

A U.S. Grand Strategy: Do We Have One And What Should It Be?

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Every US President has his own vision of the world, of the proper role of the United States in it, of the goals to pursue, and of the ways to achieve them. In brief, whether clearly enunciated or not, whether plausible or not, whether properly resourced or not, a new administration always has some grand strategy, understood as a vision of the goals and means for the state.

The Biden administration follows, as Colin Dueck notes in his essay, a progressive vision that it wants to implement abroad and at home. At home, this vision seeks to remake society according to the latest progressive values. Abroad, it tries to redesign the world to fit the Wilsonian dream of a global community working to solve global challenges. The problem with such a vision lies both in the goals and the means. In brief, the goals are to change the world while the means are to strike a deal with the rival great powers. The progressive approach seeks to impose on the world an order based on shared rules of behavior aiming to tackle what are deemed to be common global challenges, such as climate change or inequities of various nature.

It is evident that there are great and small powers that are not on board with such a vision and try either to reject or to upset these global rules and multilateral processes. But here is where the means of the progressive vision come in: these powers have to be engaged, rather than forcefully opposed, and by doing so, they will come to appreciate the rules-based order. Hence, Russia must be kept in check but without allowing Ukraine a clear victory. Israel should be supported in its fight against Hamas, but Iran should not be punished too much. China is a problem but an economic “de-risking” should not close the door to engagement. This is a grand strategy of “responsible competition”: pursue international change without entering an escalatory relationship with the rivals, in the hope of a grand rapprochement. It is a strategy that

is simply not attuned to the geopolitical reality of the threats we face and of what we have in terms of relative power.

What should it be?

Five principles should guide American grand strategy, based on a more realistic assessment of the geopolitical dynamics and resulting in an adjustment of the goals, ways, and means - the expectations and the tools - of US foreign policy.^[1]

1. Don't expect a change in rivals

A fundamental change in the political, and therefore strategic, nature of American rivals, from China to Russia, is highly unlikely to occur. Any US grand strategy must begin from this assumption, pushing the country to prepare for a long competition that will not find a resolution in a euphoric moment of progressive change in our enemies.

The belief of the last decades, which also underpins President Biden's current approach, was that our rivals were hostile because of their authoritarian regimes. Were these regimes to mutate into more democratic polities, the competition would be mitigated and certainly these rivals' violent behavior would cease to destabilize the various regions. What's more, such regime changes were going to be the result of an inevitable natural progress, a product of history rather than fragile and rare moments of hard-won liberty. The inherent weakness of authoritarian regimes facing domestic opposition and international pressures would in fact lead to a positive change. Hence, the task of the West was to engage these rivals in the expectation of a transformation. If they had to be opposed because of bad behavior, the necessarily more forceful response (e.g., by seeking to contain Russian military offensives or Chinese aggressive economic behavior) was temporary, sooner or later returning to a more hopeful policy of harmonious engagement.

But it is reasonable to ask ourselves whether such a change in our rivals is feasible and likely. The West's opponents - from Russia to Hamas, from China to Iran - are not converging with its ethos and are unlikely to change in any meaningful timeframe. It is plausible that, despite the costs incurred by the wars they initiated and the aggressive behavior they continue to pursue, neither Russia nor China nor Iran will change. In some of these countries, there is deep popular support for military actions against their perceived enemies (Ukraine for Russia, Israel for Hamas, and the US for China). And the domestic opposition in those countries, if allowed to have a voice, is often more focused on the corruption of their elites than on the foreign policy of their states.

The 1989 change in Central Europe, which was a return to democracy and reorientation to the West, is not likely to be repeated among the current geopolitical rivals of the West. The problem with these rivals may thus be a deeply ingrained cultural or national hostility to the US and the West writ large. Their regimes and leaders are more symptoms than causes of enmity. Consequently, the competition will be long-term and generational, and our strategy must take that into account.

2. Focus on rivals, not on changing allies according to latest norms

Much of current US foreign policy is motivated by a strong push to impose on the world, on rivals and allies alike, niche and extreme norms or values. These values are often a source of great contention within the United States. When pushed abroad they weaken Washington's influence and ability to counter geopolitical rivals, not to mention deepen the dissatisfaction of the American public for US involvement abroad.

American officials promoting woke interpretations of rights in Africa, for instance, become the cultural aggressors, while our enemies, armed with money and economic incentives, become the defenders of local culture.

A proper grand strategy should distinguish between fundamental rights of the human person, often defined as natural rights, and personal preferences that constantly mutate. The former are rights that protect the individual from state power, permitting liberty to flourish. What progressives advocate is quite different: rights as wishes, personal preferences changing from individual to individual and often changing for the same individual, ranging from "right to leisure time" to the license to self-define oneself as male or female or something entirely different. These progressive "rights" turn the state into a domestic and international driver of social, economic, and cultural engineering, justifying the pervasive intrusion of its power.^[2]

Pushing such interpretations of rights abroad is a blunder of enormous and lasting consequences. Allies in particular should be left alone. Washington should neither expect nor enforce political uniformity among our allies because political freedom takes different national expressions. In the case of the democratic allies of the US especially, American promotion of nice concepts of rights is an interference in the legitimate domestic dynamics creating friction and enormous opportunities for our geopolitical rivals.

3. Sequence geopolitical theaters

The United States is unaccustomed to geostrategic tradeoffs. Since the 1990s it has enjoyed economic and military predominance and, at the same time, it did not have to deal with conflict on multiple fronts on different continents. The European theater was deactivated, the Asian one was seemingly becoming a place of a great convergence between responsible stakeholders, and the Middle East had remnants of conflicts while allegedly losing its strategic relevance in the digital age. The US did not have to prioritize one region over another.

The situation is profoundly different now: we face determined rivals who spend money and effort on military capabilities and are probing and aggressively challenging the status quo in their respective regions at the same time. Not being omnipotent, the US cannot be omnipresent.

The idea of sequencing the theaters is simple in conception, but, as always, hard in practice. It involves arresting one regional rival in its geographic theater in a way that allows the repositioning of American resources and attention to the other key theater.^[3] The deprioritization of one region would then be an

outcome of a successful check on the ambitions of the local revisionist power, rather than a mere abandoning of frontline allies due to a desperate attempt to focus on another, perhaps more pressing, threat. For instance, it would mean inflicting costs on Russia in Ukraine that would prevent Moscow from pursuing its westward imperial push for several years, if not decades, thereby allowing the US to devote resources to the Indo-Pacific.^[4]

4. Geopolitical subsidiarity

Frontline states, such as Israel, Ukraine, or Taiwan, are the best guarantors of their regional status quo. These states have the strongest incentive to maintain stability in their respective region, balancing the local revisionist power, because they bear the greatest costs of any dramatic change in the regional balance of power. Hence, they have the strongest credibility to oppose their nearby rival (Russia, China, or Iran and its proxies). The US should arm them if they are willing to defend themselves. At the same time, the US should refrain from micromanaging their tactical decisions.

One way to put this is that the US should embrace geopolitical subsidiarity. This is the idea that nothing should be done by a larger, higher entity that can be done more effectively by competent authorities closer to the problem. Usually, this concept refers to domestic politics: educating kids, for example, is best done at the level of the family and local schools rather than by a higher, centralized, national and thus more distant bureaucracy. But the logic applies to international stability. The United States cannot hold the entire length of the perimeter around the revisionist powers, spanning from Europe to Asia, from the Atlantic to the Pacific. It should not, therefore, attempt to do what can be done more effectively by local actors.

Ukraine and Israel are the early models. They are both willing to fight to protect their security and independence, bearing immediate and high costs. The US should not, and could not, do it for them, leaving for it the role of arms provider.

Geopolitical subsidiarity carries some risks, of course. Conflicts could escalate beyond the control of the US, as the armed frontline states could engage in actions that may be considered too risky by Washington. It is also possible that some frontline states (Taiwan comes to mind, but also many European states) simply choose not to arm and not to act at their level, despite their clear interests and incentives to do so. But the credibility, and ultimately the capacity, of the United States to maintain on its own the regional balance of power in multiple theaters at the same time is minimal. It is preferable to let locals take the initiative.

5. Mass matters

Artillery trumps soft power and quantity wins over precision. The lesson from the ongoing war in Ukraine is that artillery shells, ammunition, tanks, missiles and men continue to be the key ingredients for war. The post-modern belief that the attractiveness of a political idea and the inevitability of the progressive advance in history would be the predominant forces in international competitions has failed the test of hard power. Kutuzov defeats Derrida. Similarly, on a more tactical level, the Western predilection for a few, high-tech

weapons platforms capable of precise firepower works in a sharp, short conflict but falls short in a long, high-intensity positional slugfest. The result has been that much of the West is effectively disarmed. Even the largest defense spenders are poorly set up for a conventional war. The United Kingdom, for example, has about 150 tanks and a dozen functioning long-range artillery pieces. Germany has ammunition for two days of war.^[5] In a nutshell, the West's warehouses are effectively empty, unable to withstand the rapid depletion of weapons of a modern conventional war. Any US grand strategy that does not take into consideration the necessity to supply mass – that is, large quantities of military hardware and ammunition – will remain an academic exercise.

Mass also means the active participation of society in conflict or competition. This does not necessarily mean military conscription (albeit in the case of frontline states it should be considered), but, given that the rivalry with the other great powers will be long and tense, national unity and civilizational conviction are indispensable to the West's ability to withstand it.

We are in a great power competition that will be long and will not be resolved by some abstract historic force. US grand strategy needs to be grounded in a realistic assessment of the geopolitical reality at hand and of the available and most effective tools. The five principles described here are a starting point, limiting the ambitious goals of changing the world and adjusting the means.

[1] See also Nadia Schadlow, “[Conservative U.S. Statecraft for the 21st Century](#),” *Foreign Policy*, November 2022.

[2]<https://www.wsj.com/articles/woke-imperialism-harms-u-s-interests-china-russia-equity-worldview-11637596572>

[3] A. Wess Mitchell, “[A Strategy to Avoid a Two-Front War](#),” *The National Interest*, August 2021.

[4]https://themarathoninitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Marathon-Initiative_Getting-Strategic-Deprioritization-Right96.pdf

[5]<https://www.wsj.com/world/europe/alarm-nato-weak-military-empty-arsenals-europe-a72b23f4>

