Trump Must Not Betray “America First”

The Case for a Foreign Policy That Eschews Primacy and Embraces Restraint

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Donald Trump has achieved a political comeback with no parallel since the Gilded Age, when Grover Cleveland won reelection to the presidency in nonconsecutive terms. On his way to this latest victory, Trump provoked a popular backlash against both major political parties’ establishments. This realignment underscores a shift in the GOP’s constituent demographics and illuminates a broader transformation within the electorate itself.

To understand why this seismic shift occurred, it is necessary to examine more fully one of the aspects of Trump’s appeal: his heterodox approach to foreign policy. Trump’s vision of the U.S. role in the world stood in sharp contrast with President Joe Biden’s dogged commitment to the post–Cold War consensus that the United States should remain stalwart in its pursuit of liberal hegemony through global primacy—a doctrine that Vice President Kamala Harris and her surrogates enthusiastically embraced while on the campaign trail. Although voters reported that domestic issues such as immigration and inflation were their main concerns, these priorities reflect—and were driven by—their shifting attitudes toward American foreign policy. Indeed, foreign policy proved a decisive issue for key communities in crucial swing states.

In the aftermath of the United States’ post-9/11 foreign policy disasters, an increasing number of Americans oppose their country’s heavy reliance on the use of military force to achieve its foreign policy objectives. Instead, they want policymakers to focus on challenges at home and be more cautious when they send U.S. service members into combat. Trump’s victory signals that breaking with the post–Cold War orthodoxy on foreign policy is both sound policy and smart politics. Many Republicans in Washington, however, still believe that the United States should pursue an interventionist foreign policy; as of this writing, Trump’s national security team is still taking shape. But regardless of his personnel decisions, U.S. foreign policy must take cues from the election and reorient around the risk of strategic insolvency, the reality that the U.S. defense industrial base is overworked, and the relative flexibility afforded by a second-term executive relieved of the pressure of reelection. Instead of doubling down on American primacy, the GOP should

more fully embrace a foreign policy of realism and restraint that prioritizes American interests over maintaining the hegemony of liberal values worldwide.

BATTLE FATIGUE

Throughout the past two decades, the U.S. government has been mired in conflicts, whether by direct engagement, as in Iraq and Syria, or by extending substantial assistance to one side, as it has done for Ukraine. These prolonged engagements—and the tarnished legacy of the so-called global war on terror—have fueled the American public's wariness of military entanglements. Many Americans are increasingly skeptical of military interventions that seem to yield limited benefits and impose heavy costs on the United States. In recent elections, this fatigue may well have translated into a preference for candidates who have embraced a more realist approach to foreign affairs.

For example, after the 2016 presidential election, the political scientist Douglas Kriner and the psychologist Francis Shen showed that voters in states with higher rates of recent battlefield casualties had been more likely to choose Trump. They argued that if three key swing states—Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania—had not had higher-than-average battlefield casualty rates, Hillary Clinton, a prominent supporter of America's post-9/11 wars, might have won there. Similarly, in 2024, the dissatisfaction that Arab Americans in Dearborn, Michigan—a critical swing state—felt toward Biden's approach to the ongoing conflict in the Middle East likely contributed to their flipping to Trump.

Harris's campaign may have exacerbated this dynamic. Compared with Secretary of State Antony Blinken, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, and Biden himself, as vice president, Harris was nearly invisible on foreign policy matters. When she hit the campaign trail, however, she and her fellow Democrats embraced a more muscular foreign policy. The Democratic National Committee's 2024 platform attacked Trump for negotiating with North Korea when he was president and for advocating a diplomatic resolution to the war in Ukraine. It even criticized him for displaying "fecklessness and weakness in the face of Iranian aggression during his presidency," a complete reversal from the party's stance just four years earlier. In 2020, Harris, then a senator from California, sponsored failed legislation to try to stop the Trump administration from directing the U.S.

military to engage in “hostilities” against Iran without congressional authorization, and that year’s DNC platform criticized Trump’s supposed “race to war with Iran.”

Most notably, in her campaign for president, Harris elevated Liz Cheney—a former Republican representative and one of the most prominent neoconservatives in the country—as a chief surrogate and campaigned with her in key swing states. In their joint appearances, they framed Trump’s candidacy as a threat not just to American democracy but to the United States’ primacy in the world. Harris and her campaign surrogates also touted an endorsement from Cheney’s father, former Vice President Dick Cheney, a leading architect of the United States’ disastrous post-9/11 foreign policy.

END RUN

That Democrats would take such a pugnacious stance was perhaps unsurprising in the wake of Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The premise that Russian President Vladimir Putin’s hostility to liberal democratic values posed a direct threat to the United States resonated with American liberals concerned about the health of democracy at home. Meanwhile, Russia’s partnerships with Iran and North Korea drove Democrats to develop a more hawkish posture toward what Blinken, in Foreign Affairs, called the “the revisionist powers.” Finally, Hamas’s October 7 terrorist attack on Israel prompted the Biden administration to take a more interventionist approach to the Middle East, boxing in a Harris campaign that refused to distance itself from the president.

But Harris’s attempt to out-hawk Trump on foreign policy did not deliver her an electoral boost. It now appears more likely that her association with the Cheneys and her tacit approval of Biden’s generous material support to Israel alienated more key voters than it reassured. Her embrace of a more muscular and militaristic foreign policy than Trump espoused may even have hurt her in swing states such as Michigan, dampening the enthusiasm of minority communities—in particular, Black and Arab Americans—who routinely express more opposition to military entanglements compared with the general population.

Harris’s strategy enabled Trump to seize open political terrain and position himself as the putative peace candidate. For starters, he selected Ohio Senator JD Vance as his running mate. After Vance, a veteran of the Iraq war, joined the Senate in 2023, he rapidly emerged as one of its most vocal skeptics of Biden’s assistance to Ukraine and a prominent critic of America’s recent nation-building wars in the Middle East. Trump chose him over intense opposition from many in the Republican foreign policy establishment.

Despite the Republican Party's long-standing tension with the Iranian regime, during his campaign, Trump explicitly said he would not seek regime change in Iran, as did Vance. Certainly, both continue to vocally oppose Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, but they made it clear that they do not support a direct conflict with the Islamic Republic. Trump also called for a swift diplomatic resolution to the conflict in Ukraine, conveyed his opposition to fighting a war on Ukraine's behalf, and mulled freezing or blocking a bid by Ukraine to enter NATO. His campaign's foreign policy approach was summed up in his victory speech: "I'm not going to start wars, I'm going to stop wars."

HOMEWARD BOUND

For years, Washington's foreign policy establishment—often derisively portrayed as "the Blob"—has championed a bipartisan, interventionist strategy aimed at maintaining U.S. primacy abroad. When it emerged from the Cold War as the world's lone superpower, the United States adopted a foreign policy premised on using its influence to promote American values worldwide. Since 9/11, however, this approach has imposed enormous costs on the United States without making the country dramatically safer or more prosperous. The United States sacrificed thousands of American lives and $8 trillion for wars in the greater Middle East that were largely unrelated to its own safety and core national interests. The expansion of the United States' alliance commitments in Europe, meanwhile, encouraged its wealthy NATO allies to rely more heavily on its support and exacerbated tensions with Russia. As the United States plowed resources into other regions, China emerged as a serious economic and military competitor.

Trump's stance resonates with a broad spectrum of voters—including moderates and independents—who simply perceive that a trillion-dollar Pentagon budget has not stopped the world from catching fire. After 20 years of failed wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and places in between, American voters are keen to focus on the home front. For months leading up to the 2024 election, polling demonstrated that Americans were sharply divided on the United States' responsibility to support Ukraine. These polls hinted that many voters did not see who controls eastern Ukraine or the fate of the so-called rules-based international order as primary concerns. Instead, they had legitimate reason to prioritize issues such as inflation, which did enormous damage to the economic well-being of many Americans, and the southern border, where in 2023 a record number of migrants crossed into the United States without prior authorization.

These shifts in voters' priorities are not new. It has been clear for some time that Americans are becoming more focused on domestic concerns than on

bulwarking their country's global primacy through costly permanent deployments to distant theaters. After Clinton lost the presidential race in 2016, for example, members of the Democratic foreign policy elite—including Sullivan, the current national security adviser—attempted to address this shift by reframing their foreign policy as one designed "for the middle class." Although both Biden and Harris largely abandoned this rhetoric, many of their key advisers knew eight years ago what has once again been demonstrated in 2024: that a foreign policy more narrowly focused on U.S. interests increasingly appeals to voters.

To be clear, the direction of U.S. foreign policy remains a secondary issue for the majority of voters, even if it motivated certain constituencies' choices in crucial swing states. That means, however, that a more prudent engagement with the world is more broadly popular and politically safe, given foreign policy's lower salience to most voters. Foreign policy may not have decisively cost Harris this election, but it likely contributed to her defeat.

LIMIT SWITCH

Future American candidates should take note lest they suffer a similar fate—not only Democrats but Republicans, too. Trump's victory will no doubt accelerate a debate that was already roiling the Republican Party between conventional hawks and proponents of a more restrained, "America first" foreign policy. The preferences that voters expressed on November 5 suggest that the Republicans under Trump and Vance should further emphasize a commitment to realism and restraint—and institute policies that uphold such a vision.

First, it is essential to recognize that the United States operates in a world of constraints. The national debt now exceeds $35 trillion; interest payments on that debt surpass defense spending. In the post-pandemic era, the U.S. economy has struggled with inflation, undermining voters' willingness to subsidize wealthy allies and fund foreign wars in perpetuity. More urgently, the U.S. military continues to face recruiting challenges, and much of its essential equipment is worn down after nearly 25 years of high-intensity operations. It has nearly exhausted its stockpiles of critical munitions and weapons in its support of Ukraine and partners in the Middle East. The United States' limited industrial capacity makes these stockpiles difficult to replenish.

The Biden administration acted as if these constraints did not exist. The introduction to the 2022 National Security Strategy pronounced that "there is nothing beyond our capacity." After Hamas's October 7 attack, the journalist Scott Pelley pressed Biden on 60 Minutes about whether the

United States could afford to assist allies fighting in both Ukraine and Gaza. "We can take care of both of these and still maintain our overall international defense," Biden replied. Days after the interview, however, his administration was forced to redirect a shipment of artillery shells from Ukraine to Israel, underscoring the reality that U.S. resources are limited.

Republicans must be honest about the limits of American power. They may find that the public is more comfortable facing this reality than the policymaking class is. Acknowledging the limits on American power does not mean lowering expectations for the United States' future or accepting its decline. But denying constraints risks strategic insolvency: if the United States becomes unable to meet its expanding global commitments, that will significantly increase the risk of a major economic collapse or security failure.

Trump's victory will accelerate a debate already roiling the Republican Party.

A foreign policy that prioritizes making Americans safe and prosperous while acknowledging the country's constraints would improve the United States' fiscal policies and work to rebuild its industrial base. But these measures alone will not be sufficient: the United States should militarily retrench from regions in which American interests are less pronounced, such as Europe and the Middle East, especially when the United States' current responsibilities can be outsourced to relatively wealthy and capable allies in those regions who have more at stake. Balancing against Iran, for instance, can be achieved largely by Israel and by the Gulf Arab nations; the United States should not have to substantially backstop them or bribe them to pursue their own interests. The United States should ask allies in East Asia to shoulder similarly heightened levels of responsibility in order to manage competition with China through strategic balancing rather than a security spiral that could easily end in a full-on war.

But simply redirecting and focusing the resources the United States has positioned abroad from a variety of theaters toward the Indo-Pacific will not be enough, either. The Republican Party should embrace Trump's "art of the deal" foreign policy approach. Trump has articulated a desire to negotiate with U.S. adversaries such as China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia to de-escalate tensions and avoid fresh conflicts. This approach is not new; it could also be called tough-minded diplomacy. It is how Republican presidents conducted foreign policy throughout most of the Cold War. President Richard Nixon, for instance, restored relations with China and achieved détente with the Soviet Union. President Ronald Reagan brokered agreements with Moscow to slow the arms race. His successor, President George H. W. Bush, managed the breakup of the Soviet Union and the collapse of the Warsaw

Pact with deft diplomacy. Only after the Cold War ended did a neoconservative foreign policy consensus come to dominate the American right—and diplomacy became a dirty word for Republicans. If Trump does prioritize diplomatic dealmaking, other Republican officials, particularly those in Congress and the national security bureaucracy, should support his efforts instead of impeding them, as happened during his first term.

Republicans in leadership positions on Capitol Hill, however, as well some influential conservative think tanks and prominent right-of-center media figures, still largely hew to the pre-2016 Republican orthodoxy. This group includes some likely nominees to key positions in the second Trump administration. But the ground may be shifting beneath their feet. Consider the case of Florida Senator Marco Rubio, whose name has been floated as a candidate for Secretary of State. When he campaigned for president in 2016, Rubio ran on a "New American Century" platform that harked back to the now-defunct neoconservative "Project for a New American Century" think tank founded in 1997 by William Kristol and Robert Kagan. Rubio's worldview, however, has seemingly evolved toward an emphasis on "American renewal," which, as he has articulated it, suggests he could shift the collective security burden to U.S. allies and trim aid to Ukraine. This trendline may well accelerate over the next four years.

As those who favor American restraint continue to fill the ranks of the conservative movement, however, the behavior of many elected officials and conservatives who prioritize career progression over ideology will have to change. The Republican Party's remaining neoconservatives may simply return to the Democratic Party, from which they sprang. This will create a clear opportunity for the Republicans to seize even more advantageous ground on foreign policy, especially if the Democrats maintain an embrace of liberal interventionism that fails to resonate with the electorate.

In the long run, a more decisive Republican shift on foreign policy might drive the Democrats to acknowledge the need for more restraint. Conservative and liberal proponents of restraint will not always see eye to eye—their ideological differences render disputes inevitable. But if the U.S. policymaking class could more broadly agree that the United States has overreached in its foreign policy and must correct course, that would help ensure that the country does not repeat the deadly mistakes of the last 20 years. The most recent election strongly suggests that this course correction is what American voters want.

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