

The Search for a New Narrative:

Recasting American Involvement in the International System

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- For the first time since the end of World War II, there is no dominant narrative about the U.S. role in world affairs within American domestic politics.
- Donald Trump ran for president in 2016 challenging many of the core assumptions of the post-Cold War bipartisan foreign policy consensus. While his administration has disrupted the status quo, it has not forged a coherent replacement that can shape both domestic attitudes as well as the conduct of U.S. foreign policy.
- Americans indicate that they want to renegotiate and reassess the terms of American involvement in the international system, amending rather than ending the U.S. leadership role in global affairs. This includes debating the desirability of engaging in “great power competition” as well as the merits of retrenchment.
- Several narratives have been emerging over the past three years. We identify the following:
 - Chastened restorationist (refreshing the bipartisan consensus for a post-2016 environment)
 - Transactional internationalism (“America First”)
 - A narrative of restraint
 - Refocusing around a “democratic community” of allies and trading partners
 - Retrenchment around an expanded Atlantic core
 - Reindustrialization/regeneration of American power
 - Climate change as a central organizing principle
- No new narrative, as of yet, has gained sufficient critical mass to become the basis for U.S. foreign policy moving forward in the 21st century.

REPORT

This project on [U.S. Global Engagement](#) was launched in 2018. An initial report was released in December 2018, [Misconnecting with the U.S. Public: Narrative Collapse and U.S. Foreign Policy](#), which diagnosed the causes and symptoms of the narrative collapse of the bipartisan consensus in U.S. foreign policy. This second report will focus on the effort to provide a new or rejuvenated foundation for U.S. action in the international arena.

This report presents some of the conclusions drawn from the focus groups, meetings, and study group sessions held by the U.S. Global Engagement project during 2018 and 2019. They are summarized and interpreted by Carnegie Council Senior Fellow Nikolas K. Gvosdev, who has been supervising the project. They do not reflect any consensus view of or endorsement by the study group or other participants in the work of the project.

FRAMING THE ISSUE

In the run-up to President Donald Trump's remarks to the 2019 United Nations General Assembly, amidst surveys of world public opinion demonstrating that confidence in U.S. global leadership has been precipitously declining, commentators also stressed the corresponding shift in American public attitudes, questioning the values and the burdens of assuming this role. Bruce Stokes of Chatham House [concluded](#), "The American public is ambivalent and increasingly divided about their country's role on the world stage. Such sentiment pre-dated the Trump era. And there is a great likelihood that a large minority of the American public will continue to question U.S. global engagement long after the Trump presidency ends."

Increasingly, there is recognition that the United States can have no coherent, sustained, impactful foreign policy that does not rest on foundations of domestic consent.

During the Cold War, there was broad public support for a foreign policy of forward engagement because of a narrative that made the case that the security and prosperity of Americans—and the very survival of the American way of life and its political and social institutions—required an activist approach to world affairs. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, this existential threat came to an end. Yet, the United States had created an entire network of alliances and trade agreements designed to enhance U.S. capabilities and to contain the USSR. The 1992 presidential primaries and elections, for the first time since World War II, raised the question of whether America should "come home."

For the past 25 years, the United States has struggled to formulate a narrative explaining why it should remain actively engaged in world affairs and why it should continue to maintain the institutions that were intended to pool together the resources and potentialities of the "Free World" against the Soviet threat. At times, the U.S. national security community has sought to replace the existential threat of the Soviet Union with a new danger—whether global terrorism

or a rising China. At other times, it has attempted to reframe the mission in more positive terms: building a new and better world by expanding the number of free-market democracies. In both cases, however, the core message has remained the same: American peace and prosperity depended upon the active measures undertaken by the United States to construct and subsidize the “rules-based liberal international order.”

As noted in the first report, public support for U.S. engagement was eroded by a number of factors: the costs imposed by the Afghan and Iraq wars combined with the perception that the U.S. was unable to achieve its objectives in those conflicts; the impact of the 2008-09 global economic and financial crisis that triggered the Great Recession; and the dislocations caused by changes in trade and technology that heightened the economic anxieties of the American middle class.



A protest in Minnesota against the U.S. military attacks in Syria in 2017.

CREDIT: [Fibonacci Blue \(CC\)](#)

In particular, the perceived “failure” of the main tenets of the bipartisan consensus as it has applied to China has been a major driver. The approach from the end of the Cold War through to 2017 rested on two broad assumptions, which in turn drove specific policy choices, namely 1) increased trade and expanded economic linkages between the United States and China would decrease the possibility of conflict by making the two countries so interdependent that neither would risk the damage that would be caused by an open rupture and a large-scale resort to force; and 2) increased Chinese integration with the U.S. market would create conditions for domestic Chinese liberalization. Thus, it was in U.S. interests to open its markets to China, facilitate its access to goods and services, and push for its inclusion in international organizations. China would thus emerge as a “responsible stakeholder” in the American-led international system, assuming more of its burdens over time, while aligning itself more with U.S. preferences both for its foreign as well as its domestic policy.

By its second term, the Obama administration was well aware that U.S. public support for an active U.S. role in maintaining the international system was soft. This led President Barack Obama to try, as Harvard’s Professor Steve Walt [sums up](#), “to address a vast array of global problems as cheaply as possible and without ‘boots on the ground.’” An advisor to President Obama [used the slogan](#) “leading from behind” with journalist Ryan Lizza to describe this approach—“the empowerment of other actors to do your bidding”—with the understanding that unilateral American action that would trigger costs would be politically unacceptable.

Nevertheless, the outcome of the 2016 elections demonstrated that many Americans were dissatisfied with the status quo in U.S. foreign policy. The first U.S. Global Engagement project report drew the following conclusions:

- Americans want to amend, not end, their involvement in global affairs.
- They want to renegotiate some of the terms of American involvement pertaining to costs and burden-sharing.
- They want to revisit the question of how costs and benefits of U.S. engagement will be distributed among the population.
- They want a balanced approach that navigates between the extremes of isolationism and declaring that 160+ countries in the world are equally vital to U.S. national interests.
- They want to see a national security community that has the ability to set limits and say no and to cut losses and move on.

The critique of U.S. policy advanced both by Senator Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump during the 2016 campaign has now been joined by almost three years of actual Trump administration foreign policy where the impetus has been to re-evaluate existing arrangements with an eye to renegotiating or abandoning them if the status quo is not seen as advancing material U.S. interests. This is changing the international landscape, as so-called “pillars” of the existing global order are shifting. By 2019, the United States had withdrawn from a key arms control



President Trump addresses the U.N. General Assembly in 2019. CREDIT: The White House [\(CC\)](#)

accord, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and President Trump reversed the executive actions of his predecessor by canceling U.S. participation in the Paris climate change accords and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (the “Iran nuclear deal”). The U.S. stopped work on two new major trade initiatives (the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the trans-Atlantic trade pact) and pushed to reformulate existing pacts or reinterpret U.S. understanding of trade rules with countries like China and Germany. While not formally altering U.S. security obligations, the president also hinted that countries that hold formal alliance relations with the U.S. would have to fulfill more of their obligations for mutual defense and resource allocation or risk the U.S. re-evaluating those commitments.

Carnegie Council Senior Fellow Devin Stewart [has noted](#) that the Trump administration “takes previous policy assumptions and turns them on their head. Trump’s ‘America First’ approach is a reversion to the idea of *realpolitik* and great power competition. It is better suited to a moment in which American power is much less dominant.” Yet this is not taking place in a vacuum. Kori Schake, the deputy director-general of the International Institute for Strategic

Studies (IISS), uses the metaphor of a “bill” that is “coming due” to highlight that these disruptions are not cost-free, nor can the United States get some sort of pass to figure out its foreign policy options. Sudden, dramatic shifts in policy negatively impact the U.S. relationship with friends and partners, who may, in turn, be far less willing to mind the store while waiting for the U.S. domestic political processes to work themselves out. Schake [observes](#), “If the U.S. doesn’t act in concert with others, it will have less absolute power”—and thus be less successful in achieving its objectives.

We are now in the condition where the old international order is in a state of disruption but the outlines of a new replacement are not yet discernible. As Ali Wyne of the RAND Corporation [points out](#), at what point might trends and actions that today are considered to be “aberrations . . . become the new principles?”

In framing this question, George Mason University’s Professor Colin Dueck [has noted](#):

“Donald Trump has cracked existing orthodoxies and opened up previously latent foreign policy options. Yet his very ability to do so indicates that he acts upon structural forces bigger than he is, and therefore likely to outlast him.”

In responding to the reality of narrative collapse, many in the U.S. national security community assert that “great power competition” provides the basis for a reconceptualization of American foreign policy, as *The Atlantic*’s Uri Friedman [has reported](#).

Yet “great power competition” does not, on its own, create a narrative about the course, direction and priorities U.S. foreign policy should take. As Wyne [frames it](#), “great power competition” describes a condition (that is, today’s world order is increasingly defined by competition between the world’s preeminent power and a host of major powers, especially China and Russia) and/or an instrument (that is, Washington must participate in this competition to accomplish certain goals). However—and this is the critical conclusion—“it does not readily lend itself to a strategy.”

The strategy only comes about once an underlying narrative has been established, which in turn requires policymakers and politicians to be able to answer four essential questions. Wyne identifies these as follows:

- Who is America’s principal competitor?
- Over what specifically is the United States competing? Does it believe that great-power competition extends to every issue area and geographic theater?

- Perhaps most importantly, what is America's ultimate objective? Is it to preserve the country's present level of preeminence? Is it to prevent China's comprehensive national power from passing a certain threshold?
- Finally—and this is why the question of narrative matters—if the United States is unable to identify a long-term objective and attendant metrics for gauging its progress towards that end, how will it prepare its economy and its society for infinite competition of an indefinite nature?

At present, no narrative has reached critical mass within the United States. Moreover, the two major U.S. political parties encompass very uneasy and unstable electoral coalitions that have different perspectives and priorities when it comes to questions of U.S. engagement or disengagement from the international system. Yet narratives matter; as former U.S. Foreign Service officer George Paik has [recently noted](#): “The diplomat needs a broad sense of national purpose because credibly representing a nation requires a base of thematic coherence, if not continuity in policy objectives.”

The first report noted that any new or rejuvenated narrative, to be successful, would have to answer the following concerns:

- It must connect domestic concerns to concrete U.S. security and economic interests overseas.
- It must provide a yardstick for making judgment calls about when and where to act.
- It must be clear on costs and risks.
- It must offer a hierarchy of values and interests that would guide action.

A foreign policy narrative should set out which coalition of interests and values it will prioritize, provide the outlines of the domestic political bargains it requires, and present the outline of central organizing principles.

This question is one that politicians, academics, experts, pundits, representatives of the business and national security communities, civil society organizations, and average citizens have been debating and discussing. While very detailed and specific plans and manifestos have been released, this report will not examine every single offering but instead present several broad categories of narratives that are being offered.

“CHASTENED RESTORATIONIST”

This approach argues that Americans, having experienced the disruptions and disconnects of the Trump administration, will return to the old bipartisan consensus about U.S. foreign policy—returning to the familiar and stable as the implications of a “world without the United States” sink in. The renewed narrative takes as a starting point that it cannot be taken for granted that the American voter understands the value and necessity of American forward engagement in world affairs and that, in the past, politicians focused excessively on the costs of U.S.



U.S. service members load humanitarian relief supplies for victims of Cyclone Nargis.
CREDIT: U.S. Air Force [\(CC\)](#)

involvement while ignoring the benefits. The narrative which stresses the importance of allies and partners and of the U.S. role in creating institutions must be refreshed, as national security expert Asha Castleberry and former State Department official Ashley Burrell [note](#) in their call for a NATO Caucus on Capitol Hill.

This narrative starts from the assumption that U.S. investment and “heavy lifting” in maintaining the current order, even if it imposes short-term, upfront costs, is vital to making Americans safer, more secure, and prosperous, because the absence of American power removes access to markets and resources and also allows threats to the U.S. to metastasize. However, there is also an understanding that supporters of robust American engagement cannot fall back on paeans to “American leadership” or discuss U.S. foreign policy in terms of an abstract “liberal, rules-based international order,” but must explicitly link American involvement overseas to “doorstep” issues of the American voter, as both Castleberry and National Committee on American Foreign Policy’s Simran Maker [have advocated](#).

TRANSACTIONAL INTERNATIONALISM (“AMERICA FIRST”)

Transactional internationalism, or “America First,” seeks to shift the basis of U.S. engagement and to define a series of quid pro quos for U.S. involvement. The proffer by the U.S. of various goods and services to other countries is no longer grounded in a long-term aspiration that the increase in the number of prosperous, democratic countries would redound to U.S. interests. Instead, it is based on the imperative that aid or action offered to others is expected to be compensated.

The starting point of this approach is that the current state of the international order is disadvantageous to average Americans because the U.S. taxpayer and citizen is expected to subsidize others, take economic losses, and risk casualties to maintain a system in which other

states can obtain economic and political advantages which they will then pursue at American expense.

This narrative argues that the disruptions and dislocations—whether in trade, alliance relations, multinational institutions, etc.—are necessary to clear away the old thinking and approaches and allow for the emergence of a new “America First” paradigm that will re-balance American commitments and interests. The starting point for that process must rest in a vigorous assertion of U.S. interests and national sovereignty, which, as Dueck has [pointed out](#), lead to “renegotiated trade arrangements with U.S. allies, assertive efforts to secure increased allied defense spending, and an intense pressure campaign against Chinese foreign economic practices.”



“Make America First Again” poster at the 2016 Republican National Convention.
CREDIT: Ali Shaker [\(CC\)](#)

One area where this narrative most explicitly breaks with the traditional consensus is in lessened willingness or interest in using force to address conflicts and threats that do not directly threaten the U.S. homeland, distancing, as Council on Foreign Relations’ Charles Kupchan has noted, “the United States from far-flung military conflicts.” Defending abstract principles or addressing regional security threats is, according to this narrative, the cause of U.S. involvement in military conflicts around the world, producing this “excess of

foreign obligations.” Instead, the “America First” component focuses on measures designed to limit the spillover of problems from other parts of the world into the United States, whether through immigration restrictions, literal walls, or other such prophylactic measures.

Of course, “transactionalism” and “quid pro quo” in foreign policy—specifically relating to U.S. foreign aid to Ukraine being allegedly withheld because of domestic politics—are at the heart of the current impeachment inquiry being conducted by the U.S. House of Representatives against President Trump. It is obviously too early to tell what effect a probable impeachment of the president will have on the future of U.S. foreign policy or long-term attitudes of the American public to transactionalism and “America First.”

NARRATIVES OF RESTRAINT

A purely transactional approach to foreign policy does not appeal to many Americans, but the “chastened restorationist” narrative still seems to imply that everything that happens around the world is an American priority that requires American intervention. Isolationism is not an answer, but neither is the designation of the United States as the world’s indispensable nation. There is also concern about engaging in great power competition simply for the sake of great

power competition. Instead, there is search for a middle ground—of more defined limits to American involvement, whether on geographic or ideological terms. Part of the narrative of restraint is to avoid foreign entanglements (reclaiming the legacy of George Washington’s Farewell Address) but also to avoid searching for monsters to destroy, per the advice of John Quincy Adams.

DEMOCRATIC COMMUNITY

The “democratic community” narrative represents an interesting “blend” of the traditional bipartisan consensus with elements of the America First critique but also a renewed emphasis on prioritizing values. Generally, it advises that the U.S. should be prepared to disengage from regimes that do not enhance the overall cause of democracy; that Americans should be prepared to produce more domestically (even at higher costs) than engage in free trade with countries who do not uphold democratic, environmental, and labor standards; and that a reduction in American interventionism abroad reduces the need to rely on less-democratic/more authoritarian partners in order to preserve forward engagement.

This narrative argues that the U.S. should pivot and reorient its core economic and security relationships to encompass a community of like-minded democracies in Europe and Asia (and perhaps Latin America and Africa). This would not only promote the development of norms (and withstand efforts by China, Russia, and others to revise the core tenets of the current international system) but would seek to re-incentivize support for a democratic coalition of nations by reorienting trading relations so that democracies trade and invest with each other, rather than “yoking” their economies to a Chinese system that may promise cheaper goods and easy credit, but which does not support the security goals or value propositions of the democracies.

RETRENCHMENT

This narrative shares a critique with the “America First” approach that U.S. attention and resources have been overextended. Like the “democratic community,” it calls for a refocusing of American efforts. Rather than the United States dispersing its attention and resources all over the world, it would concentrate on developing and strengthening an expanded trans-Atlantic core—Europe, Africa and Latin America—and maintain its outer Pacific rim of connected nations. The idea shares some similarity with the democratic community approach but would also attempt to develop both a geographically defined region and one sharing cultural values to provide a greater sense of cohesiveness, as well as generating more mutually-beneficial economic relations (in terms of reorienting the sourcing of raw materials and resources and the production of finished goods). Beyond this core area, U.S. involvement should be limited to immediate, pressing existential threats, and powers more directly

impacted by instability or challenges emanating from other areas should take the lead in responding.

REINDUSTRIALIZATION AND REGENERATION

This approach would focus on rebuilding America’s core economic might rather than risk the continued hollowing out of the U.S. in a vain attempt to continue to be the primary source of global public goods. It shares some aspects of a [narrative](#) developed by foreign policy analyst Justine Rosenthal in 2007: “Laying low while focusing our efforts on military and industrial R&D can bolster our position; technological development fostered the American moment, increasing our military capabilities and spurring economic growth. Innovation is dual use, helping us in both hard- and soft-power terms.”

This narrative is one of the U.S. taking a “pause” and re-evaluating its global posture. It also takes the position that free trade arrangements that lead to de-industrialization and loss of capacity, especially vis-à-vis a rising China, must be avoided. This narrative does not preclude an eventual U.S. return to a more interventionist, global posture if that is what the U.S. public desires, but argues that at present, the traditional U.S. approach is not affordable and a degree of withdrawal from international affairs is not only desirable but necessary.

CLIMATE CHANGE

There is also a nascent “climate change” narrative that argues that the changes expected in the global climate will require re-conceptualizing global affairs and the U.S. role in it. The impacts of major climate shifts—flooding, extreme weather, famine, and so on—will ultimately threaten both American security and prosperity, due to increased conflict, uncontrolled migration, loss of arable land, energy shortages, and even the adverse impact of climate on military facilities and the ability to project power. To

mitigate the problems that climate shifts are expected to cause, concerted action among countries to find and implement solutions is required. [The climate change perspective](#) focuses on getting countries to decrease fossil fuel usage, to transition to greener technologies and to hold leaders and countries accountable for their lack of progress. A focus on climate change would center on U.S. leadership of a community of nations aided by American innovation to deal with expected shifts during the 21st century—and redefine American allies and partners by their ability to contribute to this shared task. Ironically, if climate change becomes an organizing principle for foreign policy, it could easily clash and [contradict](#) the imperative for the U.S. to partner with democracies or to contain China.



Protesters hold up a sign at a 2019 climate strike in New York City.
CREDIT: Pamela Drew [\(CC\)](#)

NARRATIVES AND COALITIONS

New narratives emerge in times of debate and uncertainty about the role and direction of policy. The 2020 election will be a contest not simply between candidates but between and among different and competing narratives. While politicians tend themselves not to be the prime thinkers and framers, their advisors and a larger community of public intellectuals will work to shape, popularize, and disseminate themes into the political bloodstream of the country.

So far, elements of the various narratives presented above have been sounded, not only by candidates seeking the presidency in 2020, but by those who could take senior national security positions in future administrations, or who might seek higher office later in the coming decade.

Every narrative seeking to set the foundation for U.S. foreign policy must grapple with, as historian Hal Brands [has noted](#), the realities “that China poses a severe threat to U.S. interests, that U.S. alliances need updating, and that unfettered economic integration is not necessarily an unalloyed good.” Yet different narratives will place different emphases on priorities that the U.S. should pursue and the costs U.S. citizens should bear.

Some foreign policy options might cross narrative streams. One version of great power competition—Carnegie Council’s Stewart [has conceptualized](#) this as “gray power” competition—has to do with the “battle of systems” and the use of nontraditional statecraft tactics: trade conflict, information warfare, and political interference. “Chastened restorationists” and “democratic community-ers” might find agreement on the basis of a gray power assessment of the world and the need to protect and secure the Western “system.” Yet even “America Firsters” might rally around defending the integrity of American political institutions from foreign interference.

Competing narratives might also produce, among their adherents, a series of common policy options. “America Firsters” and “democratic community-ers” might find common ground in taking a more economically confrontational stand against China because of the number of American workers displaced by trade practices that China has engaged in, and the concerns that the integration of China with the U.S. economy—particularly the technology transfer—rather than democratizing China, has given the country more capabilities to repress dissidents, to repress ethnic groups like the Uyghurs, and to develop a near-peer military infrastructure to challenge the United States.

The restorationists and the democratic community-ers, on the other hand, both strongly represented within the Democratic Party, would probably agree on reviving and strengthening

the North Atlantic Treaty Organization both as a collection of democratic states but also as a key pillar of the global security order. Democratic community-ers and retrenchers might find common ground in developing stronger security and economic links among the nations of the Western Hemisphere but part company on the desirability of further NATO enlargement eastward into Eurasia; democratic community-ers might look askance at restorationists championing closer U.S. security and economic ties with the emirates and states of the Persian Gulf—but “America Firsters” might be inclined to support such moves if the continued provision of U.S. security assistance was reinforced by further large-scale purchases of American goods and services. Restorationists might want to re-enter the Paris accords as a political matter of demonstrating America’s multilateral bona fides, but climate change advocates may want to push for more binding bilateral accords, including with China, and connect with elements in the rejuvenation community to advance spending on new technologies and innovation, even at the cost of traditional defense and foreign aid spending.

As these narratives develop, it remains to be seen what their convening and motivating power will be. The focus on making climate change the central organizing principle for foreign policy has the power of activism behind it, but does not lend itself to policy positions that might gain agreement. The “chastened restorationist” position has the advantage of inertia behind it and it could offer a series of “tweaks” to established positions—NATO reform, revision of free trade agreements—but does not seem to be a narrative that, at this point in time, inspires dedication and enthusiasm. There can also be contradictions in the appeal of narratives: people, on the one hand, who have grown up in borderless worlds and are used to being able to obtain goods and services from around the globe, may nevertheless argue against paying for the maintenance of the global system.

Finally, there is the generational question to consider. As Marymount Manhattan College’s Professor Tatiana Serafin [notes](#):

“I think change has not been manifested in the policy realm, but I think that we're at this cusp where change has to come because the voting bloc is growing. In 2016, 4 percent of Gen Zers were able to vote; in 2020, 10 percent will be able to vote. So, one in 10 eligible voters will be Gen Zers. I think that increase is significant. It's similar for Millennials. You put those two voting blocs together when they are focused on a particular issue, and I think that will lead policymakers to notice and to make changes.”

U.S. policy emerges from coalitions, so charting the emergence of competing narratives becomes important for understanding the balances that will drive policymaking and the limits to any policy proposal. Given that several of the narratives charted above co-exist within both major political parties, and are reflected in sectional and regional divisions within the United

States, it is unlikely that one narrative will emerge as the dominant one in the near future. Americans may largely concur with the statement: “Our country’s commitment to taking a leading role in shaping security and economic affairs around the world after World War II led to safer and more prosperous lives for Americans.” But they may disagree over whether that conclusion still applies in the mid-21st century, what a “leading role” entails and what constitutes “shaping,” and the degree of involvement “around the world” from region to region.

Up to this point, this has been an exercise largely undertaken by experts and academics. In the coming year, the emphasis will shift to politicians, for it is politicians—who have to directly obtain a mandate from voters—who will be in a better position to assess the strengths and weaknesses of these narrative options.
