

# Trump-Reagan Fusion Can Win the New Cold War

[realclearpolitics.com/articles/2024/03/24/trump-reagan\\_fusion\\_can\\_win\\_the\\_new\\_cold\\_war\\_150693.html](https://realclearpolitics.com/articles/2024/03/24/trump-reagan_fusion_can_win_the_new_cold_war_150693.html)



## COMMENTARY

Since Donald Trump's rise within Republican ranks, conservatives have divided into two competing foreign policy camps. One contends that Trump's approach suits the world in which we live and supersedes previous GOP national security and foreign affairs outlooks. A smaller contingent contends that Ronald Reagan's understanding of America and his conduct of diplomacy remain the gold standard for U.S. foreign policy.

Atlantic Council colleagues Matthew Kroenig (also a Georgetown professor of government and international relations) and Dan Negrea contend that considerably more agreement about foreign affairs prevails among conservatives than they themselves realize. When fleshed out, a Trump-Reagan fusion represents, they persuasively maintain in their new book, "the foreign policy synthesis around which the Republican Party can coalesce."

Taking their title from Ronald Reagan's succinct 1977 statement of his stance toward the Cold War, Kroenig and Negrea argue in "[We Win, They Lose: Republican Foreign Policy and the New Cold War](#)" (the acknowledgements thank me although I contributed at most

encouragement), that the United States has been thrust into the New Cold War by the People's Republic of China. Trump administration veterans – Kroenig in the Defense Department and Negrea in the State Department – the authors maintain that Trump's 2017 National Security Strategy rightly recognized that America had already entered an era of great-power competition with Russia as well as with China.

Notwithstanding “real divisions within the party,” argue Kroenig and Negrea, recognition of “[t]he existential threat posed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)” provides conservatives “a central, unifying theme.” By combining Reagan's characteristic “commitment to individual liberty, free markets, and a strong national defense” with Trump's emphasis “on the interests of all Americans and confronting countries, such as China, whose economic policies harm American interests,” Kroenig and Negrea contend, conservatives can fashion a strategy for winning the New Cold War.

The authors start from the basics. Foreign policy, they argue, stems from fundamental views about human beings, political life, and the world. Following the late Harvard professor Samuel Huntington, Kroenig and Negrea state that conservatives typically see the world as dangerous, respect tradition, recognize religion as an essential social bond, appreciate that political communities inevitably contain a hierarchical dimension, and grasp that peoples and nations tend to regard their shared values and beliefs as superior to those of others.

Progressives place the emphasis elsewhere. They focus on opportunities for collaboration across communities, nations, and civilizations. They often believe that science and reason should liberate individuals from backward tradition and benighted faith. They seek to level hierarchies at home and abroad while stressing the equal worth of all peoples' and nations' values (with the exception, among woke progressives, of America's and the West's characteristic principles, which they deem inferior to the rest).

These divergent ideas about individuals, society, and international relations produce different opinions about the goal and conduct of foreign affairs. For most conservatives – true of both Reagan and Trump – U.S. foreign policy's primary purpose is to secure American freedom and prosperity. Conservatives see international conflict as rooted in competing interests and clashing goals. Accordingly, they believe that hard power plays an ineliminable role in world affairs. While appreciating that international institutions can serve the nation's interests, conservatives prefer U.S. global leadership because they think that America's dedication to individual freedom and equality under law distinguishes it from other peoples and nations.

In contrast, the progressive outlook organizes foreign policy around the betterment of humanity. Progressives typically see conflict among nations as springing from misunderstandings. Hence, they downplay the need for hard power, even as a last resort, and often suppose that all major differences among nations can be overcome through dialogue, diplomacy, transnational courts, and international organizations. Assuming that

America is no better than any other country and worse than many, progressives frequently favor the transfer of authority from sovereign nation-states, including the United States, to multilateral institutions and the United Nations.

The progressive mindset, according to Kroenig and Negrea, accounts for many faults of Biden administration foreign policy. Biden campaigned on “a foreign policy for the middle class.” As president, he declared that democracy must prevail against autocracy. And he has taken credit for restoring America’s alliances. Yet nothing about middle-class interests explains Biden administration foreign policy – from opening wide America’s southern border to espousing the establishment of a Palestinian state in response to Hamas’ Oct. 7 massacre in Israel of mostly civilians. The president’s tough words on autocracy, moreover, obscured the distinction between the Islamic Republic of Iran, which seeks America’s destruction, and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia – whom candidate Biden estranged by calling a “pariah” – which wants to increase cooperation with the United States and normalize relations with Israel. And America’s shambolic withdrawal from Afghanistan in the summer of 2021 effectively turned over the country to the Taliban, diminishing respect for the United States among friends as well as foes.

In addition, the Biden administration has sent mixed messages on China, not least with the president repeatedly stating that the United States would intervene to repel an invasion of Taiwan, and his staff repeatedly rescinding his statements. The Biden administration also misread Iran, conveying weakness through its zeal to reach a new agreement about Tehran’s nuclear program, which encouraged the ayatollahs in 2021 to step up uranium enrichment. It has neglected North Korea, a nuclear power with ballistic missiles that can reach the United States. It has provided Ukraine enough weapons to hold off Russia but not enough to achieve victory. And its profligate spending threatens America’s ability to fund a military capable of deterring the CCP’s world-wide campaign to reshape international affairs to the benefit of Beijing’s authoritarian ambitions.

The Trump-Reagan fusion promises much better by respecting America’s founding principles and by concentrating on advancing America’s interests in an increasingly volatile world. The fusion, according to the authors, comprises three chief elements.

First, the Trump-Reagan fusion seeks peace through strength. In the absence of world government – agreed upon international authorities with the power to make and enforce laws and adjudicate the controversies that arise under them – the United States must maintain the world’s most powerful and adroit military and make clear its readiness to use it to secure the nation’s vital interests. Reagan’s defense build-up, which hastened the Soviet Union’s demise, is a classic case of achieving peace by preparing for war.

Second, the Trump-Reagan fusion upholds free and fair trade. Reagan championed free-market and free-trade policies that sparked an economic turnaround in the 1980s and set the stage for dramatic innovation, entrepreneurship, and growth in the 1990s. But the freedom in

free trade must be reciprocal, Reagan explained: “If trade is not fair for all, then trade is free in name only.” Trump applied this principle, write the authors, “countering countries like the PRC that systematically violate the rules of international trade.”

Third, the Trump-Reagan fusion takes pride in American exceptionalism. The United States is the world’s only rights-protecting and democratic superpower. Its constitutional system furnishes “an unending source of economic, diplomatic, and military strength that helps the United States excel in geopolitics.” Since the construction of the U.S.-led international order following World War II, the authors observe, democracy has proliferated, poverty has fallen dramatically, and the world has become, by any objective measure, “much safer, richer, and freer.”

To deal with America’s principal national security threats, the authors advance a “conservative deterrence and diplomacy strategy.” China is the foremost threat, and “getting to a point where the Chinese government no longer has the will or the capacity to threaten core U.S. interests” is the chief objective. The United States must operate simultaneously on two tracks, imposing costs on China’s malign conduct – in the economic, diplomatic, and military realms – in regions around the world while building “a pro-freedom, anti-CCP coalition” – which will include friendly authoritarian nations – in hopes of cooperating “with a future, reasonable government in Beijing.” This two-track approach applies also to Russia, Iran, and North Korea – authoritarian powers bent on undermining the U.S.-led global order.

The authors also highlight three transnational issues central to American strategy. First, “America needs to strengthen traditional ties to allies and partners (NATO, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and so forth), attract new ones (Vietnam, for example), recommit to previous international institutions that work, create new ones, and tear up or adapt those that have outlived their usefulness.” Second, mindful that China is by far the world’s leading polluter and skeptical of toothless climate treaties and clumsy government interventions, the United States should rely on free markets and technological breakthroughs to effect the long-term transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy. Third, security and immigration policy should “focus on strengthening border security while expanding pathways for legal immigration for high-skilled workers who can help the United States in its struggle with China.”

The Trump-Reagan fusion represents not a new theory of foreign policy, but a sensible strategic outlook formed by applying traditional American principles of diplomacy and security to winning the New Cold War.

*Peter Berkowitz is the Tad and Dianne Taube senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. From 2019 to 2021, he served as director of the Policy Planning Staff at the U.S. State Department. His writings are posted at [PeterBerkowitz.com](http://PeterBerkowitz.com) and he can be followed on Twitter @BerkowitzPeter.*