politics in recent years has undermined the fundamental necessity of deliberation and compromise while corroding the overarching idea of community that is essential to limit and regulate what otherwise becomes destructive rivalry. The reasons for this turn of events are multitudinous: the capture of the primary system by ideologues, the diminishing ideational diversity within political parties, the vehemently adversarial competition between Democrats and Republicans, the corrupting role of money in electoral competition, the paralyzing effects of divided government, and the rise of a highly partisan and combative media—not to mention technological innovations that permit the rapid dissemination and amplification of falsehoods—have all been identified as reasons for the growing crisis of governability.²⁴ Compounding these factors is a more dangerous trend toward reimagining the meaning of citizenship itself away from the sworn commitment to the Constitution and its obligations to something grounded more on a racial or cultural inheritance.

Altogether, these forces have bolstered a politics where the ambitions of a part have overwhelmed the good of the whole. The relentless competition between different social constituencies, as reflected in contemporary party politics, is no longer anchored in a desire to promote “the happiness or flourishing of the community, the well-ordered life in the *polis*” but merely the private benefits accruing to certain constituencies.²⁵ As a result, when neither party enjoys complete dominance over the legislative and executive branches, it is difficult to pass any legislation that advances the national interest. And if one party comes to possess such dominance episodically, the legitimacy of the laws enacted

during that time is continually challenged to the detriment of the country as a whole. The collapse of bipartisanship, which can only survive if there is a commitment to the common good, thus does not augur well for the coming competition with China.

The solution to this challenge at the simplest level requires the American polity to rediscover the meaning of those “three fateful words: We the people.” But as Willian Galston has argued correctly, internalizing this vision presumes that “the people who form it [this community] must want to live together as a unity, and they must think of themselves as sharing a common fate.”²⁶ If this quest is not to end in a voluntarist or psychological morass, perhaps the only way forward is to consider structural changes that would allow citizens to convey their preferences more accurately and to increase the possibilities of compromise. Toward these ends, institutional reforms that could help a rediscovery of the common good might include the use of ranked-choice voting; the prevention of gerrymandering to create more competitive election districts; changes to the structure of primary elections; election finance reform to minimize reliance on opaque soft money provided by special interests; and better intraparty processes for choosing presidential nominees.²⁷ None of these solutions guarantees that the United States will recover its founding vision of building a united political community, but absent such structural changes, the quest for the common good will perpetually remain elusive.

It is tempting to dismiss such concerns on the ground that issues of foreign policy and national defense invariably summon cooperation across the aisle and across different branches of government. But such successes are insufficient. The ongoing rivalry with China will be a long and extended contestation that plays out not over years but decades. Unlike the Soviet Union, China promises to emerge as a genuine peer competitor with broad economic, technological, and military strengths rivaling that of the United States. This Sino-American face-off, accordingly, will not involve merely competitive decisions pertaining to foreign policy and national defense but rather the entire gamut of societal and state power. In such circumstances, it will be poor consolation if the cross-party solidarity that might be manifested currently on strategic issues does not extend to strengthening the American polity as a whole: making the right social, economic, and political decisions that enable the entire citizenry—and not just some faction—to realize its highest potential—the common good—and thereby contribute toward generating the

requisite levels of national power that permit Washington to comfortably maintain the American regime at home and abroad despite the myriad emerging challenges.

It will be poor consolation if the cross-party solidarity that might be manifested currently on strategic issues does not extend to strengthening the American polity as a whole.

PREPARING FOR U.S.-CHINA COMPETITION TODAY

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is a painful reminder that the use of force is well and alive in international politics. Yet because China, unlike Russia, is certain to emerge as a much more dangerous rival than the Soviet Union ever was, the United States has to prepare for this competition by preserving the advantages it currently enjoys—the management of an international system that reflects its interests, the possession of a highly productive economy, its preeminence in innovation and technology, and its formidable military forces—while correcting those weaknesses that are visible both at home and abroad. There are three activities that are especially relevant in this regard.

MOBILIZING COALITIONS TO MEET THE CHINESE CHALLENGE

While the United States has had a remarkably good record of managing hegemony in comparison to previous great powers, the doubts that have arisen in recent years about its capacity and commitment to responsible global leadership need to be allayed. For starters, this requires recognizing that global leadership means leading not just on issues that matter narrowly to Washington, which understandably will receive priority, but on all major concerns that affect the larger international community as a whole. Taking the lead to solve global collective action problems, such as climate change, the threat of pandemics, the organization of global trade, and the protection of the commons, permits the United States to address problems that matter to its own security and prosperity while simultaneously building a variety of coalitions that will also matter on the narrower issues of U.S.-China competition.

Beyond collective action problems, the demands of global leadership do not imply that all parts of the world require

equal or coordinate importance. In fact, prioritizing where the United States allocates resources toward solving the problems of high politics will be essential for success in an environment where both material capabilities and leadership attention are obviously limited in comparison to the demand for them. Moreover, the choice of instruments is equally pertinent: military forces are the most precious resources that must be husbanded for dealing with threats that cannot be neutralized by other means. Utilizing diplomacy, international institutions, and economic instruments are invariably to be preferred whenever possible over the employment of force—and especially in parts of the world where the United States has only secondary interests.²⁸

When American interests are assessed across the globe, there are three areas of critical priority: the American homeland and the wider Western Hemisphere, the Indo-Pacific region, and the European continent are intrinsically valuable to the United States; the Middle East is extrinsically valuable and U.S. interests there consist mainly of preventing competitors from controlling the energy reserves and subverting the stability and security of the regional states. Again, even in these vital theaters, diplomacy must be the instrument of first resort, albeit backed up by effective military capabilities. While the United States will remain engaged in other parts of the world, they do not justify any extraordinary expenditure of U.S. resources, though Washington should, and will, work with other allies to address challenges as they arise in these regions.

Where U.S.-China competition is concerned, the obligations of global leadership translate into two specific and challenging projects: encouraging greater European responsibility for their own defense while integrating their support toward addressing the China challenge; and sustaining a capable coalition of Asian states to effectively balance against Beijing. Recognizing that globalization—however, weakened since the global financial crisis—is not disappearing and will not disappear short of systemic war because the forces of international capitalism cannot be constrained except by serious great-power conflict implies that China will remain enmeshed in dense economic ties both with the United States and with its allies in Europe and Asia (and with many other countries worldwide). Despite that fact, Washington has to mobilize coalitions of partners that are capable and willing to resist Chinese assertiveness and confront it with military instruments if that proves to be necessary.²⁹

The United States already has a network of allies that constitutes the nucleus of such a response. But this network is neither mature nor flexible enough to respond to the possible challenges posed by China. Of all the alliance agreements that the United States has entered into during the postwar period, only the Rio Treaty and the North Atlantic Treaty (which established the North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO]) are collective defense agreements: they commit all members to come to the defense of each other if one of them is attacked. The other agreements, such as bilateral treaties with Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Southeast Asia, and Australia and New Zealand (ANZUS), either bind the United States to come to the defense of its allies (without reciprocity necessarily) or trigger a collective response only if aggression occurs within certain specified geographic areas.

It is unlikely that any Chinese aggression will materialize in the coming decade in the Western Hemisphere in ways that justify collective defense under the Rio Treaty. But a major war over Taiwan could occur in Asia during this timeframe, one that could implicate NATO automatically while pressuring at least Japan, South Korea, and Australia. The problem for NATO, however, is that although an attack on the United States or U.S. forces in Asia could trigger the alliance's collective defense obligations, NATO's European members are neither militarily threatened by China nor are their armed forces configured to deal with the geographically distant Chinese threat in a way that the United States already is on both counts.

Consequently, the first task for the United States is to aid NATO in operationalizing an effective response to the "systemic challenges" posed by China to the alliance, even if the latter cannot be expected to make countering China its principal responsibility.³⁰ In fact, NATO's European constituents could make a significant contribution to U.S. security in Asia by doing what they can do best: assuming primary responsibility for protecting their continent's and its immediate environs' security in order to enable Washington to free up military resources currently earmarked for Europe to support potential operations in Asia. This does not involve any strategic decoupling between the United States and Europe: the collective defense obligations of both would remain intact, but there would be a better division of labor, with the European allies taking point for European defense and the United States offering backup, while the United States takes point in Asia with NATO providing backup as necessary. Implementing this vision will require greater European

investments in defense, a promise that has surfaced (even if not yet fructified) in the aftermath of Russia's Ukraine invasion. And it will also require a more resolute European commitment to take high politics seriously—as Joseph Borrell put it, to “relearn the language of power”—in contrast to past practices where Europe busied itself with profitable low politics while leaving the United States to bear the disproportionate burden for ensuring its security.³¹

NATO's European constituents could make a significant contribution to U.S. security in Asia by doing what they can do best: assuming primary responsibility for protecting their continent's and its immediate environs' security in order to enable Washington to free up military resources currently earmarked for Europe to support potential operations in Asia.

Beyond the new division of labor, however, the European allies can make an equally significant contribution by pressing back on the dangers now posed by China. Beijing today is more than just a systemic challenger to NATO: it is already a tacit threat. Consequently, Washington needs to work with NATO, the European Union, and European capitals to encourage greater European investments not just in military modernization but especially in monitoring and mitigating the risks arising from Chinese investment, technology, and the threats to intellectual property; increasing the resilience of European defense supply chains; improving cybersecurity assurance in the face of dangers to critical infrastructure; and increasing transatlantic cooperation to protect the global commons. The remarkable Chinese intimidation of Lithuania already previews what will be Europe's future—even as Beijing continues to lure and divide European societies and nations by access to its markets and the benefits of its outward investments.³²

The transformations in the West need to be complemented by greater attention to the East. For the foreseeable future, China will remain the most significant challenger to U.S. hegemony globally and especially in Asia. This does not

imply that Washington must focus on Asia to the neglect of the rest of the world, but it does require keeping developments in Asia at the front and center of U.S. strategic consciousness. The Asian continent already hosts the most troublesome states for U.S. interests—China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran—but the problems that will be posed by China along the Asian Rimland are in a class by themselves. In fact, if Washington can adequately meet this challenge, the other contingencies will devolve into “lesser included cases” subsumed by China.

The second task, then, consists of deepening and even transforming America’s key Asian alliances to confront the wider regional challenges posed by China’s assertiveness. Washington in recent years has sensibly doubled down on investing in a coalitional strategy, and its investments in resurrecting the Quad are a good step in this direction. But the Quad is likely to be most effective mainly in diplomatic coordination and delivering public goods within the region and elsewhere. It is unlikely to be involved *qua* Quad in any military defense against Chinese aggression.³³ Only the U.S. alliances with Japan and Australia will probably be relevant here. While both these alliance partners enjoy close security cooperation with the United States, neither is automatically obliged to come to U.S. aid if they are not attacked in crisis (although both will probably be involved in U.S. military operations out of choice, depending on the character of the contingency).

Washington has worked with each partner individually—as each has with the others—to deepen strategic cooperation, but what is still missing is a unified mesh architecture that binds all three nations in the service of cooperative defense. Moreover, Japan and Australia still have significant shortfalls in military capabilities that prevent them from assisting the United States in ways that would be necessary in the event of any conflict with China. In any event, even if a formal collective defense obligation between the three nations is beyond reach during this decade, there is compelling necessity for all three states to initiate collaborative defense planning at the strategic and operational levels, develop mutual access arrangements, conduct rotational deployments at each other’s facilities, and pursue cooperation in logistics, communications, force interoperability, and weapons development and acquisitions. Such structured collaboration would provide the United States as well as its partners greater opportunities to express the political solidarity necessary to signal resolve in peacetime while

ensuring the generation, posturing, and operationalization of capabilities that are essential during conflict.³⁴

These capabilities are most likely to be tested in a U.S.-China conflict over Taiwan—a possibility that is increasingly realistic because Beijing does not seem content to live with the current status quo indefinitely. Given this change in Chinese attitude under Xi Jinping, Washington needs to urgently assess the merits of persisting with its current policy of strategic ambiguity. This approach made sense when the United States sought to deter both the Chinese use of force and the possibility of provocative Taiwanese actions toward independence simultaneously. Today, when the military balance in the Taiwan Strait has evolved decisively in favor of China, Taipei is unlikely to aggravate China in ways that were previously feared (and this danger can be minimized in any case by private admonitions to Taipei about the limits of U.S. commitment in the face of any destabilizing Taiwanese behaviors). If the current separation of Taiwan from China is judged to be in U.S. interest—and there are persuasive arguments for this conclusion—then Washington ought to shift toward a policy of strategic clarity, namely, transparently conveying that any Chinese use of force against Taiwan would be met by a U.S. military response.³⁵

If deterring Chinese aggression against Taiwan remains the most pressing strategic danger in East Asia, then preventing this outcome demands a clear commitment that the United States will come to Taiwan’s defense in a crisis. Obviously, it also requires Washington—and Taipei—to build up the necessary military capabilities to make such a commitment viable. What should be corrected, therefore, is the current course, which has taken the United States in the direction of aiding Taiwan through arms transfers, joint training, and diplomatic support but without any clear-cut assurance of defending it in the event of a Chinese attack. The lessons of Ukraine are instructive here: NATO’s commitment at the Bucharest summit to consider Ukrainian membership eventually proved provocative enough for Russia to attack Ukraine with the aim of erasing its political existence and thereby stalling its integration with the West. The growing U.S. assistance to Taiwan could prove to be a similar affront if it persuades Xi Jinping that the bolstering of *de facto* Taiwanese independence must be forcibly arrested before it is too late. Averting this cataclysm in the context of growing U.S.-China rivalry increasingly suggests that Washington

should strengthen deterrence not simply by assisting Taiwan—as it is already doing—but by clearly signaling to China that any aggression against the island would be resisted by U.S. military power.

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PURSuing SENSIBLE EXTERNAL ECONOMIC ENGAGEMENT

While course corrections at the geopolitical level are essential for success in the evolving U.S.-China competition, similar shifts must occur in regard to fortifying the nation's productive base, a task that is fundamentally under Washington's own control and not dependent on the choices made by other countries. Because the issues involved here have been discussed at length elsewhere, the following discussion will concentrate only on the nation's trade strategies, which have unfortunately become more controversial in recent years than they should be.³⁶ The adjustments in the U.S. approach to trade should be pursued not merely because they bear on American prosperity—which is clearly an intrinsic good—but equally because they affect Washington's ability to compete with Beijing: a sensible trade policy increases U.S. national power, contributes toward the maintenance of U.S. leadership in the international system, and shapes the calculations of other nations who rely on trade more than the United States does and whose partnership will be necessary for American success in the ongoing rivalry with China.

The issues of trade strategy, ordinarily, should not be big concerns for the United States because its large and open domestic economy is less trade sensitive for its growth. Even so, Washington has, since the beginning of the postwar era, invested heavily in building and maintaining an ever more open international trading system in order to enlarge global prosperity and reduce international instability. Ever since China's entry into this regime, however, the costs of asymmetrical

U.S. economic openness have weighed heavily on American policymakers. These concerns peaked during the Trump administration when the president, who was antagonistic toward multilateral trade long before he entered office, sought to gut the global trading system through the imposition of widespread tariffs on allies and adversaries alike. This approach, which was supposed to correct the failures of the global trading system, was quixotic because the evolution of cross-border supply chains rendered any strategy centered on engineering bilateral trade agreements as a substitute hopelessly inappropriate. It had the effect of not only undermining the traditional U.S. leadership in multilateral trade but also strengthening global perceptions of American unreliability, especially in Asia and Europe, where trade is a critical driver of growth, while permitting China to pose as a more constructive and often more valuable partner.

The Biden administration has corrected some of Trump's excesses, but it appears to share many of his fears about the deleterious consequences of trade on American prosperity. One scholar, in fact, described "Biden's trade policy to be Trump's without the tweets."³⁷ Achieving success in the U.S.-China competition requires the United States to make multiple course corrections on trade issues. For starters, Washington needs to renew its support for the World Trade Organization (WTO) by at the very least permitting the appointment of new judges to its Appellate Body. Global trade reform through the WTO is invariably painful, but as the latest ministerial in Geneva proved, incremental progress is possible despite the agony, and, at any rate, there are no alternatives to the WTO where regulating global trade is concerned. The United States obviously benefits directly from the existence of a robust multilateral trading system, but even if the rewards to itself are more modest—because U.S. trade-to-GDP ratios are much lower than the global average—its support for the WTO represents an example of enlightened hegemony insofar as U.S. leadership here provides gains for others that could pay back in terms of strengthened geopolitical cooperation. Neither political party in the United States today, however, seems committed to expanding international trade. Yet disregarding trade is a good way to lose friends and influence at a time when China has become the primary trading partner of the largest number of countries globally and has exploited that connectivity to shape both their economic and strategic choices.

Achieving success in the U.S.-China competition requires the United States to make multiple course corrections on trade issues.

The current U.S. disenchantment with trade is obviously shaped by multiple concerns: trade losses suffered by important domestic constituencies, constrained market access abroad, and relative gains advantages accruing to others.

The trade losses suffered either sectorally or regionally as a result of “the China shock” obviously have serious implications in U.S. domestic politics, but such outcomes are bound to occur as a natural consequence of international trade itself.³⁸ Less efficient producers go out of business as a consequence of exchange across borders, yet this outcome is compensated by the increased aggregate benefit to society as a whole. Mitigating these losses requires private producers to invest in increasing competitiveness and the state to assist these efforts through broader macroeconomic reforms and adjustment programs, thereby enabling those populations affected by trade losses to survive in the face of the dislocations. The United States, unfortunately, failed in regard to supporting adjustment in recent decades, but refusing to expand trade because of these shortcomings amounts to throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Moreover, if U.S. trade losses are caused by unfair trade practices, then these problems must be addressed by state action either bilaterally or preferably multilaterally—and this is where the U.S. dismay with the WTO Appellate Body has only contributed toward further weakening the global trading system.

The problems of constrained market access abroad also have to be remedied by national negotiations either bilaterally or multilaterally. The WTO has proved irritatingly slow on this count, but the current U.S. circumspection in considering any more bilateral trade agreements has unfortunately cut off the other avenue by which the United States could gain new markets. Because the U.S. economy is already more open than most, bilateral trading agreements are especially beneficial for the United States. The fear that new trade agreements may be bad politics domestically, however, has resulted in constraining this option right now.

The problem of relative gains also has to be addressed in different ways. The biggest problem for the United States presently on this count is China. Most of China’s trade

gains in the last several decades, however, have accrued through cost advantages—the benefits of being a cheap, yet high-quality, manufacturer. These are entirely legitimate gains. The extent of the illegitimate gains is harder to quantify: these arise from the theft of intellectual property or its coercive extraction in exchange for market access, significant governmental subsidies provided to private or public enterprises, the manipulation of exchange rates, unfair practices such as dumping, or state-driven strategies focused on cornering market share by eliminating foreign competitors. Washington historically has been reluctant to confront Beijing about these behaviors in part because U.S. businesses were afraid that any confrontation with China would make life difficult for their own commercial operations within the country. The Trump administration finally changed course in this regard, but its solutions—increased tariffs to stimulate greater Chinese purchases of American goods—were hardly appropriate to the larger problems.

Concerted action to address these issues has still proven to be elusive in Washington, but the one solution that the United States slowly gravitated toward—creating partial free trade agreements (PFTAs) centered on high standards among a small group of partners—is also in limbo. The Trump administration walked out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the most important PFTA negotiated in recent years, although by the time Trump did so, the Democratic Party also had soured on this accord. The benefit of PFTAs, such as the TPP, is that they would have allowed the United States and its partners to enjoy heightened trade gains among themselves, thereby offsetting some of the losses suffered as a result of trade with China, while institutionalizing new, higher-standard trade rules that would have reduced the cost benefits accruing to countries such as China because of their weaker labor and environmental standards. U.S. domestic politics, however, has prevented the Biden administration from considering rejoining the TPP.

All of this matters for two critical reasons. First, the U.S. absence from the TPP, which represents enhanced trade integration in Asia, coincides with the heightened Chinese interest in binding other Asian states more deeply into its own economy, an ambition signaled both by its own lower-quality Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement—today, the world’s biggest trade deal—and now its new interest in joining the TPP at a time when the United States itself seems content to stay out. At a time when U.S.-China competition is intensifying, the failure of the United States to lead in rule setting and

to bind itself to countries that are important Chinese economic partners presages an avoidable loss of influence that could prove costly in times of crises or conflicts.³⁹

Second, the U.S. abandonment of the TPP implies that Washington is willing to forego the enhanced trade gains that would derive from its participation in a high-quality agreement when even incremental increases in U.S. GDP only promise benefits for the competition with China. Because many TPP partners still possess relatively protected economies, U.S. participation in this agreement would pry open their hitherto closed markets and, by institutionalizing new and higher standards, limit China's advantages in global trade.⁴⁰ Consequently, the United States—to put it bluntly—should reenter the TPP at the earliest opportunity. The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework now proposed by the Biden administration seems like thin gruel in contrast. To the degree that the administration seeks to vitalize its trade pillar by using the United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement as a model, it will only end up recreating a simulacrum of the TPP. It should save itself the trouble and go for the real thing instead.

The larger issue of improving the relative gains enjoyed by the United States in the competition with China matters significantly for success in the U.S.–China competition because at the end of the day the nation with a larger and more efficient economy enjoys major advantages in any geopolitical face-off. That Beijing has been able to often exploit the international trading system unfairly over the last several decades has sometimes encouraged the idea that the United States would be better off without a trading partner like China. This erroneous notion, which surfaced during the Trump years, was encapsulated in the president's belief that "Trade is Bad," an idea that underlay his protectionist impulses and his inchoate ideas about decoupling from China.⁴¹ In the era prior to globalization, cutting off economic ties with China might have been a debatable solution for reducing Chinese relative gains and, by implication, the resources available to Beijing for power-political purposes.

In an interdependent international system, however, the idea is harebrained. It is in fact one of the paradoxes of security competition under interdependence that trade with one's rivals is valuable precisely because it provides the additional resources necessary to sustain the competition with them, especially when foregoing trade with one's competitors is meaningless when they have many other trading partners to choose from in a multi-actor environment. Any relative gains advantages

that accrue to rivals in such circumstances should be mitigated by both better macroeconomic policies at home and creating supplementary—higher-standard—trading networks that exclude them. But desisting from trade with competitors, particularly when other partners cannot be denied to them, is rarely a good way to realize the relative gains necessary to secure advantages in the larger geopolitical contestation.⁴²

The United States, undoubtedly, has to minimize its vulnerabilities to Chinese coercion, especially in an environment where China dominates global manufacturing. The solution to this problem consists of accepting the loss of some efficiency gains by promoting the purposeful diversification of supply. This requires assessing critical vulnerabilities in the supply chain, which matter most where national defense, information and communication technologies and platforms, and possibly public health are concerned—because constrained access here could have devastating consequences in times of conflict. Depending on the salience of other issue areas, alternative solutions such as stockpiling should be considered either as supplements or as substitutes to diversification. Because the United States must preserve its advantages in the arena of high technology, Washington should purposefully limit Beijing's access to the critical tangible and intangible elements in this arena, but such defensive strategies must not degenerate into an indiscriminate attack on trade with China itself.

The bottom line, therefore, is a deceptively simple one: U.S. power in the international system ultimately derives from America's capacity to dominate the cycles of innovation globally. It is the ability to perpetually foment technological revolutions faster than any other state that nourishes U.S. global hegemony. Maintaining this dominance is intimately linked to the openness of American society, as embodied in its political, economic, and social institutions, as well as its openness to world, which is manifested in its hospitality to foreign goods, capital, ideas, and people. Any drift toward autarky that weakens these foundations undermines American power and, to that degree, impedes its capacity to prevail in the long-term rivalry with China more easily. Fortunately, most of the choices that bear on America's capacity to out-innovate its rivals lie within its own control—and, hence, deserve as much attention as the threats posed by its competitors. In the long cycle of international politics, the United States will do better if it concentrates on staying ahead of its adversaries rather than obsessing about what might be required to pull them down.

RESTORING U.S. MILITARY POWER

While building the appropriate international coalitions and strengthening American economic power, including through trade and innovation, are the foundations for success in the long-term competition with China, fielding effective military power is also indispensable. The success of the liberal international order, in fact, ultimately derives from the capacity of the United States to protect its members by force of arms when necessary. This requires Washington not merely to field capable military forces but rather superior ones relative to its adversaries because only functional dominance will allow the nation to win its wars at the lowest possible cost. The United States already deploys the world's most formidable military capabilities, but they are unfortunately not necessarily appropriate for meeting the challenges posed by China today and in the years ahead.

In the long cycle of international politics, the United States will do better if it concentrates on staying ahead of its adversaries rather than obsessing about what might be required to pull them down.

This is largely because Washington was consumed during the last two decades with prosecuting multiple military operations against terrorist groups and insurgencies. This focus prevented the United States from making the investments necessary to deal with the new threats posed by great powers, even as it wore down the combat capabilities that were continuously involved in these misnamed “low-intensity” operations. Even when conflicts with distant state actors materialized, the United States enjoyed the advantage of being able to move forces into the theater without these arriving components being targeted en route to their deployment areas or in the rear, a luxury that is unlikely to be replicated in any future war with China. The U.S. military, therefore, for all its strengths, still requires significant recapitalization to equip it to deal with the threats posed by major state rivals, along with the appropriate changes in posture. Much has already been written on this subject before and, therefore, does not need repeating here.⁴³ The following themes, however, are worth emphasizing.

The core capability that the United States must recover is effective power projection. The capacity to deploy powerful

military forces across the globe, sustain them at a distance from the homeland for extended periods of time, and permit them to win wars even against significant local opponents is what makes the United States a genuine superpower with no peers. Effective power projection thus requires potent combat elements—the sharpened spearpoint—as well as the larger command of the commons—to enable them to reach the relevant fronts and sustain their effectiveness when deployed forward.⁴⁴ These capabilities matter a fortiori in Asia because rivalry with China entails the necessity of defending distant allies across the vast Pacific, allies that are located on China's periphery and in close proximity to its vast military capabilities.

Managing such a challenge is not altogether new for the United States. During the Cold War, Washington had to defend European allies that were closer in proximity to the Soviet Union than they were to the United States. Moreover, these partners were situated on a common landmass shared with Soviet power, which also had the advantage of being battle hardened and highly proficient at the operational level of war. In contrast, most U.S. allies in Asia (with the exception of South Korea and Thailand, which are thankfully unlikely to be threatened by Chinese land power) enjoy the benefits of “the stopping power of water.”⁴⁵ And although they face a more multidimensionally capable China than the Soviet Union ever was, they are also advantaged by China's lack of experience in prosecuting major combat operations involving the air and sea.

The U.S. strategy for coping with the threat posed by China to its allies conforms to the same pattern established during the Cold War: maintaining a combination of forward-deployed and forward-operating forces in proximity to China backed up by expeditionary components arriving from different parts of the world when necessary off the Asian Rimland. If war becomes inevitable, China's “best” strategy for military success in the face of such a posture, then, arguably consists of quickly overwhelming its local adversaries before the United States can come to their assistance, while holding out the threat of interdicting all U.S. reinforcements that may be committed to their liberation if Washington chooses to resist the Chinese aggression. The corresponding “best” strategy for the United States, accordingly, is to deny China the ability to achieve these aims.⁴⁶

The task of restoring U.S. military power must, however, be anchored first in a clear declaratory policy aimed at strengthening deterrence. Because preventing war is preferable even to winning it—even if winning in the first

instance consists only of denying Beijing its immediate war aims—the United States must signal clearly to China that any attacks on its allies—to include Taiwan, if Washington is committed to defending it—will entail high costs that the United States is willing to bear despite the risks of escalation. Obviously, the costs of any nuclear escalation will be exorbitant, and the modernization of U.S. nuclear forces, which is already underway, will hopefully serve to prevent any Chinese use of nuclear weapons even in an intense crisis. The most pressing issue with respect to deterrence, however, is less likely to be nuclear but conventional: how far can the United States go with respect to the use of conventional military instruments in deterring China from using force against its allies?

Because preventing war is preferable even to winning it, the United States must signal clearly to China that any attacks on its allies will entail high costs that the United States is willing to bear despite the risks of escalation.

Obviously, the most important restraint on the use of U.S. conventional capabilities would be targeting Chinese nuclear reserves, which should be avoided simply in order to minimize the risks of escalation. As China's nuclear transformation proceeds, these risks actually diminish because it is unlikely that Beijing would ever find itself faced by "use or lose" pressures when it deploys a large, diversified, and survivable nuclear force. The hard question, consequently, pertains to conventional attacks on China's conventional military assets on its homeland. In this context, Washington should consider the merits of signaling to Beijing that Chinese territory cannot be preserved as a sanctuary that is immune to U.S. conventional operations if China attacks American allies in Asia.

To the degree possible, the U.S. military ought to invest in options to defend the allies that do not require any attacks on Chinese soil, but this may turn out to be either operationally difficult or politically untenable if China attacks allied homelands or U.S. bases in Asia. Consequently, there is good reason to shore up deterrence by communicating to China prior to any conflict that its costs would not only be prohibitive but could also entail attacks on Chinese territory—all with the aim of preventing Beijing's recourse to force to begin with. Such

threats are undoubtedly nettlesome, but their necessity—both to reassure allies and to defend them effectively—as well as the manner of their conveyance deserve careful attention now as the United States prepares for a long-term competition with China that embodies some non-trivial risk of conflict.

The United States clearly recognizes the need to acquire the relevant capabilities to win such a war both at the front and within the wider theater. The joint force has already developed sensible concepts of operations toward this end, and the importance of acquiring more long-range and stealthier platforms, unmanned delivery and support systems, advanced standoff munitions in large numbers, better air and missile defenses, a survivable command and control system employing diverse components, and a redundant and highly resilient basing infrastructure around the region is well appreciated.⁴⁷

While the services are certain to incorporate these capabilities progressively into their force structure over time, they are faced with four distinct types of risk. To begin with, many of the technologies that are intended to provide the U.S. military with a critical edge are either still in development or are not yet mature (and, in some cases, are not even invented yet). Further, the current service plans to divest legacy systems in order to free up resources for their advanced and more expensive replacements are eminently sensible from a long-term perspective but run the danger of producing a weaker force in the interim, especially if the more pessimistic assessments about China's aggressive timeline for absorbing Taiwan turn out to be true. More consequentially, even with corrections to the force structure gaps, the U.S. military still needs to complete the force posture adjustments and plans pertaining to positioning key military assets if they are to effectively contribute in a China contingency. Finally, any successful strategy for realizing effective U.S. power projection in Asia—which involves neutralizing China's expansive investments in theater denial—entails some form of "archipelagic defense," yet the political understandings with allies and partners that will be required to implement such a concept are far from being realized.⁴⁸

At the end of the day, the United States will be unable to restore its military power to serve the ends of successful extended deterrence in Asia and globally without sufficient budgetary support. Although the Biden administration, like the Obama administration before it, prioritizes the Indo-Pacific region specifically and the maintenance of U.S.

military strength more generally, it has not yet provided the resources necessary for the Pacific Deterrence Initiative to achieve these aims.⁴⁹ Either some increases in the current budgetary top line are necessary or a more radical restructuring of the service components is essential. The administration appears shy about pursuing the latter because it involves making hard choices about which service's budget must be robbed to pay for the expansion of the others; and it seems equally shy about pursuing the former course because of the constraints of domestic politics, even while its own budgetary requests are still populated by "a series of programs . . . that are of questionable utility to the Department of Defense's [core] mission."⁵⁰

Any calls for increased budgets invariably provoke criticism by skeptics who charge that the U.S. allocation for defense is already larger than the next nine countries combined—a complaint that, although trivially correct, fails to meter America's defense expenditures against the extent of its interests, not to mention its hegemonic responsibilities. The plain fact of the matter is that the United States today spends about 3 percent of its GDP on defense, a far cry from the 6 percent or more spent during the Reagan administration and the even higher levels committed earlier in the Cold War. Washington can afford to spend more on defense if it chooses to without undermining the larger economy, and it will certainly blow through the current top line if it is forced to by a war with China. If a more modest increment now and in the future serves to strengthen deterrence and avoid conflict, the American people would certainly be better served by such a choice.

CONCLUSION

There is little doubt that China represents the most serious challenge to U.S. hegemony since the fall of the Soviet Union. In the face of this challenge, it is often feared that the U.S. investment in opposing the Russian invasion of Ukraine might prove to be an enervating distraction that prevents Washington from effectively facing up to Beijing's ambitions. These are not imaginary anxieties, but what is even more

worrisome is that the American polity will fail to perceive that Chinese and Russian assertiveness goes beyond the specific threats they pose in the Indo-Pacific and Europe, respectively. Rather, they represent challenges to the larger liberal international order underwritten by U.S. hegemonic power—and the United States may end up mounting only a ragged defense if its people either are divided among themselves, fail to receive the benefits of hegemonic stability, or suffer a loss of civic virtue. These are indeed the greater and more enduring challenges faced by the United States, which must be addressed if the American regime is to be revitalized both abroad and at home. Doing so effectively is not beyond the nation's capacities. A successful response here will strengthen the United States in the coming decades and protect both its values and its interests. It will also permit the productive—and necessary—engagement of China, but as Zalmay Khalilzad has perceptively argued, "engagement must be done from a position of strength with a clear-minded appreciation of the daunting realities we face."⁵¹ ■

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