

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

The Dangerous Decade

A Foreign Policy for a World in Crisis

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“There are decades where nothing happens, and there are weeks where decades happen.” Those words are apocryphally attributed to the Bolshevik revolutionary (and Foreign Affairs reader) Vladimir Lenin, referring to the rapid collapse of tsarist Russia just over 100 years ago. If he had actually said those words, Lenin might have added that there are also decades when centuries happen.

The world is in the midst of one such decade. As with other historical hinges, the danger today stems from a sharp decline in world order. But more than at any other recent moment, that decline threatens to become especially steep, owing to a confluence of old and new threats that have begun to intersect at a moment the United States is ill positioned to contend with them.

On the one hand, the world is witnessing the revival of some of the worst aspects of traditional geopolitics: great-power competition, imperial ambitions, fights over resources. Today, Russia is headed by a tyrant, President Vladimir Putin, who longs to re-create a Russian sphere of influence and perhaps even a Russian empire. Putin is willing to do almost anything to achieve that goal, and he is able to act as he pleases because internal constraints on his regime have mostly disappeared. Meanwhile, under President Xi Jinping, China has embarked on a quest for regional and potentially global primacy, putting itself on a trajectory that will lead to increased competition or even confrontation with the United States.

But that is not all—not by a long shot. These geopolitical risks are colliding with complex new challenges central to the contemporary era, such as climate change, pandemics, and nuclear proliferation. And not surprisingly, the diplomatic fallout from growing rivalries has made it nearly impossible for great powers to work together on regional and international challenges, even when it is in their interest to do so.

Further complicating the picture is the reality that American democracy and political cohesion are at risk to a degree not seen since the middle of the nineteenth century. This matters because the United States is not just one country among many: U.S. leadership has underpinned what order there has been in the world for the past 75 years and remains no less central today. A United States riven internally, however, will become ever less willing and able to lead on the international stage.

Call it a perfect—or, more accurately, an imperfect—storm.

These conditions have set off a vicious circle: heightened geopolitical competition makes it even more difficult to produce the cooperation demanded by new global problems, and the deteriorating international environment further fuels geopolitical tensions—all at a time that the United States is weakened and distracted. The frightening gap between global challenges and the world’s responses, the increased prospects for major-power wars in Europe and the Indo-Pacific, and the growing potential for Iran to cause instability in the Middle East have come together to produce the most dangerous moment since World War II. Call it a perfect—or, more accurately, an imperfect—storm.

To warn of danger is not to predict the future. Ideally, things will turn out for the better. But good things rarely happen on their own; to the contrary, left to their own devices, systems deteriorate. The task for U.S. policymakers, then, is to rediscover the principles and practice of statecraft: to marshal national power and collective action against the tendency toward disorder. The goal must be to manage the collision of old geopolitics and new challenges, to act with discipline in what is sought, and to build arrangements or, better yet, institutions where there is sufficient consensus. To do all

that, Washington will have to prioritize establishing order over fostering democracy abroad—at the same time as it works to shore up democracy at home.

DISORDER ON THE RISE

In August 1990, intent on territorial conquest, Iraq invaded its far smaller neighbor Kuwait. “This will not stand,” U.S. President George H. W. Bush responded. He was right. Within weeks, Washington had organized wide-ranging international support for a military intervention around the limited objective of ejecting Iraqi forces from Kuwait. The 1990–91 Gulf War was marked by extensive cooperation, including from China and Russia, fostered by U.S. leadership under the aegis of the United Nations. In a matter of months, the coordinated response met with considerable success; Iraqi aggression was reversed and Kuwait’s independence restored at minimal cost. The major powers upheld the norm that force cannot be used to change borders, a fundamental element of international order.

Nothing of that sort could take place in today’s world, as the Ukraine crisis has made abundantly clear, and the fact that Russia is a much more powerful, influential country than Iraq was in 1990 only partly explains the difference. Although Russia’s invasion has inspired a sense of solidarity and impressive levels of coordination among Western countries, the war in Ukraine has yielded nothing resembling the nearly universal embrace of the goals and institutions of the U.S.-led order that was spurred by the Gulf War. Instead, Beijing has aligned itself with Moscow, and much of the world has refused to sign on to the sanctions imposed on Russia by Washington and its partners. And with one of the permanent members of the UN Security Council blatantly violating international law and the principle that borders may not be changed through force, the UN remains mostly sidelined.

Older geopolitical risks are colliding with complex new challenges.

In a sense, the two wars serve as bookends to the post–Cold War Pax Americana. The United States’ preponderance of power was bound to diminish, not owing to American decline but because of what the commentator Fareed Zakaria dubbed “the rise of the rest”—that is, the economic and military development of other countries and entities and the emergence of a world defined by a much greater diffusion of power. That said, the United States, by what it did and did not do in the world and at home, squandered much of its post–Cold War inheritance, failing to translate its primacy into an enduring order.

This failure is especially noticeable when it comes to Russia. In the years immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the juxtaposition of vast American power and staggering Russian weakness made it seem unlikely that, three decades later, world affairs would once again be dominated by hostility between the Kremlin and Western capitals. Debates rage about how this came to pass, with profound disagreements over how much blame the United States deserves and how much should be attributed to Putin or to Russian political culture more broadly. But whatever the cause, it is difficult to deny that six U.S. presidential administrations have little to show for all their efforts to build a successful post–Cold War relationship with Russia. Today, under Putin, Russian behavior is fundamentally at odds with the most basic tenets of international order. Putin shows no interest in integrating Russia into the prevailing order but rather seeks to ignore it when he can—and when he cannot, to undermine or defeat it. He has repeatedly demonstrated a willingness to employ brutal military force against civilian populations in Europe and the Middle East. Putin’s regime does not respect the borders and sovereignty of other countries, as witnessed with its ongoing invasion of Ukraine and attempt to annex parts of the country.

Russia’s aggression has upended many assumptions that influenced thinking about international relations in the post–Cold War era. It has ended the holiday from history in which wars between countries were rare. It has hollowed out the norm against countries’ acquiring territory by force. And it has demonstrated that economic interdependence is no bulwark against threats to world order. Many believed that Russia’s reliance on western European markets for its energy exports would encourage restraint. In reality, such ties did no better in moderating Russian behavior than they did in preventing the outbreak of World War I. Worse yet, interdependence proved to be more of a constraint on countries that had allowed themselves to grow reliant on Russia (above all, Germany) than on Russia itself.

All that said, Russia will emerge weakened from what promises to be a long war with Ukraine. Unlike the Soviet Union, Russia is anything but a superpower. Even before Western countries imposed sanctions on Russia in response to its assault on Ukraine, the Russian economy was not among the ten largest in the world in terms of GDP; at least in part because of those sanctions, it is expected to contract by up to ten percent over the course of 2022. Russia's economy remains heavily dependent on energy production; its armed forces have revealed themselves to be poorly led and organized and no match for NATO. Again, however, it is Russian weakness juxtaposed against Putin's willingness and ability to act recklessly with the military and nuclear strength he does possess that makes Russia such a danger.

Russia presents an acute, near-term problem for the United States. China, in contrast, poses a far more serious medium- and long-term challenge. The wager that integrating China into the world economy would make it more open politically, more market oriented, and more moderate in its foreign policy failed to pay off and has even backfired. Today, China is more repressive at home and has vested more power in the hands of one individual than at any time since the reign of Mao Zedong. State-owned enterprises, rather than being rolled up, remain omnipresent, while the government seeks to constrain private industry. China has regularly stolen and incorporated the intellectual property of others. Its conventional and nuclear military might has increased markedly. It has militarized the South China Sea, economically coerced its neighbors, fought a border clash with India, and crushed democracy in Hong Kong, and it continues to increase pressure on Taiwan.

Russia and China share an animosity to a U.S.-led international system.

Yet China also has significant internal weaknesses. After booming for decades, the country's economy is now beginning to stall, diluting a principal source of the regime's legitimacy. It is unclear how the Chinese Communist Party can restore strong economic growth, given the country's political constraints, which hamper innovation, and demographic realities, including a shrinking labor pool. China's aggressive foreign policy, meanwhile, has alienated many of its neighbors. And China is nearly certain to face a difficult leadership transition over the next decade. Like Putin, Xi has consolidated power in his own hands in ways that will complicate any succession and perhaps lead to a power struggle. The outcome is difficult to predict: an internal struggle could result in diminished international activism or the emergence of more benign leaders, but it could also lead to even more nationalist foreign policies designed to rally support or distract public attention.

What is certain is that Xi and other Chinese leaders seem to assume that China will pay little if any cost for its aggressive behavior, given that others are too dependent on its exports or on access to its market. So far, this assumption has been borne out. Yet a conflict between the United States and China no longer seems like a remote possibility. Meanwhile, as Washington's relations with Moscow and Beijing grow tenser, Russia and China are growing closer. They share an animosity to a U.S.-led international system that they see as inhospitable to their political systems at home and their ambitions abroad. Increasingly, they are willing to act on their objections and do so in tandem. Unlike 40 or 50 years ago, it is the United States that now finds itself the odd man out when it comes to triangular diplomacy.

MIND THE GAP

As the geopolitical picture among great powers has darkened, a chasm has opened between global challenges and the machinery meant to contend with them. Take global health. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the limitations of the World Health Organization and the unwillingness or inability of even rich, developed countries to respond to a crisis that they had every reason to anticipate. Some 15 to 18 million people worldwide have thus far died as a result, millions of them unnecessarily. And nearly three years after the pandemic began, China's refusal to cooperate with an independent investigation means the world still does not know how the virus originated and initially spread, making it harder to prevent the next outbreak—and providing a prime example of how old, familiar geopolitical dysfunctions are combining with new problems.

Among other global challenges, climate change has arguably received the most international attention, and rightly so—yet there is little to show for it. Unless the world makes rapid progress on reducing greenhouse gas emissions during this decade, it will be much more difficult to preserve and protect life as we know it on this planet. But diplomatic efforts have come up short and show no sign of improving. Individual countries determine their own climate goals, and there is no price for setting them low or not meeting them. Generating post-pandemic economic growth and locking in energy supplies—a concern heightened by the war in Ukraine and the disruptions it has yielded in the energy sector—have increased countries’ focus on energy security at the expense of climate considerations. Once again, a traditional geopolitical concern has collided with a new problem, making it harder to contend with either one.

When it comes to nuclear proliferation, the reality is more complex. Some scholars predicted that dozens of states would have developed nuclear weapons by now; in fact, only nine have developed full-fledged programs. Many advanced industrialized countries that could develop nuclear weapons have chosen not to. No one has used a nuclear weapon since the United States did so in the final days of World War II. And no terrorist group has gained access to one.

A chasm has opened between global challenges and the machinery meant to contend with them. But appearances can be deceiving: in the absence of proliferation, nuclear weapons have attained a new value. After the breakup of the Soviet Union, Ukraine gave up the Soviet nuclear weapons that remained on its territory; since then, it has been invaded twice by Russia, an outcome that might persuade others that giving up nuclear weapons decreases a country’s security. Regimes in Iraq and Libya were ousted after abandoning their nuclear weapons programs, which could make other leaders hesitant to do so or encourage them to consider the advantages of developing or acquiring nuclear capabilities. North Korea remains secure as it continues to expand its nuclear arsenal and the means to deliver it. Russia, for its part, appears to be according nuclear weapons a larger role in its defense posture. And the U.S. decision to rule out direct military involvement in Ukraine out of a fear that dispatching troops or establishing a no-fly zone could lead to a nuclear World War III will be seen by China and others as evidence that possessing a substantial nuclear arsenal can deter Washington—or at least get it to act with greater restraint.

No wonder, then, that Iran is putting in place many of the prerequisites of a nuclear weapons program amid negotiations meant to revive the 2015 nuclear deal from which the United States withdrew in 2018. The talks seem to have hit a wall, but even if they succeed, the problem will not go away, as the accord features a number of sunset clauses. It is thus more a question of when, not if, Iran makes enough progress to provoke an attack intended to prevent Tehran’s nuclear capability from reaching fruition. Or one or more of Iran’s neighbors might decide they need nuclear weapons of their own to counter Iran should it be able to field nuclear weapons with little warning. The Middle East, for three decades the least stable region of the world, may well be on the cusp of an even more dangerous era.

TROUBLE AT HOME

As problems new and old collide and combine to challenge the U.S.-led order, perhaps the most worrisome changes are taking place inside the United States itself. The country retains many strengths. But some of its advantages—the rule of law, orderly transitions of power, the ability to attract and retain talented immigrants on a large scale, socioeconomic mobility—are now less certain than they once were, and problems such as gun violence, crime in urban areas, drug abuse, and illegal immigration have become more pronounced. In addition, the country is held back by political divisions. A widespread refusal among Republicans to accept the results of the 2020 presidential election, which led to the attack on the Capitol on January 6, 2021, suggests the possible emergence of an American version of Northern Ireland’s “Troubles.” Localized, politically inspired violence might well become commonplace in the United States. Recent Supreme Court decisions and the diverging domestic reactions to them have reinforced the impression of a Disunited States of America. As a result, the American political model has become less appealing, and democratic backsliding in the United States has contributed to backsliding elsewhere. Making matters worse, U.S. economic mismanagement led to the 2008 global financial crisis, and more recent missteps have allowed

inflation to skyrocket, further damaging the country's reputation. Perhaps most worrisome is the erosion of faith in Washington's basic steadiness. Without a consensus among Americans on their country's proper role in the world, there have been wild swings in U.S. foreign policy, from the George W. Bush administration's catastrophic overreach in Iraq, to the Obama administration's debilitating underreach in the Middle East and elsewhere, to the Trump administration's incompetence and transactionalism, which led many to doubt whether precedent or standing commitments mattered anymore in Washington. The Biden administration has done much to prioritize alliances and partnerships, but it, too, has at times reinforced doubts about American steadfastness and competence, especially during the chaotic withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan last year.

The fact that it is impossible to predict who will occupy the Oval Office in the future is nothing new; what is new is that it is impossible to assume much about how that person will approach the United States' relationship with the world. The result is that U.S. allies and partners increasingly have no choice but to weigh continued reliance on Washington against other alternatives, such as greater self-sufficiency or deference to powerful neighbors. An additional risk is that Washington's ability to deter rivals will diminish as its foes come to see the United States as too divided or reluctant to act.

ONE BIG IDEA?

In the face of the geopolitical tumult and global challenges that seem certain to define this decade, no overarching doctrine or construct for American foreign policy will be able to play the role that containment did during the Cold War, when the concept provided a good deal of clarity and consensus. Such constructs are useful for guiding policymakers, explaining policies to the public, reassuring allies, and signaling adversaries. But the contemporary world does not lend itself to such a simple frame: today, there are simply too many challenges of different sorts that do not sit inside a single construct. Accounting for this judgment is the reality that it is no longer possible to speak of world order as a single phenomenon: there is the traditional geopolitical order reflecting balances of power and the extent to which norms are shared, and there is what one might term the globalization order reflecting the breadth and depth of common effort to meet challenges such as climate change and pandemics. World order (or the lack of it) is increasingly the sum of the two.

That does not mean that the United States should simply wing it and approach every foreign policy issue in isolation. But instead of a single big idea, Washington should use a number of principles and practices to guide its foreign policy and reduce the risk that the coming decade will produce a calamity. This shift would translate into a foreign policy that is based largely on alliances to deter Russian and Chinese aggression and selective partnerships of the like-minded to address global challenges that the United States cannot ignore or handle on its own. In addition, democracy promotion at home rather than abroad should be the focus of U.S. attention, since there is more to build on and more to lose if the effort fails.

The greatest immediate threat to global order stems from Russian aggression against Ukraine. Properly managing the war will require a delicate balance, one that blends determination with realism. The West must provide extensive military and economic support to Ukraine to ensure its continued viability as a sovereign state and to prevent Russia from controlling more territory than it already holds, but the West also needs to accept that military force alone cannot end the Russian occupation. That outcome would require political change in Moscow and the arrival of a leadership willing to reduce or end Russia's presence in Ukraine in exchange for sanctions relief. Putin will never accept such a deal. And to offer a worthwhile compromise to a hypothetical future regime in Moscow, Washington and its partners would need to levy far more draconian sanctions on all Russian energy exports—above all, a ban on natural gas exports to Europe.

On China, the United States likewise needs to strengthen the foundations of a regional order. That means prioritizing its alliance with Japan, the Quad (Australia, India, Japan, and the United States), and the AUKUS grouping (Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States). Applying the lessons gleaned from watching Europe's awkward dance with Russia, the United States needs to reduce its interdependence with China—which, in too many instances, looks an awful lot like dependence on China. This would mean scaling back economic relations so that imports from China and exports to it

become less essential to the economic health of the United States and that of its partners—which will make it easier to stand up to China, or even sanction it, if need be. The United States and other Western countries must bolster the resiliency of supply chains in critical materials through a mix of diversification and redundancy, stockpiling, pooling arrangements, and, when necessary, increased domestic production. This is not economic decoupling so much as economic distancing.

Washington and its partners will also need to respond forcefully if China moves against Taiwan. Allowing China to capture the island would have massive ramifications: every American ally and partner would reconsider its security dependence on the United States and opt for either appeasement of China or some form of strategic autonomy, which would likely involve obtaining nuclear weapons. A conflict over Taiwan would also lead to a profound global economic shock owing to Taiwan's dominant role in manufacturing advanced semiconductors.

Preventing such a scenario—or, if required, defending against a Chinese attack—calls for Washington to adopt a posture of strategic clarity on Taiwan, leaving no doubt that the United States would intervene militarily to protect the island and putting in place the security and economic means to back up that pledge. More international involvement, not less, will be required, which should entail at a minimum coordinating a strong sanctions package with European and Asian allies.

U.S. policy should not seek to transform Russia or China.

Relations with both Russia and China will remain complex, as they will not be one-dimensional even if they are largely competitive or adversarial. High-level, private strategic dialogues should become a component of both bilateral relationships. The rationale for such dialogues has less to do with what they might accomplish than what they might prevent, although in the case of China, there could be greater scope for exploring rules to guide relations between the two powers. Diverging and competing U.S., Russian, and Chinese attitudes and ambitions may rule out more than limited collaboration on world order, but these fault lines arguably make communication among the three countries all the more vital to reduce the chance of a grave miscalculation on geopolitical matters.

Meanwhile, U.S. policy should not seek to transform Russia or China, not because doing so would be undesirable but because advocating for regime change would likely prove irrelevant or counter-productive. The United States must deal with Russia and China as they are, not as Washington would prefer them to be. The principal focus of U.S. foreign policy toward Russia and China should not be to reshape their societies but to influence their foreign policy choices.

Over time, it is possible that limiting their external success and avoiding confrontation with them will build pressures inside their political systems, which could lead to desirable change, much as four decades of containment did with the Soviet Union. But Washington ought not to pose an existential threat to either government lest it strengthen the hands of those in Moscow and Beijing who argue that they have nothing to lose by acting recklessly and that there is nothing to be gained from working selectively with the United States.

Realism must trump idealism.

There is another reason for prioritizing the promotion of order over the promotion of democracy—one that has nothing to do directly with Russia and China. Efforts to build international order, be it for the purpose of resisting aggression and proliferation or combating climate change and infectious disease, have broad support among nondemocracies. A world order premised on respect for borders and common efforts on global challenges is preferable to a liberal world order premised on neither. That so many countries have not participated in sanctioning Russia is revealing. Framing the crisis in Ukraine as one of democracy versus authoritarianism has, not surprisingly, fallen flat among many illiberal leaders. The same logic applies to the U.S. relationship with Saudi Arabia, which the Biden administration is belatedly working to repair: a preference for democracy and human rights is one thing, but a foreign policy based on such a preference in a world defined by geopolitics and global challenges is unwise and unsustainable.

A similarly clear-eyed view should determine how Washington approaches cooperation on global challenges. Multilateralism is far preferable to unilateralism, but narrow multilateralism is far more promising than universal or broad forms of collective action that rarely succeed; witness, for example, the course of climate-change diplomacy and trade. Better to pursue realistic partnerships of the like-minded, which can bring a degree of order to the world, including specific domains of limited order, if not quite world order. Here, too, realism must trump idealism.

This observation has direct implications for dealing with climate change. Climate change poses an existential threat, and although a global response would be best, geopolitics will continue to make such collaboration difficult. The United States and its partners should emphasize narrower diplomatic approaches, but progress on mitigation is more likely to stem from technological breakthroughs than from diplomacy. That owes not to a lack of possible policy tools but rather to a lack of political support in the United States and other countries for those measures or for trade pacts that could encourage mitigation by imposing taxes or tariffs on goods derived from fossil fuels or manufactured through energy-inefficient processes. As a result, the goal of adapting to climate change should receive more attention and resources, as should exploration of the technological possibility of reversing it.

FORGING AHEAD

Three last considerations fall most directly on the United States. As it works to untie the knots that bind old geopolitical dilemmas to newer problems, the United States will face a number of serious threats, not only from Russia and China but also from Iran and a number of failed states that could provide oxygen to terrorists in the greater Middle East, and from North Korea, whose conventional military and nuclear capabilities continue to grow. Security, therefore, will require Washington to increase defense spending by as much as one percent of GDP: still considerably below Cold War levels, but a significant step up. U.S. allies will need to take similar steps.

In dealing with the many threats that will define this decade, the United States will also need to act with both greater caution and greater boldness in the economic realm. There is as yet no serious alternative to the dollar as the world's de facto reserve currency, but that day may come, especially if Washington continues to weaponize the dollar through the frequent imposition of sanctions, in particular those targeting central banks. If a competitor currency emerges, the United States will lose its ability to borrow at low rates and inflate its way out of its massive debt, which currently stands at more than \$30 trillion. Even now this debt threatens to crowd out more productive government spending, since the cost of servicing it will rise along with interest rates. But fiscal caution should be combined with a more assertive approach to trade, which would ideally mean joining the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership and fleshing out newly announced frameworks in the Indo-Pacific and the Americas so that they lower barriers to trade in goods and services, set standards for data, and meaningfully address climate change.

Ultimately, however, the biggest risk to U.S. security in the decade to come is to be found in the United States itself. A country divided against itself cannot stand; nor can it be effective in the world, as a fractious United States will not be viewed as a reliable or predictable partner or leader. Nor will it be able to tackle its domestic challenges. Bridging the country's divisions will take sustained effort on the part of politicians, educators, religious leaders, and parents. Most desired norms and behaviors cannot be mandated, but voters have the power to reward or penalize politicians according to their behavior. And some changes, including expanding civics education and opportunities for national service, could be formally introduced.

Navigating a decade that promises to be as demanding and dangerous as this one—a decade that will present old-fashioned geopolitical risks alongside growing global challenges—calls for a foreign policy that avoids the extremes of wanting to transform the world or ignoring it, of working alone or with everyone. It will ask a great deal of U.S. policymakers and diplomats at a time when the country they work for is deeply divided and easily distracted. What is certain is that the course of this decade and decades to come will depend on the quality of officials' political skills at home and their statecraft abroad.

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