

# Bolstering U.S. Foreign Policy by Repairing U.S. Dysfunction

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## COMMENTARY

The United States is “facing an inflection point in history,” stated President Biden in his Oct. 19, Oval Office [address](#). Assisting Ukraine in countering Russia’s invasion and Israel in defending itself against Hamas’ jihadists, the president argued, will advance U.S. interests by deterring authoritarian aggression and terrorism. But to ensure that Ukraine and Israel successfully defend themselves, Americans must rise above “our divisions at home,” said the president. “We can’t let petty, partisan, angry politics get in the way of our responsibilities as a great nation.”

Biden’s linkage of national security to national unity has a distinguished pedigree. In February 1946, in the [Long Telegram](#) – the best-known and most influential document ever drafted by a U.S. State Department official – George Kennan wrote to Secretary of State James F. Byrnes from the U.S. Embassy in Moscow to explain the magnitude and the

complexity of the challenge presented by the Soviet Union. The outcome of the worldwide struggle between communists and free people over the shape of world order, Kennan concluded, would depend on the West's "cohesion, firmness and vigor."

"World communism is like [a] malignant parasite which feeds only on diseased tissue," Kennan wrote. "Every courageous and incisive measure to solve internal problems of our own society, to improve self-confidence, discipline, morale and community spirit of our own people, is a diplomatic victory over Moscow worth a thousand diplomatic notes and joint communiqués." Kennan also advised that the government should encourage rigorous study of the nature of Soviet communism and undertake a concerted effort to educate the public about the realities of the Soviet challenge. Rising to the occasion, furthermore, would require the United States to provide a "tired and frightened" Europe with more than bromides about freedom: "We must formulate and put forward for other nations a much more positive and constructive picture of [the] sort of world we would like to see than we have put forward in [the] past."

Like Kennan in 1946, in his recent "Foreign Affairs" essay, published less than two weeks before Hamas' 10/7 attacks, Robert Gates warns of an ominous geopolitical landscape. "The United States now confronts graver threats to its security than it has in decades, perhaps ever," he writes in "The Dysfunctional Superpower." Like Kennan, Gates contends that achieving stability, freedom, and prosperity at home and presenting a confident and compelling view about America's role in the world are crucial to vindicating U.S. national interests. But in contrast to Kennan, who emphasized that America needed only to rally around what was widely recognized as the best in the nation's traditions, Gates describes an America in which citizens quarrel vehemently over the meaning and merit of those traditions.

Gates brings to his sobering analysis distinguished credentials, including stints as deputy national security advisor and CIA director under President George H. W. Bush, and service as secretary of defense from 2006 to 2011 under Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama. Gates' account of the international challenges that the United States confronts, therefore, carries substantial weight. "Never before has it faced four allied antagonists at the same time – Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran – whose collective nuclear arsenal could within a few years be nearly double the size of its own," he writes. "Not since the Korean War has the United States had to contend with powerful military rivals in both Europe and Asia. And no one alive can remember a time when an adversary had as much economic, scientific, technological, and military power as China does today."

America's fractured and feckless political leadership, according to Gates, amplifies the dangers from abroad. Given former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's reorientation of the State Department around the China challenge and his many speeches on the threat, Gates overstates matters in charging that Republicans and Democrats alike have failed to explain

to the American people how Russia and China imperil American interests. In any case, neither political party, as Gates argues, has articulated a comprehensive strategy to enable the United States to counter those authoritarian powers.

Chinese Communist Party Secretary General Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin, maintains Gates, are alike in three important respects. Both are driven by imperial ambitions rooted in their people's national spirit. Both believe that Western liberal democracies – particularly the United States – are over the hill and destined to decline. And both have acted recklessly. Xi telegraphed his intentions for worldwide dominance through wolf-warrior diplomacy, a massive military build-up, and saber-rattling in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait while weakening the Chinese economy by expanding state control and by adopting a futile “zero COVID” policy. Putin sought to conquer Ukraine with an army unequal to the task.

China's and Russia's combination of belligerence and miscalculation create an exceptionally dangerous moment for the United States. “Washington must therefore change Xi's and Putin's calculus and reduce the chances of disaster, an effort that will require strategic vision and bold action,” advises Gates. But the United States appears “incapable of mustering the unity and strength necessary to dissuade them” owing to “dysfunction” that “has made American power erratic and unreliable, practically inviting risk-prone autocrats to place dangerous bets – with potentially catastrophic effects.”

The CCP's bet is that it can reestablish China, in accordance with the nation's traditional self-understanding, as the Middle Kingdom, the center of world affairs. Seizing Taiwan is essential to CCP plans. So is building a world-class military – including space and cyberspace capabilities as well as conventional and nuclear forces. Maneuvering other countries into China's orbit through Beijing's economic might, however, is the CCP's preferred approach. “China is now the top trading partner of more than 120 countries, including nearly all of those in South America,” Gates writes. “More than 140 countries have signed up as participants in the Belt and Road Initiative, China's sprawling infrastructure development program, and China now owns, manages, or has invested in more than 100 ports in some 60 countries.”

Russia's bet seems less promising, Gates observes. Putin's pursuit of a lost empire in Ukraine has bogged down into a costly war of attrition, grinding down Russia's army, driving away foreign investment, triggering a brain drain, and reinvigorating NATO. Nevertheless, Putin possesses the largest nuclear force in the world and expands Russia's influence “in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia” with “arms sales, security assistance, and discounted oil and gas.”

Although the U.S. economy has proved surprisingly resilient, American political dysfunction thwarts the formation and execution of a long-term plan, Gates believes. The appropriations process is broken. The national debt has reached an all-time high of \$33.4 trillion. And

government spending spirals out of control.

As Kennan emphasized regarding the Soviet challenge, so Gates stresses concerning the Russia and China challenges: It is incumbent on government officials and leaders of both parties to educate Americans. The president, members of Congress, and candidates for their parties' presidential nomination must clarify for the American people how support for Ukrainian resistance to Russian aggression advances America's interest in deterring China in the Indo-Pacific. They also need to state in plain English why countering China and Russia in the global South is crucial to American security and prosperity. And, in the spirit of Gates' analysis but going beyond what he said in a pre-10/7 world, they need to speak forthrightly about the dangers to the free world presented by a jihadism that authorizes the mass murder, rape, mutilation, and abduction of civilians and by the ignorant and vicious far from the front lines who cheer on the jihadists.

Politicians of both parties can start by ensuring that the American people understand that "American global leadership has provided 75 years of great-power peace – the longest stretch in centuries." The hard truth must be effectively conveyed: World War I, World War II, the Cold War, and the 9/11 attacks teach – with special pertinence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century's intricately interconnected world – that failure to deal firmly with aggressors, even in distant corners of the world, impairs America's interests by inviting further aggression.

Reinvigoration of American global leadership, argues Gates, requires the renewal of interest in, and preparation for, that leadership. First, the United States must develop a foreign policy that affirms American principles of freedom and democracy while acknowledging the need to partner with imperfectly free and democratic regimes and sometimes authoritarian ones that share American goals. Second, the United States must employ the full array of tools in its diplomatic toolbox, with special emphasis on creating more effective development assistance programs to compete with China's debt-trap diplomacy, ramping up public diplomacy to counter Chinese and Russian propaganda, and improving military assistance. Third, the United States must expand its nuclear force and build more warships and submarines. Fourth, Congress must reliably fund the Pentagon while the Pentagon must streamline its acquisition process.

Reasonable as they are, the nation will not easily take these steps and assume these responsibilities. As Gates observes, "The American public has turned inward; Congress has descended into bickering, incivility, and brinkmanship; and successive presidents have either disavowed or done a poor job explaining America's global role."

The dependence of American diplomacy and national security on the nation's "cohesion, firmness, and vigor" has not diminished since George Kennan brought into focus the Soviet challenge. To enable the United States to meet "its responsibilities as a great nation," President Biden – and government officials and citizens of both parties – must not only note "our divisions at home" but act to mend them.

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