

American Foreign Policy in Transition: From Cold War Consensus to Controversy and Confusion

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Twenty-five years after the demise of the Soviet Union, Americans are still struggling to understand and adjust to the costs and consequences of success. Ordinary citizens recognized that the end of the Cold War was a big deal, but few saw an urgent need to tamper with the policies and priorities that achieved victory, avoided nuclear war, and raised living standards. Self-congratulatory triumphalism and voter confidence in politicians and the political system contributed to a general sense that trend lines were positive and that continuing to do what we had been doing was both adequate and prudent. The result was an atmosphere in which most voters were happy to devote little attention to “politics” so they could focus on family, work, or other interests.

The situation summarized above prolonged the Cold War consensus that entrusted management of national security and international engagement to politicians and the foreign policy elite. The diplomats, military professionals, trade specialists, and other members of this elite were inclined to—and did—maintain essentially the same approach to international affairs that had brought success in the Cold War. This approach entailed assumption by the United States of disproportionate responsibility for maintenance of the liberal order that evolved in the so-called “free world” but expanded after 1991 to include all but a handful of nations. Inherent inequities in the approach were ignored or accepted by American voters because they were perceived as facilitating their own security and prosperity.

The factors summarized above made American foreign policy both stable and predictable. This, in turn, contributed to stability in the international system. Not all international actors liked or supported American objectives and approaches, but they could anticipate and adapt to decisions made in Washington. That is no longer the case or, more accurately, it is no longer as easy to understand or anticipate what the United States will do or wants to achieve. Much of the world and many Americans find this unsettling. Some hope that Washington will soon revert to policies and approaches of the past. Others seem to have concluded—erroneously—that the United States is in inescapable decline and cannot again provide leadership and stability to the international system. My own judgment is that American foreign policy will become more stable and predictable than it is today, but it will not simply revert to the policies of a now bygone era.

Supporters and critics of President Trump alike ascribe most responsibility (or blame) for the current state of American foreign policy to his refusal to accept the logic of policies endorsed by Republican and Democratic predecessors.¹ That is certainly true,

¹ See, for example, Stephen Sestanovich, “The Brilliant Incoherence of Trump’s Foreign Policy,” *The Atlantic*, May 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/05/the-brilliant-incoherence-of->

but attributing what the Trump administration is doing to iconoclasm or ignorance misses the larger points that the world is very different than it was when core elements of America's post-WW II foreign policy were formulated, and that the consensus undergirding those policies no longer exists. Neither Trump nor any successor can simply revert to what was effective in the past. Restoring clarity, coherence, and predictability to American foreign policy is an urgent and achievable goal, but articulating a vision for the international system in the 21st century, developing a strategy to achieve that vision, and forging a new consensus to support that strategy will be far more difficult.

Factors Undergirding Continuity of US Foreign Policy

For many decades, the United States was perceived to be—and was—a bastion of stability and predictability in a divided and turbulent world. Even when US domestic politics were tumultuous, as they were during the 1960s and 1970s, American foreign policy was remarkably stable. Americans stressed, stretched, and transformed our political system and social structure, but our foreign policy goals and the means used to pursue them remained essentially unchanged. To understand why foreign and security policies remained stable and evolved in predictable ways, it is useful to examine developments in four issue arenas: the international system, the US economy, social conditions in the United States, and perceptions of government performance.

International System. Decades after the end of the Cold War, it is easy to underestimate the decisive importance of the existential competition between the US-led “free world” and the Soviet-led “socialist” bloc. The United States, the Soviet Union, and their respective allies were fixated on the dangers and consequentiality of this all-encompassing struggle. For Americans, this was the single most important security concern; everything else paled in comparison. Despite at times deep division on domestic issues and occasional debate over specific initiatives and responses in the foreign policy arena, the consensus in favor of doing everything necessary to avoid defeat in the Cold War struggle and annihilation in nuclear war was deep, broad, and strong.²

Existential rivalry between the “free world” and the “socialist bloc” was a seemingly never-ending fact of life that had to be managed through deterrence and détente. The United States used a combination of preferential access to US arms, markets, training, and technology to strengthen its allies and woo the non-aligned. Use of these instruments and blandishments produced the desired results—preserving strategic stability, enhancing prosperity and stability in allied states, and promoting American prosperity. The perceived efficacy of US national security policies buttressed other incentives to insulate foreign policy from the vicissitudes of domestic politics and to

[trumps-foreign-policy/521430/](https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/04/12/donald-trump-has-a-coherent-realist-foreign-policy/); and Rosa Brooks, “Donald Trump has a Coherent, Realist Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Policy*, April 12, 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/04/12/donald-trump-has-a-coherent-realist-foreign-policy/>.

² General histories illustrating these points include James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1971* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); and Joshua B. Freeman, *American Empire: The Rise of a Global Power and the Democratic Revolution at Home* (New York: Viking, 2012).

reassure friends and deter adversaries by maintaining a high degree of continuity and predictability.

The logic undergirding these policies and the consensus-driven dynamic that effectively delegated responsibility for managing national security issues to the executive branch favored foreign policy continuity. Richard Nixon's opening to China was a logical extension of the already long-standing commitment to do whatever was necessary to prevent defeat in the Cold War. When Nixon and Kissinger seized a perceived opportunity to constrain the USSR by improving relations with China, it shocked Japan and many other nations and surprised the American public, but it did not trigger debate or dissension in the United States.³

Almost a decade later, when Jimmy Carter saw an even better opportunity to constrain Moscow by supporting Deng Xiaoping's "Reform and Opening" strategy to achieve wealth and power through modernization and export-led growth, the American public again understood and approved the logic of what he did.⁴ The way in which Nixon changed the US relationship with China and Carter's decision to enable China to benefit from participation in the free world economic order without changing its form of government greatly expanded the economic possibility space of the US and its allies, but until 1992 everything that happened was still bounded by Cold War parameters.

Viewed through this lens, the Nixon and Carter initiatives were tactical adjustments made to enhance the position of the US and the "West" in the enduring competition with the Soviet bloc. Characterizing them in this way does not diminish their importance to the United States, China, the region, and the world, which was, of course, very substantial. Americans giddily welcomed China's de facto membership in the liberal international order, and US policy toward China allowed for more far-reaching and deeper engagement. Politicians and pundits proclaimed the dawn of a new era, but the situation rather quickly settled into a "new normal" that looked a lot like the old normal, and the United States continued to act much as it had since the end of World War II. Most who commented on these important tactical shifts extolled the wisdom and courage of the presidents who made them; few characterized them as desperate attempts to retain US hegemony, resuscitate the US economy, or bolster political support for the administration. The bottom line judgment of most was that Washington seemed to know what it was doing, and that US actions after the shock would again be as predictable as they had been previously.

The Economy and the Middle Class. The American people have benefitted greatly from decades of economic success. Investments in infrastructure and education in the 1950s and 1960s, government investment in research and development intended to counter Soviet numerical superiority with technically superior weapons, the vitality and success of American firms in the rules-based economic order that prevailed in the "free world," and corporate cultures that shared increased profits with workers as well as

³ See Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1979), chapters 18, 19, and 24.

⁴ See Michael J. Green, *By More than Providence: Grand Strategy and American Power in the Asia Pacific Since 1788* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), chapters 9-10; and Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser, 1977-1981* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985), chapter 6.

investors. Tens of millions of families moved into the middle class, purchased homes, and became accustomed to steadily improving life styles.⁵ We experienced normal ups and downs in the economy, but until into the 2000s, life was good and promised to become even better. In terms of economic wellbeing, government policies and the system seemed to be working pretty well. Since it was working well, there was no perceived need to monitor policy deliberations more closely or to seek changes to correct neglected problems. Indeed, there was no need to pay much attention to politics.⁶

Prosperity facilitated and was accompanied by a greater sense of personal security. Families now felt secure in their jobs, their ability to house and feed themselves and their children, and confident that their children would have even greater opportunity, wealth, and job security than they did. Automation and the movement of low-skill jobs overseas caused short-term pain and dislocation, but people generally found employment in new or expanding industries rather quickly. Despite setbacks and disruptions, the future continued to look bright. The system was working well for most Americans.

It is doubtful that many Americans thought about whether or in what ways US foreign policy, especially trade policy, facilitated or constrained improvements in their standard of living because they were doing well. This would change in the second decade of the 21st century when individual prosperity became more problematic.

American Society. Despite, or perhaps to some extent because the economy was strong and most families expected and experienced steady improvement in their standards of living, social turbulence reached high levels and demands for changes to domestic policies were in marked contrast to the consensus on foreign policy. Reasons for the sharp contrast include the fact that success in the foreign policy arena and prosperity in the economic arena created conditions that made it “safe” to press for voting rights, greater social justice, cleaner air and water, health care for senior citizens, and alleviation of other conditions incompatible with American values and detrimental to the lives of increasingly important voting constituencies. If the economy had been less prosperous and the perceived danger of military attack been greater, people might have been less willing to take to the streets and governments at all levels might have been less willing to countenance fundamental policy shifts.

With the obvious and important exception of the anti-war movement sparked by the Vietnam War, the most divisive domestic issues (e.g., racial equality and civil rights) did not have an international dimension. This meant that they could be pressed, in the streets and through the ballot box, without fear that doing so would endanger the security of the nation. Protests and demonstrations were widespread and sometimes violent, and passions on all sides were intense. But divisions on most issues did not align with party affiliation. Some cleavages were based on class, others on region, and still others on economic self-interest. This, too, is in contrast to the situation that emerged after the Cold War.

Government Performance. Gross generalizations about government performance and citizen confidence in politicians and the political system are hazardous and obscure critical exceptions, but for the purpose of underscoring differences between the last five

⁵ See Lawrence R. Samuel, *The American Middle Class: A Cultural History* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

⁶ See Patterson, *Grand Expectations*.

decades of the 20th century and what is happening today in American politics, I will argue that confidence during 1950-2000 was much higher than it is now. Citizens trusted politicians and bureaucrats to manage “big” issues involving national security and foreign policy, and the fact that we avoided conflict with the Soviet Union seemed to validate that trust. The same is true with respect to the economy where government actions were seen as fostering and regulating economic activity in ways that produced tangible benefits for tens of millions of families.

Confidence in government and the political system also seemed to be vindicated even in the social arena. Citizen activism and get out the vote campaigns were effective. Government responded by passing landmark legislation that included the Clean Air Act of 1963, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the 1965 Voting Rights Act, the introduction of Medicare (health care for senior and disabled Americans) in 1965, and the Clean Water Act of 1972.⁷ Even in the case of opposition to the Vietnam War, there was a widely shared sense that the system had worked. Not as fast or well as many desired, but eventually the troops did come home and Congress passed the War Powers Act to limit the president’s ability to wage war without Congressional approval in 1973.⁸

The net effect of the judgments and trends summarized above was that most American voters, most of the time, in most places, operated within parameters defined by basic satisfaction with economic performance and the economic policies of whatever administration happened to be in power, a general but widely shared sense that government was working reasonably well, and confidence that whatever the federal government was doing to preserve peace and prevent victory by our communist adversaries was acceptable because it was working. Widespread satisfaction with policies and government performance on these “big” issue clusters created a bias for policy continuity in accord with the American axiom “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” By the end of the first decade of the 21st century, satisfaction with and confidence regarding all of these arenas had diminished almost to the vanishing point.

A New Era

One need not concur with everything in the summary analysis above in order to recognize that the situation today is very different than what it was from 1945 to 2000.⁹ Nuclear weapons continue to constrain the choices of sane political leaders and, in that way, to limit the danger of war between major powers, but the Cold War is over and its demise swept away the principal rationale undergirding American foreign policy for five decades. The effects were not immediate; it took years to accept that the Soviet Union was gone and would not return and, more importantly, for technological change and the forces of globalization to undermine long-extant institutions and assumptions about the world and America’s place in it. Changes at several levels and in multiple arenas of

⁷ See, for example, Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, chapters 15-22.

⁸ See Leslie H. Gelb and Richard K. Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 1979).

⁹ I have used 2000 rather than 1992 as the endpoint of the Cold War because of lingering uncertainty about what the demise of the Soviet Union meant, inertia in the system, and the time lag before voters and politicians fully understood that we were in a new and very different situation.

national and international politics have evolved, interacted, and accelerated to a point at which much about America that could long be taken for granted and projected into the future now seems irretrievably lost. Multiple streams of developments came together in the 2016 presidential election in ways that puzzle, distress, and sometimes mislead observers.

The world has changed fundamentally in the last 30 years and, from an American perspective, most of the changes and their cumulative effects have been positive. The implacable existential competition between Western democratic capitalism and Soviet communist authoritarianism ended without conflict, the world is more peaceful and more prosperous than ever before, and political accountability continues to spread around the globe. Terrorism by non-state actors has displaced the danger of nuclear war as our most pressing security concern. In terms of the highest priority objectives during the Cold War and its immediate aftermath, events have moved in the right direction. Threats to our nation, our allies, and the international order we helped to build, maintain, and expand have been greatly reduced.

The international system is more integrated and interdependent than ever, more countries and more people have a stake in the rules-based liberal order, and the most modern and prosperous nations are less dependent on the United States for protection and prosperity. The world has become more prosperous, but other's prosperity has not been attained at the expense of the United States, American firms, or most American citizens. Almost four decades after the start of China's rise and 25 years after India, Brazil, and many other nations began their own economic ascent, the US share of the world economy has dropped by only a few percentage points and is actually higher than it was on a per capita basis because the US population is now only about 4.5 percent of the world total. America is still doing well, but many Americans judge—accurately—that they are doing worse.

What is important to individual citizens is their ability to find meaningful and remunerative employment that enables them to enjoy comfortable middle class standards of living and to envision a better future for their children. It is also important that the system be perceived as fair; that some earn more than others is tolerable provided that all earn enough to live comfortably and that each receives a fair share of total profits. For many millions of Americans, the system no longer provides the rewards they believe they have earned and seems to be stacked against them. They do not imagine this; statistics confirm that worker earnings have been largely stagnant for three decades. The rich are getting much wealthier. A small percentage is moving from the upper middle class to the wealthy category, but most are stuck at a level that is increasingly stressful and unacceptable.¹⁰

Worker earnings and expectations are not the only things that have changed in the last decade or so. Indeed reality and perceptions in all four of the arenas discussed above are substantially different than they were and, more importantly, all have changed in ways that erode or eliminate the pillars of foreign policy stability.

¹⁰ See, for example, Lawrence Mishel, Elise Gould, and Josh Bivens, "Wage Stagnation in Nine Charts," Economic Policy Institute, January 6, 2015, <http://www.epi.org/publication/charting-wage-stagnation/>.

International System. Although the world is more prosperous, more integrated, more interdependent, and more peaceful than ever despite the turmoil in the Middle East, it is also more fragmented and diverse. The Cold War was fraught and dangerous in many ways, but there was a coherence to the competition and reasonable clarity about whether countries were friends, enemies, or irrelevant to the primary security rivalry. There was also considerable overlap between security and economic groupings. All of America's allies were also part of the free world economic order and none of our adversaries had more than limited access to our markets, capital, or technology. After 1978, China became part of the economic order without becoming an ally, but had not been classified as an enemy for a decade.

The clarity resulting from the bipolar exclusivity of the Cold War began to dissipate in the early 1990s. What was the free world group has become the only game in town and now includes all but a handful of nations. The once clearly defined categories of friends and enemies have been joined by "Frenemies," and economic relationships now include countries with little in common beyond participation in the same production and supply chains. Everything in the international arena has become a lot more complicated and difficult to manage.

The international arena has changed in other ways as well. Aging post-WW II institutions are losing efficacy and increasing numbers of activities occur outside international regimes. The scope of what is considered an international issue has expanded to include infectious diseases, trafficking in persons, greenhouse gases, and much more. Competition among firms with multilateral operations has made labor policies, tax policies, and environmental policies (among others) a factor in domestic economies, including that of the United States, that lose (or gain) jobs because of decisions made by corporate boards rather than government officials.

The demise of the Soviet Union has also eroded the consensus in favor of doing everything necessary to keep our country safe.¹¹ Moreover, as other countries, notably allies of the United States but also many others, have become stronger and more prosperous, voters are beginning to ask if it is appropriate to continue policies and arrangements put in place to deter and defeat an enemy (the Soviet Union) that no longer exists. Inclinations and pressures to review and revise arrangements that were and are more favorable to our partners than to the United States are increasing, in part because voter economic conditions and prospects are quite different than they were 10-15 years ago.

Economy and the Middle Class. We know now that wages for American workers plateaued in the 1980s and have remained essentially stagnant ever since.¹² When wage growth flattened, it appeared to be a "normal" part of economic cycles and did not command urgent attention because people expected it to be of short duration. The anticipated quick improvement did not happen, but several years elapsed before the economic and political effects became salient.

¹¹ Combating terrorism has, to a considerable extent become the functional equivalent of the consensus and rationale that shaped US foreign policy during the Cold War, but the scope and impact are very different.

¹² Mishel, et al., "Wage Stagnation."

The nation's economy continued to grow, albeit slowly because the base had become so large, and per capita GDP continued to increase, but a growing share of increased earnings went to an ever smaller segment of the population. The very rich became much richer, but middle class incomes stagnated. As the gap between the few and the many became more visible, it became more unacceptable and voters understandably wanted government officials to do something about it. What Congress did was to pass legislation that gave some tax relief to the middle class but was disproportionately favorable to the very rich. The "solution" made the situation worse for most citizens.¹³ Trump and Republicans in Congress compounded the unfairness problem in late 2017 by changing the tax code in ways that bestowed even greater benefits on the very wealthy.

Changes in the US economy have many causes ranging from aging infrastructure to automation, deficiencies in education and technical training programs, to competition from firms operating in other countries, and there is no easy or quick fix. Some of the blame rests with individuals, but firms, local governments, and the federal government are all part of the problem and must be part of the solution. But it is easier for politicians to blame "unfair" competitors in other countries and "unwise" trade agreements than to acknowledge their own failure to develop effective remedies.

American Society. The economic problems of poor and middle class families became a central feature of the electoral campaign, but job loss and scapegoating other countries are only part of the reason voters were unhappy. A second and equally important part was (and is) growing inequality that makes the difficult economic circumstances of the many less acceptable—and more politically charged—because so few—the one percent—now account for a very large and rapidly growing share of income.¹⁴ As in all countries, the economic elite has a great deal of political influence and is reluctant to allow reforms that would jeopardize their wealth and status.

Government Performance. Most of the time, most Americans pay little attention to politics and partisan debate. I ascribe this more to confidence in our political system and political leaders than to apathy or disinterest. In normal times, voters are content to let professional politicians and career bureaucrats manage the day-to-day responsibilities of government and to adjust policy as seems appropriate to solve specific problems or respond to new developments. Knowing that we can use the ballot box and other mechanisms to hold leaders accountable if things do not go well (e.g., the economy falters, aspects of the system appear to be unfair, or government appears not to be doing enough to protect the environment or regulate the actions of corporations), we do not feel compelled to monitor political debate closely or to become actively engaged in efforts to change policies or government actions. Normally, we "outsource" or delegate policy decisions to "the politicians." In unusual circumstances—when the system appears not to

¹³ See, for example, David Kamin and Isaac Shapiro, "Studies Shed New Light on Effects of Administration's Tax Cuts," Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, September 13, 2004, <http://www.cbpp.org/research/studies-shed-new-light-on-effects-of-administrations-tax-cuts>.

¹⁴ See, for example, Josh Blivens, "The Top 1 Percent's Share of Income from Wealth has been Rising for Decades," Economic Policy Institute, April 23, 2014, <http://www.epi.org/publication/top-1-percents-share-income-wealth-rising/>.

be working as it should—we become more vocal and more engaged in the process. That is what is happening now.

The most recent election cycle was shaped by a “perfect storm” of uncertainty about the wisdom and efficacy of foreign and security policies, economic uncertainty and stagnant or deteriorating living standards for many voters, and increasing discontent with the failure of government to alleviate a growing list of social problems. These sources of discontent were and still are compounded by conviction that the system simply is not working as it should. The partisan division that has produced gridlock in the Congress both exacerbates and proves the accuracy of this conviction. The result is widespread sentiment similar to that expressed in the iconic 1975 movie *Network* tirade by fictional news anchor Howard Beale who exclaimed, “I’m mad as hell and I’m not going to take it anymore.”¹⁵

Voters have lost confidence in politicians of both parties and all points on the ideological spectrum. Among other consequences, this will cause far more people to pay attention to politics and policy debates. Foreign and security policymaking will not again be entrusted to the “professionals” in the foreign policy elite until they have regained the trust and confidence of the American public. This will take time. During the interim, foreign policy issues will be debated in public, shaped by tradeoffs across issue areas, and be rife with inconsistencies resulting from political compromises.

Implications for Asia

The developments and debates now unfolding before the world in the harsh glare of American politics are the culmination of trends and events that began almost twenty years ago. What is happening is puzzling and worrying to many in Asia (and elsewhere). It is also puzzling and disorienting to Americans, but most Americans are at least moderately confident that we will work our way through the challenges of the moment and emerge stronger, more united, and better able to meet the challenges of tomorrow. Some might think such confidence is naïve or Pollyannaish, but it is also quintessentially American. Those with knowledge of our history know we have been through similar periods before.

People in other nations do not share American confidence that we will surmount our current difficulties. Perhaps more to the point, many in Asia worry that the way in which we resolve our internal disagreements will be detrimental to their own security, economic, and/or political interests. They are right to be concerned, because simply returning to the *status quo ante* is unlikely. American foreign policy and interaction with the global order will be different than it was in the late 20th century and the first years of the 21st.

Whether the changes will be advantageous or disadvantageous to particular countries will depend on their own actions and reactions as well as the decisions made by American politicians. If others, including Asians, are to shape and respond effectively to developments in the United States, they need to have a reasonably accurate understanding

¹⁵ See Jeff DeGraff, “I’m Mad as Hell and I’m Not Going to Take It Anymore,” *Psychology Today*, October 17, 2011, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/innovation-you/201110/i-m-mad-hell-and-i-m-not-going-take-it-anymore>.

of what is happening, why it is happening, and what is likely to determine future US priorities and policies.

Intensified Political Debate is Sign of Vigor, not Decline. Contrary to the assertions and apparent beliefs of many in Asia, the United States is not in decline.¹⁶ Our economy is still by far the strongest in the world, American firms account for a larger share of global production and earnings than was the case 30 years ago, the American military has no peers, American universities remain the envy of the world, and obtaining an American “green card” (permanent resident status) remains the dream of elites around the globe. That many, including senior leaders in Asia, misperceive this dimension of the American situation is important because it leads to incorrect assessments of US foreign policy and adoption of policy responses predicated on an inaccurate understanding of what Washington is attempting to achieve. In other words, faulty analysis of the US condition leads to faulty analysis of US objectives and misconstruing of US policies.

One of the more prevalent and pernicious ideas running through much Asian commentary on the United States is that of American decline and the inevitability of a “power shift” to China, the new regional hegemon. This notion has many variants, including a puzzling tendency to equate the size of GDP with a nation’s overall power, influence, and stability; a “seesaw” view of power that assumes the rise of China and other nations “proves” that the US is in decline; and expressions of concern about being caught in an inevitable conflict between a rising China and a declining United States determined to thwart China’s ascent. Derivative speculation includes worry about the US will and ability to honor its security commitments, and concern that failure to preemptively accommodate China’s preeminence will have adverse economic consequences.

I raise this point not to attack a straw man, but because the existence of such thinking colors the lens through which officials and others view continuing US engagement with the region and the way in which it revisits Cold War arrangements. Since fundamental conditions have changed so much, it is unlikely that future policy reviews will recommend going back to business as usual in the foreign policy arena. Precisely what changes will be sought will be determined not only by the preferences of American voters and policymakers; it will also be shaped by the initiatives and responses of regional states. What other states do will be crucial to the way in which legacy arrangements are modified to suit new conditions. This makes it extremely important that the policy deliberations of other countries be based on an accurate understanding of American capabilities and objectives.

Engagement. The United States will remain deeply engaged in Asia. Many commentators in the region, and some in the United States, have questioned the sincerity, significance, or sustainability of Obama’s “rebalance,” but I find most such commentary to be incredibly simplistic and overly focused on words to the neglect of facts. Whether one characterizes US engagement with the region as the continuation and evolution of long-standing policies, revitalization of specific aspects of the overall relationship, or as

¹⁶ See, for example, Bonnie S. Glaser and Lyle Morris, “Chinese Perceptions of US Decline and Power,” *China Brief* 9:14, July 9, 2009, http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=35241&cHash=db9748f805#.V9RaXhSTS9c.

more or less central to American thinking, the underlying fact is that the US is and will continue to be deeply engaged. Debating whether it is more or less engaged than it was at some time in the past or in comparison to Europe, the Middle East, or elsewhere is about as pointless as debating the number of angels able to fit on the head of a pin.

Engagement is not a binary phenomenon with only “on” and “off” positions. It is always a scalar phenomenon that differs in magnitude and specific content but never drops below a minimum value. Fretting about how far Obama moved the needle toward broader engagement and speculating about the long-term consequences of Trump’s withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership obscure the far more important point that the magnitude of US engagement will remain very high. Trade volumes, financial flows, production and supply chains, security concerns, the large number of Asian-American citizens, and many other “facts” ensure that the United States will continue to be deeply engaged. They do not, however, mean that the modalities of engagement will be exactly the same as they have been for the past several decades.

Drivers. American interests drive US engagement with Asia. Those interests do not include pursuit or preservation of American hegemony or containment of China. Overarching objectives include preservation and prolongation of peace and prosperity, not via the exercise of hegemony by the US or any other country or through balance of power mechanisms, but through adherence to a rule-based order accepted and administered by all. The United States has and will continue to have closer relationships with some countries than with others, but it does not seek to divide the region into groups of allies and adversaries.

Those who depict US policy toward the region as driven by rivalry with China are wrong. There are things that China (and other countries) does that Americans dislike, but most foreign policy professionals seek to manage differences within a common structure or architecture, not to recreate Cold War-like division and hostility. Campaign rhetoric critical of China should be taken seriously because of what it reveals about specific, mostly economic, concerns of American voters. But thoughtful Americans understand that blaming China and other countries for the problems in American politics and policymaking is a vast oversimplification of reality. Voters know, for example, that corporate decisions to move production out of the US are made by boards of directors and American business executives, not by unscrupulous Chinese or other foreigners. Characterizing the need to address the underlying problems as a national security concern is a contrivance to underscore their importance and is not to be taken literally.

The Cold War is Over. The Cold War ended twenty-five years ago but its legacy has continued to shape perceptions, policies, and priorities in the United States and elsewhere. Illustrative examples include the perpetuation of unequal relationships with allies and partners, and contentious commitments to protect access to resources that we no longer need. We continue to do things that were begun during the Cold War (e.g., providing one-sided security guarantees to some allies, and granting more favorable access to US markets than other countries give to US-based firms) but may no longer be appropriate. American officials (and officials in countries that benefit from such unequal arrangements) have been reluctant to tamper with arrangements that have been in place for a long time, have benefitted both sides, and are inextricably intertwined with multiple aspects of our relationships. But, as argued above, several concerns and attitudes

highlighted during the presidential campaign explicitly or implicitly challenge the rationale for continuing such practices.

President Trump has responded to such concerns in unprecedented and unsustainable ways, but the need to re-examine the means used to pursue US objectives is real. His “solutions” are unlikely to endure, but they will not be replaced by reversion to the status quo ante. Americans are still considering and debating what we want the post-Cold War world to be like, what our role in the new order should be, how to reform, replace, or supplement existing institutions in order to meet 21st century requirements, and how to work with other nations to design and build a more just and more effective rules-based order. There is plenty of room for input and leadership from other international actors.

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