

THE END OF THE AMERICAN CENTURY? A SHORT HISTORY OF US FOREIGN POLICY FROM WORLD WAR II TO THE PRESENT

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In 1941 H. Luce famously declared the arrival of the American century where the US would emerge as the dominant superpower in the world. After the end of World War II and then again in 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it looked in many ways like H. Luce's prediction was correct. However the world today looks very different compared to 1945 or 1991. This article looks at the way the world and US foreign policy have evolved, contending that the foreign policy options for the United States are very different now and in the future from what they once were. Both the D. Trump and now J. Biden foreign policies are the result of these changes, and the article looks at some of the challenges facing the US going forward.

Keywords: Joe Biden; US foreign policy; US foreign policy establishment; America first.

КОНЕЦ ГЕГЕМОНИЗМА? ВНЕШНЯЯ ПОЛИТИКА США ПОСЛЕ ВТОРОЙ МИРОВОЙ ВОЙНЫ

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В 1941 г. Г. Люс провозгласил наступление столетия Америки и предрек превращение США в мировую сверхдержаву. Порой казалось, что его пророчество во многом сбывается: так думалось и после Второй мировой войны, и на момент распада СССР в 1991 г. Но сегодняшний мир сильно отличается от того, каким он был в 1945 и 1991 гг. В статье описываются эти изменения, а также обсуждаются текущие и будущие возможности внешней политики США. Отмечается, что внешняя политика администраций Д. Трампа и Дж. Байдена является следствием этих изменений, рассматриваются некоторые перспективные вызовы для внешней политики США.

Ключевые слова: Джо Байден; внешняя политика США; внешнеполитический истеблишмент; принцип «Америка прежде всего».

Introduction

Life Magazine founder H. Luce famously declared in a 1941 issue of his magazine that it was the beginning of “America’s century”¹. His proclamation has garnered various interpretations, but at its most basic it was a statement pronouncing that the United States would be the dominant power for years to come, in part because America would remake the world in its image. After World War II, the US and the USSR defined a bi-

¹Luce H. The American century // Life Mag. 1941. 17 Febr. P. 61–64.

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polar world and global order, but many of the major institutions of the world, such as Bretton Woods reflected a bias favouring American interests and perspectives. Yet the American century came to realisation, especially after the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 and the breakup of the USSR in 1991 where it looked as if America stood atop of a unipolar world.

But now 30 years later the world looks different. The American presidency of D. Trump raised questions for many regarding how the US would adapt to the change. His presidency was marked by a new nationalism or America's first strategy, less emphasis on diplomacy – at least in terms of a multilateral approach – and trade wars with several states including China. Yet with D. Trump's electoral defeat in 2020 and the transition to the presidency of J. Biden, many concluded – or hoped – that the administration would return to a more traditional post-Cold War foreign policy for the United States.

The US is in a very different position today than it was in 1945 or 1991. Moreover, often the best predictor of a new US president's foreign policy is his predecessor [1]. The American presidency of J. Biden shares more with the D. Trump presidency than it diver-

ges from it. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, while US presidents have a lot of authority in the area of foreign policy, its making is a shared task with congress and the foreign policy establishment that limits presidential autonomy. Secondly, presidents are not free to start a foreign policy anew with their inauguration. They are products of historical contexts and circumstances, often limiting their ability to act [2].

This article examines US foreign policy under the J. Biden presidency. It details the challenges that will impact American foreign policy in the coming years, regardless of who is president. We begin by explaining the basic principles and structure of US foreign policy since World War II, seeking to establish that for nearly 80 years there has been more continuity than divergence. Then we briefly review the foreign policy approach of the D. Trump presidency to show the breaks and continuities it represented. Finally, the article takes us into the J. Biden presidency. The argument will be that first the D. Trump and now the J. Biden presidencies are responding to broader global challenges the US is facing and that perhaps the American century that H. Luce proposed is facing a serious challenge.

A short history of US foreign policy since World War II

American foreign policy since the end of World War II is guided by several principles which have largely remained constant over time. If we assume as realists do that each nation acts in its interests [3; 4], then one can argue that these are the guiding principles of US foreign policy. These principles, as noted below, often serve a dualistic function of being strategies or tactics to securing the principles. Thus, in some cases, principles also exist as strategies.

The first principle is the commitment to a liberal world order. A liberal order can mean a political philosophy grounded in the teachings of J. Locke which includes respect for democratic rights, limited government, and support for property rights [5]. One might also attach to this principle a commitment to a capitalist world order where free markets are generally considered to be the preferred form of economic activity, ascribing to the government generally a limited role. Until the 1970s or 1980s, the combination of the two philosophies into market capitalism meant toleration for welfare state policies, but since the 1980s it has turned more into neoliberalism and market fundamentalism [6].

The importance of the support for market capitalism has meant several things when it comes to US foreign policy. For one, generally, the US supported western democratic values and opposed communism or other non-democratic values or regimes across the world. Second, it meant that the US generally would support free trade and open economic orders. This translated into support for free trade agreements such as North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in

North America, as well as multinational entities such as the World Trade Organisation. It also meant that the US would support countries and movements that it considered to be democratic.

The commitment to liberal values brought with it a belief that the US was the guardian of democracy and that in many cases it had a right or obligation to intervene in the internal affairs of other states to promote or maintain democracy. Moreover, in cases where the US judged there to be human rights violations, it also chose in many cases to intervene for humanitarian reasons. The commitment to a liberal world order for the US also meant it was the leader of the first or free world, with obligations to use its force to promote democratic values.

The second guiding value linked to the first is opposition to communism. This principle may be an outgrowth of the first principle endorsing democracy, but it is its distinct guiding value. From the end of World War II until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Cold War politics defined the US. This played out in terms of the US being viewed as the leader of the free world or at the same time as the world's policeman in terms of seeking to enforce democratic norms. Anti-communism as a defining principle meant during the height of the Cold War that international relations could depict the world as bipolar – with respective spheres of influence allocated to the US and the USSR.

With the collapse of the latter, there was a brief period or emergence of a unipolar world with the US at its helm [7]. This was the point where F. Fukuyama [8] proclaimed that history had ended and western

values had triumphed. However, as G. Herring [7] and H. Brands [9] have pointed out, that unipolar moment has disappeared. Instead, as S. Huntington [10] and B. Barber [11] have argued, a new “clash of civilisations” has emerged pitting the US against perhaps the Arab or other worlds. The point being is that while the US is still considered the leader of the western democratic world (the first world to use Cold War language), its foe is now terrorism and the US now sees itself as defending western values against it.

The third principle for the US was the maintenance of military and nuclear superiority over all other countries in the world. The Cold War was in part about both of these types of superiorities. The idea of military superiority was to ensure the US could enforce democratic capitalist norms, be the leader of the west, and oppose communism and the USSR. To be the leader of the free world and control its part of a bipolar world necessitated this superiority.

Finally, the fourth principle was economic dominance or superiority. While this principle could be linked to the first principle supporting liberal capitalism, here the idea is that the US wanted to maintain itself as the dominant economic power in the world. In part, as P. Kennedy [12] argued, military superpowers such as the US need to have a strong economy to support their empires, but America has also viewed having the dominant and largest economy in the world both as a matter of pride and also as a way to influence and leverage international affairs. Its sheer wealth and size have made it possible for the US to have its currency dominate the world in many capacities, influence trade agreements, and affect global economic policies through its banks or other institutions.

These principles – support for democratic capitalism, opposition to communism and global terrorism, and military and economic superiority enjoyed bipartisan support in the United States from 1946 though (and as will be argued) into the D. Trump administration. These principles have also been sustained by several strategic policies or powers.

W. Mead and J. Kaufman divide American power into four types, military, economic, sweet (cultural), and hegemonic² [13, p. 191]. This distinction articulates the various ways the US has deployed a variety of tools to enforce its values. While one can debate exactly the different ways American power can be described or dissected, there is no question that generally one sees several strategic tools or powers as part of US foreign

policy. The first has been military (conventional) and nuclear superiority. Throughout the Cold War and after, the goal has always been to maintain a military strength sufficient to deter communism, defend the free world or democracy, fight two wars, deter nuclear war, or lead the fight against the war on terrorism. At present, the US military budget is by far the largest in the world, surpassing the next seven countries combined [14].

The second strategy has been diplomacy. Diplomacy is broader than simply setting up ambassadorships, it is negotiating treaties and alliances that are often multilateral. It is creating rules for international trade and dispute resolution. Diplomacy is about using American soft power to create a world hospitable to US interests, including democratic and free-market values. Diplomacy is convincing others to do things America wants and reaching agreements to protect the country. Diplomacy has produced alliances such as NATO, South-East Asia Treaty Organisation, and international organisations such as the World Trade Organisation. Diplomacy secured the coalitions the US needed under the G. H. W. Bush administration to liberate Kuwait from Iraq, broker the Camp David accords under J. Carter, and open up US-China relations under R. Nixon.

The third strategic tool is economics. The US maintained the largest economy in the world and its sheer size gave it muscle across the globe. American capitalism, coupled with its diplomatic skills in forging free trade and other economic agreements, fashioned a world where America dominated. The US may not have had a positive trade balance with every nation, but collectively the economic world order formed after World War II favoured the United States, making it the most prosperous nation on Earth. Economic superiority, like its military power, is a strategic tool and an end or principle itself.

Finally, one can see cultural values as critical to the US foreign policy interests. Perhaps the most significant US export is its cultural values. Hollywood, television and American pop culture define America and are projected onto the rest of the world. They define a hegemonic way to see and describe the world.

Collectively, the above principles and strategic tools have defined the structure of US foreign policy since the end of World War II. Even with the end of the Cold War and the emergence of the war against terrorism, the basic contours of US foreign policy have not changed much.

American foreign policy under D. Trump

The D. Trump presidency demonstrated continuity and discontinuity in terms of the broader patterns of recent US foreign policy and many of his positions are within the mainstream of part of Republican party po-

litics [1]. D. Trump supported America first's core principles of economic and military superiority, but it was questionable how much he was committed to furthering liberal democratic values. Also uncertain was his

²US defense spending compared to other countries // Paul Peterson Found. 2018. 7 May.

commitment to fighting terrorism, at least and until it actually hits the United States directly again.

Perhaps the most obvious characteristic of D. Trump's foreign policy was its more explicit and narrow definition of US national interests.

As candidate in April 2016, D. Trump declared in his first major foreign policy speech: "My foreign policy will always put the interests of the American people and American security above all else"³ [15]. More specifically, he identified five weaknesses with current US foreign policy under B. Obama. First, he saw the US military weakened by a weak US economy. By a weak economy he identified trade deficits with the world and specific countries. He wanted to reduce and reverse these deficits. Second, he argued that US allies were not paying their fair share in military alliances. He specifically pointed to NATO countries where only 4 of the 28 countries were spending at least 2 % of their GDP on defence. He wanted to reverse this unfair burden on the US. Third, he argued that our friends cannot rely upon the US, seeing America as negotiating bad deals, such as with Iran over nuclear weapons production, as an example. He saw this deal as selling out Israel and humiliating the US internationally. Fourth, he asserted that US rivals no longer respected the US, citing the failure of a leader from Cuba to greet B. Obama when he visited there. Finally, he contended the US no longer had clarity in terms of its foreign policy goals since the Cold War ended. This clarity requires the US to develop a plan to halt the spread of radical Islam, rebuild the military and the economy, and "develop a foreign policy based on American interests"⁴. In this speech, D. Trump also urged for common ground to be found with Russia and China to address terrorism and migration, and he also indicated that financial leverage and economic sanctions would be among his tools to push American interests.

D. Trump's economic nationalism saw other nations taking advantage of the US. His administration

pursued zero-sum economic policies with all states, seeking to have positive trade balances with all of them, instead of viewing the world from a comparative economic perspective or where it would make sense for America to do tradeoffs on economics for other security or foreign policy concerns.

Trump did not like multinational trade deals and preferred to do one-one-ones. Trump pulled the US out of the Paris accords, the Iran nuclear agreement, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), and UN Human Rights Council. As noted above, he did not see linkages across issues or how international economics or politics is more than bilateral or how in many cases, a deal with one nation is connected to another. For example, D. Trump did not like the trade deficit the US has with South Korea. However, for many strategists, the trade deficit is worth it because it places US military bases there, including equipment that could detect the launch of missiles from North Korea or China far more quickly than radar in Alaska, for example. The trade deficit thus purchases US military security through an advanced warning system.

D. Trump's foreign policy thus elevated economics and trade policy as a primary tool of US foreign policy power. Although he increased the military budget, the D. Trump presidency was more marked by a desire to withdraw from military commitments, such as his decision to pull the troops out of Afghanistan, which did eventually occur under J. Biden. The D. Trump presidency also seemed to downplay diplomacy, and it did not do much in terms of using US cultural influence.

Thus, Trump's approach to foreign policy shared many basic principles inherent in US foreign policy since World War II. However, it shuffled or altered the way the foreign policy tools were deployed and the way the US worked with other nations in the world. It represented continuity and a break. But was the break a product, or personality, or politics, or something more profound?

The global challenge to the J. Biden presidency

With D. Trump's 2020 electoral defeat many thought that his presidency was simply an aberration or outlier and that the J. Biden presidency would represent a return to a more historic norm for the US. In some ways that is true, as the J. Biden presidency has returned to the use of diplomacy again, and it is willing to engage in multilateral actions again with allies. While D. Trump questioned the value of NATO, the US has also reaffirmed its commitment to NATO and to rejoining organisations or agreements such as the Paris accords. The US also assembled a 2021 conference seeking to bring together the democracies of the world, evidence of America again seeking to be

a leader working with other states for the common interests. Thus, one conclusion is, as J. Biden said, America is back. Yes, it is, but what is the world the US is facing now?

Despite a nearly 80-year commitment to some core values and principles, the US may no longer be in the position to act on its foreign policy role in the way it once did. The world is very different in 2022 than it was in 1945 or 1991. The D. Trump presidency may have represented one way to respond to the global challenge or changes, but the US still may be at a point where it is no longer its century. Moving forward, the J. Biden presidency and the US face a host of challenges.

³Trump D. Transcript: Donald Trump's foreign policy speech [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/28/us/politics/transcript-trump-foreign-policy.html> (date of access: 15.12.2021).

⁴Ibid.

Rising nationalism. The Great recession of 2008, as well as the 2011 refugee crisis, helped flame a new nationalism across the world. There was a push-back against immigration, a fear that refugees, especially non-Caucasian and non-Christian migrants, as in Europe, would threaten the national character of countries. Free trade agreements and open borders made it look like conventions such as the EU were simply an open invitation for a country to be flooded with others, potentially damaging the ethnic or racial mix of the current population. M. LePen in France and V. Orban in Hungary were but two examples of how rising nationalism fuelled new political movements in those countries. Trumpism in the US, resulting in the Muslim travel ban and policies of asylum while you wait outside the US were examples of this (with many of these policies carried over into the J. Biden presidency). But even before D. Trump, the B. Obama presidency was marked by one of the most aggressive deportation policies ever in American history.

The point is that even before D. Trump the US was pushing back on immigration. There is no sign that the J. Biden administration will make any significant changes to the US immigration policy and for the near future (even beyond the pandemic), American borders will be hard to cross for immigrants.

New economic nationalism. D. Trump's phrase "Make America great" was not simply the product of a personality. D. Trump's presidency was the result of a convergence of many forces, some racial, but many economic that had been brewing for many years. Free trade and automation may have made some Americans very wealthy, but the burdens as noted above fell heavily upon the working class. In the 1990s US economists such as P. Krugman applauded free trade, but not until it became obvious that not all Americans were winners did he and a few others concede that perhaps they missed something in the chalkboard models. The public was never and is still not as enthusiastic and sold on free trade as tenured professors are.

When D. Trump spoke of America first and contended that other countries such as China were taking advantage of the United States, he was in part targeting trade policies and conventions that opened borders. D. Trump offered a convenient excuse as to why many of his supporters were not doing well – it was unfair trade practices with other countries. In 2016 he described NAFTA as the worst trade deal ever for the US. He and the US senator and presidential candidate B. Sanders railed against the TPP, forcing presidential candidate H. Clinton in 2016 onto the defence (because of her role in forming and defending it). Eventually, the US did not join the TPP and even into the J. Biden presidency many of the D. Trump era economic policies remain in place, and it is unlikely that the US will become a full member of the TPP any time soon.

Afghanistan. The United States invaded Afghanistan in 2001 after the terrorist attacks on 11 September

2001. It was the only time that NATO invoked art. 5 of that defence treaty to provide mutual aid. In amassing a multinational force, including with support from the Russian Federation, America sought to oust Al-Qaeda and the Taliban and transform Afghanistan from a terrorist haven into a stable democracy. When in 2021 US president J. Biden followed up on D. Trump's plan to remove all US troops from that country it was recognition that America had failed in that mission. One can also argue that the invasion of Iraq and the removal of S. Hussain, too, failed in the sense of producing a stable western European style democracy. Both of these examples point to the limits of US foreign policy.

But many point to the messy US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the rapid collapse of its regime and the takeover by the Taliban as a sign that the US may have overreached. Or perhaps it was no longer willing to use military force to defend some interests or causes. Or one can conclude that perhaps the US had lost another war, much like its defeat in Vietnam in the 1970s. There are many possible conclusions to what Afghanistan represented, but there is no question that for many it signalled a withdrawal of US foreign commitments and an opening of a power vacuum that other nations could fill.

Geopolitics. Brexit demonstrates geopolitics is alive and well. The unipolar moment that the US had after 1989 and 1991 is gone. Brexit in part is about the breaking up of the world after the forces for the last several decades have been toward less nationalism and more cooperation. While Brexit does not directly involve the US, it does signal a change in the way the world looks and operates. Instead of a united Europe behind the United States, the world is more fragmented than it was just a few years ago, and there are many forces contending against American supremacy in the way it has enjoyed it for so long.

After World War II the US GDP was nearly half of the global GDP. Today it competes with the EU and China and soon may be surpassed by both. The rise of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) points to a collection of states not willing to concede American supremacy. In Russia one finds V. Putin lamenting the breakup of the USSR as the greatest geopolitical disaster of the 20th century and some wonder if statements such as this and other actions by Russia are meant to challenge US global dominance and the unipolar position America had after 1991. The Eurasian Economic Union, unification or cooperation agreements with Belarus and the efforts to keep Ukraine within its sphere of influence demonstrate Russia remains a major player.

China is testing US global dominance too. Even before D. Trump's trade wars with China, president B. Obama wanted to pivot to Asia to address the challenges emerging from Beijing. The Belt and Road initiative is an effort to expand its global economic influence. Its growing military confidence in the

Pacific, the limiting of self-rule in Hong Kong, and impatience with Taiwan's independence and desires to resolve unification soon demonstrate the challenge to US supremacy. Moreover, under D. Trump across the world, many countries questioned US willingness and resolve with regard to organisations such as NATO. The Ukraine conflict and J. Biden's statement that he will not send troops there if Russia invades make one wonder if Russia will be deterred. But especially after the botched withdrawal from Afghanistan, many across the world are questioning what the US is willing to fight for now, and even in NATO small states such as Lithuania wonder now if Europe is alone. Finally, the inward turn of the US under D. Trump and J. Biden now makes democracy less secure, with Freedom House pointing to several years where democracy and individual rights, including in the US, are receding. Illiberalism is on the rise, and there seems to be little resolve to challenge it. What at one point looked like the global victory for democracy and American values is less certain today.

In a different way, geopolitics is also changing. The new buzzwords for the third decade of the 21st century are cybersecurity and sovereignty. How do we rethink global borders in a world where cyberhacking and warfare are possible? The states themselves are questioning the values of the interconnectedness of a global system that for so many years thrived on the rise of a digital economy.

Conversely, the new space race will also splinter the world. While earlier conventions did not foreswear the militarisation of outer space, such agreements were more symbolic in that there was not the capacity to do so. Now technological advances are making that even more possible. But an even more potent challenge is how we are on the brink of the commercialisation of outer space. It may sound like science fiction, but it is merely a matter of a few years before the Moon,

Mars, and maybe asteroids or comets are commercially exploited. The race to space is reminiscent of the great powers colonisation movement, with the one coming portending victory to the technologically advanced.

Internal political polarisation. Unlike during the Cold War and the early days after 9/11 when there was a strong political consensus on many issues, including in the areas of foreign policy, the US is now a politically divided nation with the two major parties, Democrats and Republicans, unable to reach agreement on very many issues. The result is both a society very much divided, even over whether US elections are fair, but also in terms of the inability to pass needed legislation. The political divide is making it difficult for the US to pass core legislation to address immigration, education, health care, and a variety of other issues. Internal political polarisation only makes it more difficult for the US to lead internationally.

Pandemic. If any event has torn the fabric of the frictionless unipolar world it has been the coronavirus pandemic beginning in 2019. Nearly from its start and spread it has led to the closing of borders, interruptions in migration, the closing, opening, and reclosing of businesses and economies, and even conspiracy theories regarding the origin of the pandemic. D. Trump's effort to label the pandemic as the "China pandemic" revealed the merger of nationalism, ethnic rivalry, and racism attached to the fears of the origins and spread of the virus.

But the spread of the virus and the demand to seal state borders is only one of the ways the pandemic has been a disrupter. Development of the vaccines and the hoarding of them, face masks, and other medical supplies also revealed the ways that states favoured their interests and pulled away from collective actions when threatened. Delays in delivering vaccines to Africa, for example, have allowed the spread of mutations of the virus, pushing it into a 3rd, 4th, and possibly a 5th wave.

Conclusion

What the American century was and whether it has ended is a matter of debate. However, there is no question that the world is far different than it was in 1945 or 1991 when there was little dispute that the US was the preeminent power in the world. At that time the US GDP was approximately half of the world GDP and the US came out of the war with its infrastructure largely undamaged. Along with the USSR, it defined the global world order, but many of the international institutions generally favoured an American perspective on the world. But after 1991 with the breakup of the USSR, it did look like an American unipolar moment had arrived and that the American century had finally and fully emerged.

Yet we are now more than 30 years away from 1991, and more than 75 years from 1945. The US no longer has the same global economic dominance, with many

other states, including Russia and China, challenging America across a range of issues. This article has also identified several other factors and trends that are impacting the ability of the US to execute its foreign policy and vision for the world. Some of these factors are beyond the control of any president to alter.

The D. Trump and now the J. Biden foreign policies are products of a changed world with many powerful state players and other forces potentially limiting the policy and policy options for the United States. In the future, it is not clear that the US will have the same options it did in the past. Is this an indication of the US global decline? Maybe. But keep in mind that after the US lost the Vietnam War in 1975 many proclaimed America's best days were behind it, only to find that in 1991 it has survived and arguably won the Cold War and was at that point the only remaining superpower.

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