



Maintaining America's Superpower Status:

A Series on Restoring America's Credible Deterrence After Putin's Invasion of Ukraine

INTRODUCTION TO SERIES

Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine represents the latest in a long line of Russian military interventions aimed at reestablishing its former sphere of influence, underpinned by dissatisfaction with the conclusion of the Cold War. Whether or not Putin is successful, the fact that he felt confident to act in this way is an indictment of how the Biden Administration let this happen and the effectiveness of current alliance structures.

Stepping back from the events of the day, two observations stand out and serve as an invitation for this primer. First, Putin did not attempt this action during the Trump Administration, even though he appears to have had [the same views](#) then and earlier about Russia's claim to Ukraine. Second, over the last year, other adversaries also stepped up their aggressive actions, from Communist China flying hundreds of sorties in Taiwan's air defense identification zone to Iran mobilizing its proxies to attack America's neighbors and even threaten Americans directly. Put differently, America's adversaries today demonstrate a newfound boldness in pursuing their objectives.

What, then, does it mean for America to be a global superpower, and what will this look like in the aftermath of current events? However current circumstances resolve, what should Americans expect of their leadership to advance their priorities and interests overseas? How does America effectively deter adversaries from causing harm to American interests, and how does America ensure that its engagements with other nations result in outcomes that physically and materially benefit Americans? Indeed, on the last point, little is known about what President Biden says to adversaries during his virtual summits, and his remarks to the press have been minimal.

This series starts with the premise that America was overall safer and more prosperous under the Trump Administration and that, from the period January 2017 until January 2021, America's adversaries did not succeed in undermining America's leadership position in the world. They were effectively deterred, and the world was safer and more stable. The series draws lessons from the events of those years to distill the core principles of the America First foreign policy that made the world safer and preserved America's global leadership. The four focus areas are America's engagement with allies; America's interaction with adversaries; the role, culture, and institution of the American military; and the related topics of America's economic and energy security. Without success in these four areas, America cannot protect Americans or their interests around the world

I. AMERICA'S ENGAGEMENT WITH ALLIES

CORE TENETS

- Only Americans—not even our best allies—will consistently place America's interests first.
- Working with allies depends on a unity of purpose and action to confront adversaries.
- America engages directly in different regions only when there is buy-in from regional partners who are committed to doing so as well.
- America's work within multilateral settings does not prevent it from acting unilaterally or bilaterally, nor does it restrict its ability to act in the manner of its choosing.
- Adversaries must be confronted globally, not regionally.
- Expansion without justification leads to irrelevance. To endure, alliances must evolve and ensure all members carry their share of the burden.

OVERVIEW

America First does not mean America alone. It means, as President Donald J. Trump described in his first address to the United Nations General Assembly in 2017, that America's engagement with other nations should clearly define and put the interests and security of the American people first—the people to whom all American elected representatives are directly accountable. There are several implications that follow from this principle; foremost among them is that goodwill alone is not enough to justify commitments by America to other nations. Rather, an America First approach is distinguished by a shared and clear understanding that in working together, America and other nations recognize the stakes and benefits for their people. By contrast, the consensus Washington approach to alliances can be described as “nostalgia-driven,” as they remain focused on America's experiences during the Cold War and an assumption that only countries with the same composition and structure—for example, only functioning democracies working in tandem with one another—can work together irrespective of their priorities, views of threats, or ability/commitment to working together. A significant factor driving Putin's invasion of Ukraine was the fact that Germany, one of the most prominent democracies in Europe, is dependent on unreliable Russian energy for much of its energy needs and so is unreliable, if not insincere, in deterring Russia. Indeed, the Biden Administration's *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* states that “[w]e will work alongside fellow democracies across the globe to deter and defend against aggression from hostile adversaries.” ([White House, Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, 19](#)). Of course, many of America's closest allies share America's democratic values, but the world is a very different place from what it was during the Cold War. We face a different adversary in Communist China. Our threats are more complex—emanating from an array of sources with different motives—and geographically dispersed, and a significantly higher number of nations have many more resources at their disposal to do more and to fight for themselves. Our shared view of threats and the need to address them, rather than only historical ties or common political values, dictates the success of America's efforts with allies.

A clear and objectives-based America First approach to working with allies has other virtues—namely, adaptability and transparency that conveys to non-allied nations that America is not limited only to the existing allies it has and that there is a clear opportunity and constructive way to work with America even if not part of America’s formal alliance structures. Namely, other nations can choose to share our view of who our adversaries are, share our commitment to stopping them, and embrace our method for doing so. This simple formula ensures everyone is working in lockstep and that allied nations are aligned in their worldview and in their commitments to contribute to meeting shared objectives.

The following six principles describe the America First approach for how America should engage with allies.

1. Only Americans—not even our best allies—will consistently place America’s interests first.

Americans cannot depend on any other nation to represent and advance American interests. The interests of nations that have shared history, values, and stated goals will sometimes diverge from our own. America can and does do much for other nations, but this must be done when the objectives of doing so clearly advance the well-being of the American people. Moreover, in cases where America happens to share the worldview and values of another nation, it is important to recognize that that is often the result of shared experiences—in the case of America and its European allies, having fought wars alongside one another against common adversaries, for example—and not because of America’s direct efforts to shape the identity and government structure of other nations. Indeed, even the famed Marshall Plan to revitalize Europe’s economy was justified on the grounds that Europe’s economic revival directly impacted Americans’ safety and world peace. Similarly, America’s efforts to unilaterally transform other nations into replicas of America have near-universally failed, for the very reason that no matter the actions pushed by external actors, any meaningful change within those nations depends on the decisions those other nations make—their culture, history, and a people-driven commitment to change.

It is not in the interest of the American people for America to impose its own image, values, or institutional structures on other nations absent a clear justification that ties doing so to immediate and existential justifications. Indeed, the United States did so to Germany and Japan during World War II, though this was in the context of total war when that was the only remaining option to bring peace. As a general principle in other circumstances, the goal should be to identify common priorities and to build a path to work together to achieve strategic objectives in the interests of both the American people and those of other nations where possible. The alignment of values can result from a shared history of working together to meet shared objectives, particularly to deter adversaries. This is exemplified most clearly by the Abraham Accords, where Israel and its neighbors came together not because of having the same government structure or values but rather because of a shared perspective of opportunities and of threats.

2. Working with allies depends on a unity of purpose and action to confront adversaries. America should prioritize engagement with allies who share common objectives and the willingness to act—particularly as it pertains to confronting adversaries—instead of those content to free-ride off America’s investments and sacrifices. A cornerstone of working with allies—both current and future—should be

to agree regarding identifying and willingness to confront a shared adversary and have clearly scoped objectives.

- 3. America engages directly in different regions only when there is buy-in from regional partners who are committed to doing so as well.** Although America has interests across regions, achieving its objectives in a region should not always mean America commits troops or resources directly to address that objective. Rather, America sets the regional conditions for allies to work together towards clearly defined shared objectives in alignment with America's determination of objectives. Indeed, there is a range of actions America can take—from instituting sanctions to trade policies—that do not require an outsized commitment of American taxpayer dollars or military engagement and which, depending on the nature of the conflict, can achieve objectives without risking strategic overreach.
- 4. America's work within multilateral settings does not prevent it from acting unilaterally or bilaterally, nor does it restrict its ability to act in the manner of its choosing.** The fact that America belongs to a particular regional or functional alliance, such as North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), does not mean that America cannot directly interface with other nations, whether allies or adversaries. By the same token, there may be local or regional issues between NATO members with little American interest—for example, managing refugee inflows from conflict areas in the Middle East and Eastern Europe—that could be resolved bilaterally and not require the entire alliance to become engaged. Although prior consultation is generally encouraged, America can make the determination about how much and with whom such prior consultation should take place, particularly with reference to the outcome of a particular course of action and expectations for any follow-on actions.
- 5. Adversaries must be confronted globally, not regionally.** Regional crises that involve America are rarely limited to a single region and so necessarily require a global response. As such, America will seek partnerships around the world wherever opportunities may exist for advancing policy objectives, particularly when it comes to deterring adversaries in a region where those partners may have interests. As mentioned earlier, the world is a different place from the immediate aftermath of World War II, during which many of today's alliance structures were formed. Although these structures, particularly NATO, grew stronger as a result of shared training and integration, their missions and overall purpose also expanded to include missions like scientific collaborations and democracy promotion. Moreover, individual nations within the alliance had very different experiences during the post-Cold War setting and today have different, even conflicting, priorities when it comes to addressing America's adversaries, much as they did during the Cold War. At the same time, the threat landscape became far more complex and geographically distributed, with the emergence of Communist China as the top nation-state adversary, the Iranian government's nuclear ambitions and expansive proxy terrorist network, and the persistent threat of Islamist terrorists, to name a few.

These circumstances require a worldwide perspective to confront adversaries—acknowledging their reach in other parts of the world and allowing for more opportunities to apply pressure alongside allies in other regions. For example, disentangling European nations from dependence on Russian energy may mean building alternative energy sources with Middle East partners. Similarly, reducing

dependence on Communist China for critical needs like pharmaceuticals requires nearshoring to allied nations, whether in East Asia or in other theaters.

6. **Expansion without justification leads to irrelevance. To endure, alliances must evolve and ensure all members carry their share of the burden.** The NATO experience demonstrates that the first priority should be to examine thoroughly what the purpose of the alliance is given the long-term strategic threats and how the alliance currently functions, particularly if there is an uneven distribution of responsibilities. Indeed, expansion may, after all, make sense, but it may be to include more allies from other regions alongside an overhaul and modernization of the tools and processes of how NATO operates, rather than solely expanding across Europe.