

A FLEETING GLIMPSE OF HEGEMONY? THE WAR IN UKRAINE AND THE FUTURE OF THE INTERNATIONAL LEADERSHIP OF THE UNITED STATES

Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine has opened up an opportunity for the United States to assert international leadership once again and even recapture some trappings of hegemony, which have been eroded in recent years. As the war has upended the old international order, the Biden administration is facing questions regarding the future direction of America's global engagement in the "post-February 24, 2022" world. This article zooms in on five sets of challenges that the U.S. needs to deal with if it wants to sustain the "hegemonic moment" brought about by the war in Ukraine. Without attention and resolve to mitigate these challenges, the re-emergence of U.S. leadership in the transatlantic domain, not to mention any visions of reasserting U.S. hegemony more broadly, may prove but a flash in the pan.

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The war in Ukraine is a world-historical moment – a pivotal event that comes around maybe once every decade. Already the Russian invasion has upended the post-Cold War European security order. However, beyond shattering established structures, crises tend to create opportunities. In this regard, the war in Ukraine is no different. From the standpoint of the United States, Moscow’s blatant aggression has creating an opening to reassert its leadership of the Western alliance and even recapture some of its post-Cold War hegemonic position, which has been challenged by revisionist powers China and Russia and domestic travails.¹ A little over six months after a chaotic exit from Afghanistan, President Biden and his administration are being hailed for the successful coordination of a joint transatlantic response in sanctions against Russia and military aid to Ukraine. Joe Biden’s triumphant inaugural declaration looks prescient: “America is back”.

However, in the midst of such triumphalism, it is vital to pause and consider pathways forward. As the old international order receded, the Biden administration is facing questions regarding the future direction of America’s international engagement in the “post-February 24, 2022” world.² After briefly outlining how the Biden administration arrived at its pivotal date with history, this article zooms in on five sets of challenges that the U.S. needs to deal with to sustain the current “hegemonic moment.” Without attention and resolve to mitigate these challenges, the re-emergence of U.S. leadership in the transatlantic domain, not to mention any visions of reasserting U.S. hegemony more broadly, may prove but a flash in the pan.

From Relief to Trepidation and Back Again

In Europe and within the U.S. alliance network more broadly, the Biden presidency was greeted by and large with a sense of relief. After four years on Donald Trump’s America First rollercoaster, transatlantic relations would – so the logic went – give way to a smoother ride. For America’s friends and allies, Joe Biden was a known quantity, an experienced foreign policy leader with transatlanticism and alliance solidarity near his heart; a stark contrast to Trump’s unilateralist and transactionalist tendencies.³ Biden’s team articulated a willingness to reassume America’s place at the relevant tables of international politics to “earn back [... its] leadership position.”⁴

¹ Alexander Cooley and Daniel Nexon, *Exit from Hegemony: The Unraveling of the American Global Order*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

² Roland Paris, “We’ve reached a new post-Cold War era,” *The Globe and Mail*, 21 March 2022. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-weve-reached-a-new-post-cold-war-era-what-follows-may-be-even-more/>

³ Thomas Wright, ‘The Point of No Return: The 2020 Election and the Crisis of American Foreign Policy’, Lowy Institute Analyses, 2 October 2020. <https://www.loyinstitute.org/publications/point-no-return-2020-election-and-crisis-american-foreign-policy>

⁴ Joseph R. Biden Jr., “Remarks by President Biden on America’s Place in the World,” White House, 4 February 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/04/remarks-by-president-biden-on-americas-place-in-the-world/>

In the context of these high expectations, the first year of the Biden administration was a disappointment for many on the old continent. There were, of course, early successes. The U.S. decision to re-enter the Paris Climate Agreement and return to the fold at the World Health Organization (WHO) were greeted with applause by many in Europe. The President's "feel-good tour" of the old continent in June produced pledges of support for the EU and NATO as well as headline-grabbing developments like the B3W (Build Back Better World) infrastructure initiative and a deal on the 17-year-old EU-U.S. dispute over airline subsidies.⁵

“Relatedly, the leadership role the U.S. has presently assumed remains in stark contrast to how the Trump administration dealt with the Covid-19 pandemic, shutting borders, hoarding medical supplies, and engaging in vaccine nationalism.”

However, dark clouds were brewing on the horizon. The U.S. had already failed in consulting its European allies on the decision to withdraw U.S. troops from Afghanistan, ultimately taken in mid-April. The chaotic exit from the country in August, on the heels of a surprising Taliban takeover, led observers to question U.S. reliability and credibility and the Biden administration's policy competence.⁶

The Afghanistan debacle was followed in short order by an announcement of a security pact by the U.S., UK, and Australia, dubbed AUKUS. The arrangement would grant Australia access to nuclear propulsion technology for its submarines. In the process, the French – the one EU member with ambitions of a sustained security footprint in the Indo-Pacific – lost out on a lucrative \$66 billion deal to build diesel-powered submarines for Australia. In the ensuing dust-up between the U.S. and France, Paris even called home its ambassador to the United States.⁷

After these debacles, Russia's maximalist calls to renegotiate the European security architecture and build-up of forces around Ukraine provided the Biden administration with an opportunity for a transatlantic reset after a challenging year. By airing intelligence findings about Russian troop movements and intelligence regarding

⁵ David E. Sanger and Steven Erlanger, "For Biden, Europe Trip Achieved 2 Major Goals. And Then There Is Russia," *New York Times*, 17 June 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/17/world/europe/joe-biden-vladimir-putin-usa-russia.html>

⁶ Kori Schake, "The Roads Not Taken in Afghanistan," *Foreign Affairs*, 25 August 2021. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2021-08-25/roads-not-taken-afghanistan>

⁷ Mark Leonard, "The False Promise of AUKUS," ECFR Commentary, 29 September 2021. <https://ecfr.eu/article/the-false-promise-of-aukus/>

the Kremlin's plans, the U.S. eroded Moscow's ability to rely on the element of surprise. Just as importantly, the U.S. took the lead in diplomacy before Russia shut the door on such endeavors with its invasion on 24 February 2022.⁸

Because of astute diplomacy and coordination in the weeks leading up to the invasion, the U.S. and the EU were swift in responding with punitive sanctions and have been able to up the ante as the Russian attack has continued. The provision of Western military aid to Ukraine has also been a joint transatlantic undertaking, and despite some public spats, such as over the fate of Polish MiG-29 fighter jets, the effort has allowed Ukraine to inflict considerable damage upon the invading forces. Meanwhile, NATO is bolstering its defenses on the Eastern flank and has regained a sense of purpose. In the span of less than three months, doubts over U.S. credibility have been traded in for celebrations of transatlantic unity.⁹ Yet the war in Ukraine still raises several open questions about the future role of the United States in the world writ large and the shape of the transatlantic relationship in the coming years. Five sets of challenges appear particularly pertinent, namely, making most of the transatlantic unity, selling the U.S. and Western approach globally, engaging in two-theatre great-power competition, finding a balance between safeguarding democracy, and dealing with autocracies, and, last but not least, finding domestic backing for a sustainable foreign policy line.

Cashing in on Transatlantic Unity

The pronounced unity on sanctions against Russia and the steady stream of weapons deliveries and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine speak volumes for the reinvigorated strength of the transatlantic bond. Even Germany has gone against the grain of its strategic culture, pledging a €100 billion increase in defense spending and endeavoring to meet NATO's 2-percent-of-GDP military spending target.¹⁰ Declared "brain dead" by French President Emmanuel Macron in 2019,¹¹ NATO has found a new sense of purpose, and is now debating the entry of two new members: Finland and Sweden. Both countries possess a long history of military non-alignment, robust democratic credentials and relatively strong militaries.¹² In fact, the entry of these two Nordic countries to NATO enjoys broad support within

⁸ Riccardo Alcaro, "The Return of U.S. Leadership in Europe: Biden and the Russia Crisis," IAI Commentaries, 2 February 2022. <https://www.iai.it/en/publicazioni/return-us-leadership-europe-biden-and-russia-crisis>

⁹ Ursula von der Leyen, "Statement by President von der Leyen with U.S. President Biden," European Commission, 25 March 2022. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/STATEMENT_22_2043

¹⁰ Rachel Tausenfrennd, "Zeitenwende—The Dawn of the Deterrence Era in Germany," *GMFUS*, 28 February 2022. <https://www.gmfus.org/news/zeitenwende-dawn-deterrence-era-germany>

¹¹ *The Economist*, "Emmanuel Macron warns Europe: NATO is becoming brain-dead," 7 November 2019. <https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/11/07/emmanuel-macron-warns-europe-nato-is-becoming-brain-dead>

¹² Tommi Koivula and Heljä Ossa, "What would Finland bring to the table for NATO," *War on the Rocks*, 9 May 2022. <https://warontherocks.com/2022/05/what-would-finland-bring-to-the-table-for-nato/>

the alliance, and bipartisan support in Congress.¹³ Such seismic shifts would have been unimaginable at the beginning of the year, let alone in the Trump era.

“The world remains a messy place, and the ability of the U.S. to counter Chinese or Russian influence globally hinges on the U.S.’ ability to work pragmatically with regimes that possess few democratic credentials.”

Yet, barring a leadership change in the Kremlin or a drastic Russian policy shift, a long era of “neo-containment” beckons on the continent.¹⁴ After years of uncertainty over the future direction of the Western alliance, the U.S. commitment to the transatlantic relationship seems secure, at least for the time being. The U.S. has, for instance, increased its troop presence in Europe from 60 000 to 100 000 after the Russian invasion, alongside its material support for Ukraine.¹⁵ In the long run, however, the future American military presence and shape of NATO’s deterrence posture on the old continent will depend on how the war in Ukraine ultimately plays out. The extent to which Russia’s military capabilities can be further degraded in Ukraine and the ability of either the Ukrainians or Russians to achieve successes on the battlefield before a negotiated solution or a stalemate are just two vital vectors that will impact contingency planning.

Whether the U.S. can cash in on its allies’ manifest willingness to invest more in defense is an even broader question. Europeans are finally answering a call for more equitable burden-sharing that U.S. administrations have been making for decades. At the same time, however, the transatlantic relationship has always presented Washington D.C. with a dilemma. The ability of the U.S. to influence its allies has depended on an asymmetry of power between the two sides of the Atlantic. At the same time, a more capable and autonomous Europe would likely be less willing to follow Washington’s lead.¹⁶ This mode of thought has historically been at the core of

¹³ *Yle News*, “Sen. McConnell: U.S. could vote on Finland’s NATO bid before August,” 16 May 2022. <https://yle.fi/news/3-12447474>

¹⁴ Ivo Daalder, “The Return of Containment,” *Foreign Affairs*, 1 March 2022. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-03-01/return-containment>

¹⁵ Elie Kaufman and Barbara Starr, “U.S. likely to keep 100,000 troops in Europe for foreseeable future in face of Russian threat, U.S. officials say,” *CNN*, 20 May 2022. <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/05/20/politics/us-troops-in-europe/index.html>

¹⁶ Brian Blankenship, “Control vs. Cost-Sharing: The Dilemma at the Heart of NATO,” *War on the Rocks*, 7 August 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/08/control-vs-cost-sharing-the-dilemma-at-the-heart-of-nato/>

D.C. insiders' gripes regarding European strategic autonomy. Going forward, U.S. policymakers would need to drop such antiquated views in favor of a more approach to transatlantic security, one where the U.S. views European capacity building as positive progress regardless of the framework wherein such developments take place.¹⁷ A more capable Europe would not only assume more responsibility for the continent's security, but free up U.S. resources for use elsewhere around the globe. A stronger Europe thus makes for a better – even if at times more independent-minded – partner. Here the Europeans' manifest demand for sustained U.S. hegemony and calls for strategic autonomy need not be irreconcilable.

A Worrying Global Context

While European solidarity has been on display in media headlines, and the U.S.' traditional allies in the Indo-Pacific have been supportive, a prominent chunk of the world does not share the American and European understanding of the war.¹⁸ Nor are they willing to take measures to sanction Russia either symbolically or materially. When the UN General Assembly voted to suspend Russia from the UN Human Rights Council on 7 April 2022, 93 members voted for the resolution, but 24 voted against and 58 abstained. Notable abstainers included India, Brazil, South Africa, Mexico, Malaysia, Indonesia, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia. Vietnam, which the U.S. has sought to woo in recent years, voted against.¹⁹ In the Middle East, the U.S.' traditional partners have refused to pump more oil into the market amidst soaring energy prices.²⁰ Meanwhile, despite U.S. courtship of India in the Quad framework, New Delhi continues to balance American demands and its historical relationship with Moscow.²¹ Testament to the difficulty of selling the West's message in the global south, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa has blamed NATO enlargement for the outbreak of the war.²²

From the U.S. and Europe standpoint, this lack of support from outside the traditional West is a problem. Although the hegemony of the U.S. dollar makes going against its sanctions difficult,²³ how the U.S., EU, and their allies have managed to shut

¹⁷ Garret Martin and Ville Sinkkonen, "Past as Prologue? The United States and European Strategic Autonomy in the Biden Era," *European Foreign Affairs Review*, Vol. 27, No.1 (2022): p. 99–120.

¹⁸ Edward Luce, "The west is rash to assume the world is on its side over Ukraine," *Financial Times*, 24 March 2022. <https://www.ft.com/content/d7baedc7-c3b2-4fa4-b8fc-6a634bea7f4d>

¹⁹ UN News, "UN General Assembly votes to suspend Russia from the Human Rights Council," 7 April 2022. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/04/1115782>

²⁰ James M. Lindsay and Steven A. Cook, "The Middle East's Reaction to the Invasion of Ukraine," The President's Inbox (podcast audio), 10 May 2022. <https://www.cfr.org/podcasts/middle-east-s-reaction-invasion-ukraine-steven-cook>

²¹ Tanvi Madan, "By Invitation: Tanvi Madan explains why India is not in Russia's camp," *The Economist*, 7 May 2022. <https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2022/05/07/tanvi-madan-explains-why-india-is-not-in-russias-camp>

²² Tim Cocks, "South Africa's Ramaphosa blames NATO for Russia's war in Ukraine," *Reuters*, 18 March 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/safricas-ramaphosa-blames-nato-russias-war-ukraine-2022-03-17/>

²³ Niklas Helwig, Clara Portela and Juha Jokela (eds.), "Sharpening EU Sanctions Policy: Challenges and Responses in a Geopolitical Era," *FIIA Report*, Vol. 63, (May 2020). https://www.fiaa.fi/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/report63_web.pdf

Russia out of the global economy is a warning sign to other potential targets of sanctions. Therefore, the war could hasten movement away from the dollar and euro as reserve currencies, eroding the future efficacy of sanctions.²⁴ Relatedly, the leadership role the U.S. has presently assumed remains in stark contrast to how the Trump administration dealt with the Covid-19 pandemic, shutting borders, hoarding medical supplies, and engaging in vaccine nationalism.²⁵ While Covid vaccinations have progressed with vigor in the West, vaccination rates are lagging in the global south. There is a stark contrast between the U.S. Congress approving a \$40 billion package to support Ukraine, and its inability to agree on sufficient funding for the global vaccination drive.²⁶ In this vein, what might appear as newfound U.S. leadership in the West, can easily be construed as yet another manifestation of American and Western hypocrisy elsewhere.²⁷

Competing on Two Fronts

In the process of upending the European security architecture, the Ukraine crisis has thrown the U.S. into the center of a “two-front great-power competition”.²⁸ At the start of the Biden presidency, there were few areas of bipartisan consensus in Washington D.C., but the imperative of engaging China in great-power competition came close. The incoming administration recognized China as a priority over other security challenges, including Russia. In fact, there was little discernible change beyond rhetorical nuance from the Trump administration when it came to China policy. The Biden team kept Trump-era tariffs in place, and despite a joint U.S.-China pledge made at the COP26 summit, competition has been the order of the day. Joe Biden’s recent statements indicating U.S. willingness to defend Taiwan against a Chinese attack – which would be a departure from decades of “strategic ambiguity” – underline how the U.S.’ China policy’s tides have shifted in the span of two presidential administrations.²⁹

When it came to Russia, the initial intention of the administration was to manage the relationship so that the U.S. could finally reorient towards the Indo-Pacific

²⁴ Karen Brettell, “Analysis: As sanctions ‘weaponize’ U.S. dollar, some Treasury buyers could fall back,” *Reuters*, 29 March 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/business/finance/sanctions-weaponize-us-dollar-some-treasury-buyers-could-fall-back-2022-03-29/>

²⁵ Colin Kahl and Thomas Wright, *Aftershocks: Pandemic Politics and the End of the Old International Order* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2021).

²⁶ Dylan Scott, “Congress is cutting corners on Covid-19 funding. We may pay for it later,” *Vox*, 5 April 2022. <https://www.vox.com/coronavirus-covid19/23009783/covid-19-relief-funding-bill-senate-vaccines>

²⁷ Martha Finnemore, “Legitimacy, Hypocrisy, and the Social Structure of Unipolarity: Why Being a Unipole Isn’t All It’s Cracked up to Be,” *World Politics*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (2009): p. 58–85.

²⁸ Hal Brands, “The Overstretched Superpower: Does America Have More Rivals Than It Can Handle?” *Foreign Affairs*, 18 January 2022. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2022-01-18/overstretched-superpower>

²⁹ Tim Kelly, “Behind the scenes in Japan, a welcome for Biden’s defense of Taiwan,” *Reuters*, 24 May 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/behind-scenes-japan-welcome-bidens-defence-taiwan-2022-05-24/>

– although there was no expectation of an actual “reset” with Moscow. Although the June meeting between Biden and Putin in Geneva appeared to pave the way for more predictable relations initially, Russia’s decision to pursue regional revanchism in Ukraine has laid any such plans to rest. The success of Ukraine in withstanding the Russian onslaught, with the help of Western weapons deliveries, has also enabled the U.S. to reframe its approach towards the Kremlin. In the words of Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, the U.S. “want[s] to see Russia weakened to the degree that it can’t do the kinds of things it has done in invading Ukraine”.³⁰ This shift towards degrading Russia’s capacity is reflected in the investments the U.S. is willing to make to support Ukraine’s cause. These assets have broad bipartisan support, as manifested in the recent \$40 billion bill that passed with comprehensive bipartisan support in both houses.³¹

To further complicate matters, just weeks before Russia embarked on its military adventure, Xi Jinping met Vladimir Putin at the Beijing Winter Olympics, and the two states released a statement asserting their friendship had “no limits”. While China has refrained from directly supporting Russia with military equipment, it has not condemned the invasion or gone along with Western sanctions, instead looking to benefit from cheaper Russian energy. While the Russia-China relationship is hardly a happy marriage, Beijing’s reaction proves it does not want to lose a partner who shares its distaste for American hegemony.³² China is therefore unlikely to forsake Moscow, at least for the foreseeable future.³³

The key question going forward is how the United States intends to maintain such a two-theatre posture in the great game of the 21st century. Obviously, this is a question of attaining and allocating the necessary resources to sustain such an approach, whether in terms of troops or materiel. Critics of the U.S. approach to Ukraine have already pointed out that the rejuvenated focus on the European theatre is a distraction, and the “U.S. Should [...] husband its critical resources for the primary fight in Asia.”³⁴ Regardless of the constellation of capabilities the U.S. can muster

³⁰ Missy Ryan and Annabelle Timsit, “U.S. wants Russian military ‘weakened’ from Ukraine invasion, Austin says,” *Washington Post*, 25 April 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/04/25/russia-weakened-lloyd-austin-ukraine-visit/>

³¹ Catie Edmondson and Emily Cochrane, “The Senate overwhelmingly approves \$40 billion in aid to Ukraine, sending it to Biden,” *New York Times*, 19 May 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/19/us/politics/senate-passes-ukraine-aid.html>

³² Mercy Kuo, “China’s Ukraine Response Is All About the U.S. (Not Russia),” *The Diplomat*, 5 April 2022. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/04/chinas-ukraine-response-is-all-about-the-us-not-russia/>

³³ Hanns W. Maull, “Why China Isn’t Backing Away From Alignment With Russia,” *The Diplomat*, 15 April 2022. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/04/why-china-isnt-backing-away-from-alignment-with-russia/>

³⁴ Elbridge A. Colby and Oriana Skylar Mastro, “Ukraine Is a Distraction From Taiwan,” *Wall Street Journal*, 13 February 2022. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/ukraine-is-a-distraction-from-taiwan-russia-china-nato-global-powers-military-invasion-jinping-biden-putin-europe-11644781247>

for each theatre, the role of allies will be magnified, requiring astute relationship management from the United States in marrying the concerns and capabilities of its European and Indo-Pacific allies and partners.³⁵ This will be no mean feat, given the different threat perceptions and security concerns of U.S. friends across the globe.

Dilemmas of Democracy and Autocracy

President Biden has linked strategic competition to a broader contest between democracy and autocracy. For him safeguarding democracy is “the defining challenge of our time.”³⁶ To underline U.S. commitment to bolster democracy worldwide, the President fulfilled a campaign pledge by hosting the first ever Summit for Democracy in December 2021, albeit to little fanfare. While this narrative of the competition as a struggle between systems of governance plays to audiences at home and in the West writ large, it may actually operate in the converse direction in the rest of the world. Branding states as laggards is not ideal for enticing them into cooperation.³⁷ The world remains a messy place, and the ability of the U.S. to counter Chinese or Russian influence globally hinges on the U.S.’ ability to work pragmatically with regimes that possess few democratic credentials.

This dilemma has been on full display in the aftermath of Russia’s attack on Ukraine. In its search for softening the spike in energy prices, the Biden administration has reached out to Saudi Arabia and its controversial crown prince Mohammed bin Salman and oil-rich Venezuela, a state under severe U.S. economic sanctions.³⁸ The current crisis has also opened up opportunities for authoritarian states to haggle with the hegemon. The opposition of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to Finland’s and Sweden’s NATO membership, for instance, can be seen as a not-so-subtle ploy to obtain concessions from the U.S.³⁹ Of course, making deals and cultivating strategic relationships with unsavory regimes were part of the American toolbox in the bipolar competition of the Cold War and during the global “War on Terror.” The difficult task of balancing between the desire for bolstering democracy and the imperative of safeguarding U.S. interests will certainly remain at the heart

³⁵ Luis Simón, “Bridging U.S.-Led Alliances in the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific: An Inter-Theater Perspective,” *CSIS Briefs*, (May 2020). https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/220512_Simon_Inter-theater_Perspective.pdf?EYs_U24B33P_UuUoXQA1qHf2kRr7h.uV

³⁶ Joseph R. Biden Jr., “Remarks By President Biden At The Summit For Democracy Opening Session,” White House, 9 December 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/12/09/remarks-by-president-biden-at-the-summit-for-democracy-opening-session/>

³⁷ Michael Hirsh, “Why Biden’s Anti-Putin Democracy Crusade Is Failing,” *Foreign Policy*, 11 May 2022. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/05/11/us-russia-war-ukraine-democracy-autocracy/>

³⁸ Timothy Puko, Alex Leary and Vival Monga, “Ukraine War Pushes Biden Toward Venezuela, Iran and Saudi Arabia in Oil Hunt,” *Wall Street Journal*, 10 March 2022. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/ukraine-war-drives-u-s-hunt-for-more-oil-to-help-tame-rising-prices-11646935216>

³⁹ Richard Milne and Laura Pitel, “Erdogan blocks Nato accession talks with Sweden and Finland,” *Financial Times*, 18 May 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/3d1ab5d0-19a6-41bd-83a4-7c7b9e2be141>

of U.S. international engagement for decades to come.⁴⁰

Domestic Concerns and Presidential Wildcards

The Trump era illustrated that the ability of the U.S. to sustain a globally engaged foreign policy is intimately tied to domestic politics. Trump consistently questioned the value of U.S. alliances and partnerships, was suspicious of multilateral institutions and opposed to free trade, and showed blatant disregard for democratic norms at home and abroad.⁴¹ This “America First” foreign policy approach undercut U.S. influence globally as it pulled out of critical institutions and eroded allies’ and partners’ trust in U.S. security guarantees and America’s willingness to provide global public goods.⁴² Doubts about the U.S. persisted throughout the Trump presidency, even though day-to-day U.S. diplomatic engagement and military cooperation with allies and partners remained intact, and the administration made substantial investments in its alliances, for instance in the auspices of the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI).⁴³ Trump’s rise to the presidency would not have been possible without the extreme polarization and hyperpartisanship that plagues American politics and the wariness of American voters regarding an active foreign policy. Despite Joe Biden’s pledges to unify the American people,⁴⁴ there are few signs of these phenomena abating. The world is thus justifiably holding its breath in anticipation of the 2024 presidential election.

It is unclear whether the war in Ukraine has created the conditions that will forestall a drastic foreign policy shift if a Republican candidate takes the White House in 2024. Admittedly, on Capitol Hill, the Republican party has, by and large, sought to portray itself as tough on Russia, creating an air of bipartisanship on the issue. The same goes for supporting building up NATO defenses on the Eastern flank or for the alliance’s open-door policy, particularly Finnish and Swedish NATO accession. At the same time, however, some Trumpian politicians and pundits have questioned the rationale of supporting Ukraine. Trump himself made headlines in the lead-up to the Russian invasion by praising Putin.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Cf. Ville Sinkkonen, *A Comparative Appraisal of Normative Power: The European Union, the United States, and the January 25th, 2011, Revolution in Egypt* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

⁴¹ Ivo H. Daalder and James M. Lindsay, *The Empty Throne: America’s Abdication of Global Leadership* (New York: Public Affairs, 2018).

⁴² Ville Sinkkonen, “Contextualizing the ‘Trump Doctrine’: Realism, Transactionalism and the Civilizational Agenda,” *FIIA Analysis*, Vol. 10 (May 2018). <https://www.fia.fi/en/publication/contextualizing-the-trump-doctrine>; Kahl and Wright, *Aftershocks*.

⁴³ James Sperling and Mark Webber, “Trump’s foreign policy and NATO: Exit and voice,” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 3 (2019): p. 511-26.

⁴⁴ Joseph R. Biden Jr., “Inaugural Address by President Joseph R. Biden, Jr.,” White House, 20 January 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/01/20/inaugural-address-by-president-joseph-r-biden-jr/>.

⁴⁵ Elaine Kamarck, “Ukraine: Trump will pay for praising Putin,” Chatham House, (1 April 2022). <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/the-world-today/2022-04/ukraine-trump-will-pay-praising-putin>

Of course, beyond questions related to European security, Trump or a Trump-like President would likely retain the core parameters of the “America First” foreign policy approach. This would entail wariness regarding international institutions, a dogged focus on competition with China and resistance towards multilateralism and free trade. Even in the event of Democrats holding the White House, these tropes will continue to impact foreign policy. This is clear in the remarkable continuity between the China policies of the Trump and Biden administrations and Biden’s “Foreign Policy for the Middle Class”.⁴⁶ This entailed a pronounced focus on domestic initiatives during Biden’s first year, including the \$ 1 trillion bipartisan infrastructure bill and the initially \$3.5 trillion Build Back Better framework, which never made it through Congress. In addition, the Biden administration has made little substantial progress on trade agreements, which has left it engaging China in great-power competition “with one hand tied behind its back” – much to the chagrin of its allies in Europe and the Indo-Pacific.⁴⁷

Conclusion: Whither American Leadership?

The war in Ukraine has allowed the United States to reassert its leadership of the Western alliance. However, upon closer reflection, the crisis has unearthed a set of challenges that the United States and the West need to deal with to sustain the current momentum. The future of U.S. leadership internationally will depend on whether it can cash in on Europe’s newfound willingness to invest in defense, sell the Western approach to dealing with Russia globally, and allocate time and resources between Europe and the Indo-Pacific as two theatres of great-power competition. The U.S. will also need to strike a delicate balance between the idealistic impulse of propping up democracy while dealing pragmatically with authoritarian states. Meanwhile, a sustained U.S. global presence requires long-term domestic-political unity on matters of core national interest, especially when it comes to alliances, Russia, and China. We will likely glean some answers regarding how the United States wants to confront these challenges when the Biden administration releases its much-awaited National Security Strategy (NSS) for a changed, post-February 24 world. At the very least, a U.S. approach to this new era of geopolitics necessitates letting go of archaic policy positions vis-à-vis allies, exercising delicate diplomacy, forgoing moral absolutism in favor of contextual pragmatism, and building up unity and democratic resilience at home. At the beginning of his presidency, Joe Biden pledged that the U.S. would “again lead not just by the example of our power but the power of our example.”⁴⁸ The first year and a half of his presidency have shown that regaining the trappings of hegemony is hard work – it will not get any easier in the foreseeable future.

⁴⁶ James Traub, “Biden’s ‘Foreign Policy for the Middle Class’ Is a Revolution,” *Foreign Policy*, 17 March 2021. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/17/bidens-foreign-policy-middle-class-revolution/>

⁴⁷ Edward Luce, “Biden’s China strategy cannot work with weapons alone,” *Financial Times*, 17 May 2022. <https://www.ft.com/content/fb15dfd1-b1cf-44d1-9584-d48d6c2095c5>

⁴⁸ Biden, America’s Place.