The Return of Statecraft
Back to Basics in the Post-American World

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For more than 70 years, starting in the middle of World War II, the United States bestrode the world like a colossus. Its economy and military emerged from the war not just unscathed but also supreme. Its institutions of governance—a unified Department of Defense, a system of far-flung military commands, the National Security Council, specialized agencies for international development, and so on—were those of an effective global hegemon. Even when it was locked in a mortal struggle with the alien and hostile ideology of communism, it held most of the winning cards. And as colossi do, it elicited resentment from those not content to live in its shadow.

For anyone who hadn’t noticed the growing challenges to American dominance, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, in February of this year, should have erased any doubts. International politics had clearly entered a new era, one in which the old forms of predatory state behavior had returned, and the putative global hegemon proved unable to stop it. The colossus could not get its way.

But the United States’ relative decline could be seen in many indicators long before the Russian invasion. The U.S. economy now produces under a quarter of global GDP, compared with 40 percent in 1960. The United States’ military spending is still enormous, accounting for as much as 40 percent of the world’s total, but it no longer generates the same margin of superiority it once did. The United States confronts opponents that are nimbler in adopting new technologies and modes of warfare. Its ideology of free minds and free markets faces challenges not only from foreign models of authoritarian efficiency and ethnonational-
ism but also from waning confidence in American institutions. A 2021 Pew Research survey found that a healthy majority of the populations of 14 countries, all U.S. allies, held the view that democracy in the United States “used to be a good example but has not been in recent years.” The insurrection that swept a mob of jeering, violent vandals into the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, to overturn President Donald Trump’s electoral loss dealt a greater blow to the United States’ reputation than did the attacks on New York and Washington 20 years earlier.

For the foreseeable future, the United States will remain powerful. Although China’s rise means that it may not have the world’s largest economy forever, it will certainly have the second-largest and possibly the most dynamic and globally connected one. It has one of the biggest and most experienced militaries on the planet, along with plentiful allies. Above all, the United States has a demonstrated resilience going back to its founding. It has been rent before, suffered grievous economic setbacks, and, time and again, bounced back.

Nonetheless, relative decline is a fact. Historians will dissect why the age of American dominance ended when it did and whether its disappearance might have been delayed or mitigated. The question now, however, is how the United States should adjust to its changing position. The response will have many elements, but the most important is attitudinal. After decades of relying on big strategic ideas that are translated into policy by complex and arduous bureaucratic processes, the U.S. government must return to statecraft. This means an approach that embodies a fine-grained comprehension of the world, the ability to quickly detect and respond to challenges, a penchant for exploiting opportunities as they arise, and, behind all of this, effective institutions for the formulation and conduct of a nimble foreign policy.

In the previous era, the United States was strong enough to get away with less-than-perfect implementation of its big ideas. Its unrivaled power granted it a wide margin of error, enough space so that Washington could get most of what it wanted, no matter what its level of competence. Today, when it is much harder for Washington to call the shots, the problems it faces demand not more abstruse strategies. They require something far earthier: skill.

IDEAS AND THEIR LIMITS
The recommendation to downplay extensive, formal strategizing in favor of deftness, strength, and agility swims against the tendency of
the time. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine earlier this year came when a new U.S. grand strategy was supposedly set: focus on the rivalry with China and (more or less) leave Europe and the Middle East to their own devices. The showers of Russian missiles and bombs blew up not only Ukrainian towns but also that scheme. Even before the invasion, intellectuals were advocating the revival of grand strategy—that is, a sweeping concept for the conduct of foreign policy. Author after author has called for a new “X” article, akin to the one written by the diplomat George Kennan in these pages in 1947, which laid out the Cold War grand strategy of containment. Today, some scholars, harking back to Wilsonian idealism, have suggested that the United States should orient its policies around the creation of a new “rules-based international order.” Others have proposed “retrenchment,” a realpolitik-driven acceptance of decline and a diminished role for the United States on the world stage. There are still other grand strategic variants floating about, but all share a desire to boil down the complexities of foreign policy into a few clear dicta. What matters most, their proponents argue, is having the right intellectual framework; the rest is commentary.

This notion is flawed. It is of course essential to have some organizing ideas about the world—that the United States should pursue both its interests and its ideals, for example, or that it faces chal-
lenges from the rise of competitors and such developments as climate change and state failure. Decision-makers can call such ideas “grand strategy” if they must, but they should not ascribe excessive importance to them, because such general principles offer limited help when it comes to formulating specific policies. Grand strategy relies on simplifications, and yet the world is complex.

So, for that matter, is the United States. For one thing, it is both a status quo and a revisionist power. It seeks to preserve key elements of the world order—the rule of law, the free flow of trade, individual liberty—and yet because of its attachment to these ideals, it opposes and often seeks to transform those regimes that have no such attachment. For another thing, U.S. foreign policy is shaped by a complex blend of ideals and interests that vary by time and place. Just as it aligned with the Soviet Union against Nazi Germany, today it backs Saudi Arabia against Iran and Vietnam against China. Idealists who argue that the United States must repudiate any connection with unsavory partners ignore complexity in favor of dogmatic simplification.

Also guilty of this charge are the retrenchers, who dismiss all consideration of values in foreign policy. Countries that brutalize their populations, assassinate dissidents, subvert legitimate governments, and indulge in paranoid fantasies about external enemies are obviously more dangerous than other states. In the nineteenth century, the United States and the United Kingdom found themselves on opposite sides of various territorial disputes, but each side never considered the other as dangerous as both did the totalitarian dictatorships of the twentieth century.

Grand strategy abstracts policy from the contingency of personalities and unforeseeable events. The doctrine of containment, for instance, offered no particular guidance on how to manage the crises in Berlin and Cuba or the wars in Korea and Vietnam. Yet the study of history reveals the overwhelming importance of unpredictable characters and events. U.S. policy toward China must contend with the personality of Chinese President Xi Jinping, whose methods and aims go well beyond those of his immediate predecessors. An unforeseen global pandemic has caused the United States to look either patheti-
cally weak (because it failed to stop the spread of the disease and vaccinate enough of its population) or remarkably strong (if its looser approach allows it to open its economy faster than China opens its own). And foreign leaders can take everyone by surprise. To adapt the former heavyweight champion Mike Tyson’s adage about boxing, that everybody has a plan until they get punched in the mouth, one might say that everybody has a grand strategy until Russia invades Ukraine.

THE PROBLEM WITH STRATEGY
Ideas matter, but they do not matter as much as intellectuals and politicians think they do. What matters far more is statecraft, which is about sensing, adjusting, exploiting, and doing rather than planning and theorizing. It is the skill of a judo player who may have plans but whose most important characteristic is agility. It is what the philosopher Isaiah Berlin called “understanding rather than knowledge,” an ability to “tell what fits with what: what can be done in given circumstances and what cannot, what means will work in what situations and how far.”

A focus on statecraft rather than grand strategy is particularly urgent given the speed and unpredictability of today’s challenges. The United States is set to face confrontations with three opponents—China, Iran, and Russia—in the near future. Each is a revisionist power that wishes to acquire new possessions or recover old ones in its immediate neighborhood. Each fears long-term demographic decline and economic stagnation. Each has cultivated a style of warfare—hybrid or “gray zone”—that involves sophisticated tools, including proxies, cyberwarfare, low-cost technologies, selective repression, and even murder. Each is ruled by an aging leader who may wish to see major accomplishments within the next few years before he passes from the scene. Each is ready to cooperate, on a purely transactional basis, with the others. And each is threatened, not superficially but existentially, by the notion of free politics, the rule of law, and respect for individual liberties. All of this is a recipe for sudden, possibly stupid, and most definitely dangerous decisions that no grand strategist can predict. Look no further than Russian President Vladimir Putin’s foolhardy invasion of Ukraine.

Adding to the complication is the possibility that a crisis in one area may rebound in another. The chaos on NATO’s border, for instance, could strip U.S. resources away from Asia, and indeed, it
has already turned the United States’ attention back to the old cockpit of Cold War struggles. Some of the larger forces at work—climate change, democratic decay, Islamist terrorism—will present further opportunities for unpredictable crises. The United States’ goal should be to cope with this chaotic reality rather than provide an architecture for global politics.

Too often, however, Washington has incompetently executed its foreign policy, rendering any aspirations of grand strategy meaningless. The best example is the calamitous U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in the summer of 2021. On grand strategic grounds, one might have argued the case either way: cut U.S. losses and avoid the distractions of Afghanistan to focus on more important interests in East Asia or, alternatively, sustain a low-cost engagement in the country to maintain credibility and undermine radical Islamist movements in South Asia. Like most decisions in foreign policy, there were good arguments on both sides. What resulted, however, was an appalling failure of statecraft, and that is what really mattered.

The chaotic withdrawal left behind tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of Afghans who had worked with U.S. troops. It led to humiliating images of ragtag Islamists defeating the world’s sole superpower. And it dented the popularity of a president seeking to restore American prestige. It didn’t have to be this way: the pullout could have been scheduled for the end of the fighting season, the State Department could have prepared in advance special visas for Afghans who had worked with the United States, a larger temporary force could have been left to retain control of the country’s largest air base, and U.S. allies could have been forewarned so that they wouldn’t have to scramble to secure their nationals.

The debacle of the withdrawal from Afghanistan was but one of a number of self-inflicted wounds in recent years. In 2003, the George W. Bush administration invaded Iraq with no serious plan for the occupation that followed. In 2012, President Barack Obama declared that Syria’s use of chemical weapons would constitute a redline—and then never followed through when the country’s dictator, Bashar al-Assad, crossed that very line. The Trump administration, for its part, not only dismissed the importance of values in...
foreign policy; the president practically reveled in his relationship with Putin and (according to former National Security Adviser John Bolton) set the stage for what would have been a catastrophic exit from NATO. Even the inauguration of the AUKUS security partnership, with Australia and the United Kingdom—a moment that represented a long-term success in U.S. foreign policy—was marred by the Biden administration’s inept handling of a key ally, France, which was left humiliated by the unexpected cancellation of a major Australian-French submarine program.

None of this is to say that U.S. policymakers shouldn’t hold some core ideas—namely, that the United States should be prepared to play an active role abroad, that it has an interest in the free flow of goods and ideas, and that it favors democracy over dictatorship. U.S. policymakers in the twentieth century correctly concluded that the aggressive proclivities of revisionist dictatorships would ultimately impinge on the United States and that regimes that were repressive at home were more likely to use force abroad and toward malevolent ends. That connection has not yet been broken. Still, a basic understanding of the need to be actively engaged in the world on the basis of both values and interests provides only the most limited guidance for the conduct of policy. That is especially true at a time when the United States is not in a position to create a new world order (as it was in the 1940s) or benignly manage an existing one (as it was after the Cold War). After World War II, big new ideas were indeed required for the world order that only the United States, with its unmatched and untouched economy, could create. Today, the United States, crowded by aggressive autocracies, sliding democracies, and unpredictable global phenomena, simply cannot come up with schemes comparable to those of the immediate postwar period. Instead, it has to turn to statecraft.

RECOVERING STATECRAFT

One element of a renewed commitment to statecraft should be a pronounced tilt in policy and intellectual circles toward empiricism over generalization. Accurately judging the environment is no small task. Over the last two decades, for example, U.S. policymakers failed to recognize the speed with which China would rise and the threat that it could pose to the United States’ world position, even though the Chinese were hardly hiding their ambitions. Washington dismissed Beijing’s military buildup and did little to counter its aggressive naval
tactics in the South China Sea. The Obama and Trump administrations alike failed to secure congressional passage of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the proposed trade bloc that would have helped balance China. In missing the China threat, policymakers let a priori beliefs—the kind that characterize most grand strategic thinking—get in the way of good political judgment. They adhered to a theory of development that saw global economic integration as leading to political liberalization, a hypothesis that in the case of China proved utterly false.

Understanding the environment means constantly searching for linkages. Many U.S. analysts have made the mistake of treating the rise of a revanchist Russia, for example, as a matter of discrete rather than linked episodes. Moscow’s military incursions into Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 were treated as separate problems rather than a reflection of a new and dangerous course in Russian policy, one that could not be met with the Obama administration’s “reset” of U.S.-Russian relations or with Trump’s personal connection to Putin. The result: for more than a decade, the United States failed to develop and deploy the military power that it needed to deter Russian aggression.

U.S. decisions on Afghanistan, Syria, and other trouble spots were similarly treated as local and separable, with little apparent awareness that they would have global repercussions. It was surely no accident that Russia’s annexation of Crimea followed less than a year after the Obama administration failed to enforce its supposed red-line on Syria’s use of chemical weapons. Nor was it likely a coincidence that Russia invaded Ukraine following the United States’ humiliating scuttle from Afghanistan.

Statecraft also entails speed. Acting swiftly is a matter not of doctrine but of mindset, culture, and preparation. In his posthumously published memoir about the fall of France in 1940, the historian and Resistance martyr Marc Bloch made a damning observation: “From the beginning to the end of the war, the metronome at headquarters was always set at too slow a beat.” The problem lay not in France’s grand strategy but in its sluggish decision-making apparatus. Therein lies another challenge for the United States in today’s world—its temptation to follow the dictum supposedly put forward by British Prime Minister Winston Churchill: “The Americans can always be trusted to do the right thing, once all other possibilities have been exhausted.” But in a world that is spinning faster and faster, the United States may no longer have the luxury of exhausting all other possibilities before doing the right thing.
THE ARCHITECTURE OF COMPETENCE

Improving American statecraft should begin with an audit of the institutions that formulate and implement policy. Of all the constituent parts of the U.S. national security establishment, only one has truly engaged in harsh self-scrutiny: the U.S. Marine Corps, which after two decades of counterinsurgency warfare reoriented itself toward expeditionary warfare in the Indo-Pacific. It is not at all clear that other branches of the armed forces have done anything close, to say nothing of the government’s intelligence, international aid, and public diplomacy agencies. The failures in Afghanistan and Iraq reflected not only particular policy choices but also institutional pathologies that prevented the development of competent local forces and flooded those countries with economic aid that was as often counterproductive as it was useful. Expensive development projects, for example, facilitated corruption and siphoned off English-speaking Afghans from teaching and government work but did little to build a reliable army and police force. Yet there is very little evidence that the United States’ national security institutions are interested in painful introspection or reform.

A comprehensive institutional audit would suggest not only the reform, or even the abolition, of some organizations but also the revival of old ones or the creation of new ones. Since the dominant mode of war today is hybrid conflict, the United States needs to be much better at playing offense. To that end, it might revive the U.S. Information Agency, which spread pro-American propaganda during the Cold War before being dismantled in the late 1990s. Or it might mobilize civilian cyber-militias that could undermine hostile governments by wielding the most powerful weapon of all, the truth. The impromptu mustering of anti-Russian hackers by the Ukrainian government after Russia’s invasion is one example. The United States should also make advocacy for civil liberties both a matter of principle and a tool to weaken opponents. Russians, for example, should be bombarded with messages exposing the lies their regime feeds them, the truth regarding the human and economic losses they have experienced in and because of the war in Ukraine, and the calamitous consequences of becoming a Chinese vassal state excluded from the West.

In some cases, the problem is one not of institutions but of mindset—namely, the inability of leaders to deal with multiple crises simultaneously. There is no reason the United States cannot deal with more than one threat at a time; after all, it successfully fought
in two very different theaters during World War II. But doing so requires the discipline that a generation of leaders showed in calmly dividing their time and energy among multiple problems, rather than burning themselves and their staffs out on one issue at a time in an atmosphere of continual crisis. The picture of Obama’s entire team crowded in the Situation Room to follow the raid that killed Osama bin Laden in 2011, an operation they could do nothing to influence once it began, contrasts sharply with the behavior of American leaders the evening before D-Day. President Franklin Roosevelt watched movies, and General Dwight Eisenhower read a Western novel. According to a *New York Times* profile, during the withdrawal from Afghanistan, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan was getting only two hours of sleep a night—a troubling sign of a lack of decision-making discipline.

Some of the improvements needed are mundane indeed. More than one might think, sound foreign-policy making rests on the basics of bureaucratic behavior: clear and concise memorandums, crisply run meetings, well-disseminated conclusions, succinct and unambiguous guidance from above. Good process does not guarantee good policy, but it increases the odds of it. With that in mind, the U.S. government should pay renewed attention to the training and career management of security professionals. There are plenty of young people who wish to serve in government, but professional schools of international affairs often fail to prepare them for their actual duties.

It is long past time for Washington to invest heavily in professional education and development. Offering well-designed short courses at universities and even creating a state-run academy for foreign policy professionals from across government would cost a tiny fraction of the U.S. national security budget but could yield disproportionate results. The curriculum should focus on the mechanics of effective policy-making, as opposed to the mix of social science, current affairs, and business school organization theory that characterizes much of higher education in the field in the United States.

Restoring procedural competence also requires repairing the broken personnel system. The process for appointing people to top State Department and Pentagon posts has long been an abomination, and the problem is getting worse. A year into Joe Biden’s presidency, according to *The Washington Post*, the administration had vetted, nomi-
nated, and obtained Senate confirmation for just one-third of the 800 or so positions the newspaper was tracking. Some of the critical posts left vacant included the ambassadorships to South Korea and Ukraine, assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, and assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs. The White House and Congress, which share responsibility for these delays, need to accelerate the processing of political appointees. Their ranks should be thinned, too. Although political appointees bring fresh perspectives and a commitment to the president’s agenda, the United States could have half as many of them and still fill the upper echelons of government with a much higher proportion of noncareer officials than its peers have. As painful as both Democrats and Republicans might find it, a bipartisan push to reduce the number of political appointees and accelerate their processing would pay more dividends than any new national security document.

Statecraft also involves substantive choices—such as the persistent effort to divide one’s enemies. During the Washington Naval Conference of 1921–22, the United States maneuvered the negotiations so as to rupture the Anglo-Japanese alliance, possibly the most threatening foreign relationship at the time. In the 1960s and 1970s, it exploited the Sino-Soviet split to weaken the communist world. Today, Washington needs to drive a wedge between China and Russia—a task that will be difficult, given the anti-American and antidemocratic preoccupations of both countries’ leaders, but not unthinkable in the long term. Although Beijing and Moscow are deeply wary of efforts to pry them apart, they do have different foreign policy goals: where Russia seeks to break the international order, China seeks to bend it. Surely, the United States can find ways to play to Russian fears of Chinese dynamism, on the one hand, and to Chinese contempt for Russian bungling, on the other. The point is not to divide China and Russia in the near term, which is not feasible, but to maximize the points of friction in their relationship.

Intelligent opportunism is particularly valuable in an age of informal alliances and covert relationships. Washington has tended to downplay such ties, thinking of Afghanistan as a Taliban problem when it was also
a Pakistan problem, for example, or thinking of Iraq as an al Qaeda problem instead of an Iran problem, too. The solution begins with openly and unflinchingly identifying these connections. Again, there are opportunities to divide the opposition: for instance, Washington should reinforce the simmering competition between Russia and Turkey for influence in Central Asia by tilting toward Azerbaijan (Turkey’s client) in the conflict over the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Finally, U.S. statecraft must include a domestic component. For decades, U.S. foreign policy elites got used to making decisions without giving much thought to public opinion. They opened trade with China, for example, not worrying about the gutting of American industrial jobs that resulted. Today, they talk about abstract goals, such as “extended deterrence,” that make sense in Washington but will never enjoy the support of the American people. Americans have no particular reason to trust the experts who conduct foreign policy and little idea of what their leaders have signed them up for and why. Politicians have to explicitly connect developments in crisis areas to U.S. interests—clearly laying out, for example, how an independent Taiwan reflects American values (self-determination and liberty) and serves American interests (keeping one of the world’s most productive economies out of Chinese hands).

The 2022 crisis in Ukraine is a prime example of the need to substitute statecraft for grand strategy. The Biden administration, like its predecessor, correctly judged China to be the United States’ prime competitor. Putin’s decision to invade Ukraine was an unexpected jolt. What was called for was a quick and adroit reaction—and to its credit, the Biden administration was not only nimble but also cunning in its well-timed release of intelligence in the weeks before the invasion to undermine Russia’s attempts to lay the groundwork for its actions and divide Europe.

The crisis did not, of course, end there. A dangerous period looms in which Moscow will test Western resolve. It may, for example, claim a right to protect Russian speakers in the Baltic states or insist on the dismantling of NATO in eastern Europe. Worse, it might test the alliance’s commitment to collective defense by lobbing a missile or two at transshipment points for arms bound for Ukraine. To meet such threats, the United States will need not grand strategy but steadiness in confronting Russia, ingenuity in supplying Ukraine and frontline NATO allies while shutting down the Russian economy, and subtlety in guiding European rearmament.
THE CASE FOR PRAGMATISM
The United States is unique by virtue of many things—its values-based national identity, its massive size, its favorable geographic position, its overwhelming power, and its quarter-millennium history as a flawed but successful democracy. Today, however, it is entering a period of challenges for which grand strategy, with its penchant for grand simplifications, will not be very helpful. The country must navigate its way through a difficult world, manage crises, and incrementally do good where it can and confront evil where it must.

The United States’ foreign policy future will not echo the trumpet call of President John F. Kennedy’s 1961 inaugural address to “bear any burden, meet any hardship.” Rather, the United States should follow the guidance, at once principled and pragmatic, that President Theodore Roosevelt offered in his 1905 inaugural address: “Much has been given us, and much will rightfully be expected from us. We have duties to others and duties to ourselves; and we can shirk neither. We have become a great nation, forced by the fact of its greatness into relations with the other nations of the earth, and we must behave as beseems a people with such responsibilities.”

Roosevelt, who made a careful study of foreign policy throughout his career and took care to explain it to Americans beyond the cosmopolitan cities of the Northeast, was a shrewd practitioner. As assistant secretary of the navy and later as president, he helped revitalize both the army and the navy, making them fit for the needs of an emerging world power. In 1905, he seized the opportunity to broker a peace between Japan and Russia in a way that would benefit the United States. He anticipated the issues at stake in World War I long before most Americans did and advocated an earlier U.S. intervention that might well have shortened the conflict. He balanced ideals and interests. He was relentlessly curious about the world in which he operated, reading in foreign languages and traveling widely. He operated in an era in which the United States was powerful but hardly predominant and in which multiple forces were at work. His pragmatism, informed by principle, was not grand strategy. But it worked.