Here's Why the U.S. Is No Longer the World's Only Superpower

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Articles & Testimony

Mismatching objectives and means has repeatedly produced failure and undermined consensus, but Washington no longer has the luxury of bad statecraft on pressing issues like Iran's nuclear program.

Over the past several decades, the world order has shifted. Today, the United States is no longer a unipolar uber-power, and this shift has dramatic implications for those inside, and outside, of our borders.

I have long been a student and practitioner of statecraft. For four decades, I worked for both Democratic and Republican Presidents, including as the head of Policy Planning for President George H.W. Bush and as a Special Envoy for President Bill Clinton, as well as a member of the National Security Council staff for Presidents Ronald Reagan and Barack Obama.

In 2006, I wrote a book about statecraft to explain what I felt was missing from the foreign policy of George W. Bush. Statecraft involves using all the tools that we have—diplomatic, economic, military, intelligence, management, information, organization—to advance our interests, deter threats, and defend the country. At the time, I felt that the Bush policies, especially the decision to go to war in Iraq, reflected little understanding about what the U.S. was getting into—and we paid the price with a very costly war, with very limited gains, as a result.

One of the ironies of writing a new book on statecraft is that I was able to analyze how President Bush changed during his second term, particularly with regards to Iraq. In deciding to go to war in Iraq in 2003, the president presided over a groupthink that assumed away the prospect of failure. There was no real debate about the pros and cons of going to war, and those who did raise questions were increasingly excluded from the decision-making process. But by 2007, our policy was failing and Iraq was disintegrating into a sectarian war. It was President Bush who raised

hard questions about our strategy, and his national security advisor, Steve Hadley, made sure there was a systematic review of all options. The processes could not have been more different—and so were the results. Bush made the decision to surge forces which restored some security to Iraqis, stopped the sectarian violence, and produced greater stability.

While it was interesting to see how the same administration applied statecraft far more effectively in its second term, I chose to do a new book on statecraft (https://global.oup.com/academic/product/statecraft-20-9780197698914?cc=us&lang=en&) not simply to take another look at history and draw lessons about how to do it well. I wrote a new book because the world is so different today from the one I was describing nearly 20 years ago.

Back then, the world was a unipolar one. American power dwarfed all others. We had no real competitors. China was using the institutions we built internationally—like the World Trade Organization—to accelerate its economic growth even as it did not always play by the rules (https://www.brookings.edu/articles/issues-in-chinas-wto-accession/) for mutual trade and investment. The U.S. tolerated China's violation of those rules, in no small part because we very much dominated the world. Russia was not challenging us yet—though in 2007 (https://www.politico.eu/article/munich-security-conference-angela-merkel-mike-pence/) at the Munich Security Forum, Vladimir Putin signaled what would be coming (https://time.com/5531770/munich-security-conference-mike-pence-angela-merkel-china-russia/) when he decried the idea of a unipolar world and said the Russians and others could not accept it. At the time, his assertion did not change the reality of U.S. hegemony.

But the reality is different today. Internationally, we face China (https://time.com/7199538/us-military-edge-china/) and Russia (https://time.com/7261449/putin-donald-trump-russia-ceo-essay/) as global competitors—with China posing both an economic and military challenge. Regionally, we face challenges from Iran (https://time.com/7210555/iran-shaky-regime/) and North Korea (https://time.com/6721376/north-korea-threats-ian-bremmer/). America may still be the world's strongest power—economically, technologically, and militarily—but we must now operate in a multipolar world in which we face constraints. And the constraints are not only international, they are also domestic.

The rise of populist and nationalist policies, embodied by President Donald Trump (https://time.com/7198869/george-wallace-donald-trump-populism/) and Vice President JD Vance (https://time.com/7000008/jd-vance-populist-nationalist-rnc-speech-analysis/), are raising basic questions about the U.S. role in the world. In 2006, I was writing about an America that was debating our role in Iraq but still believed in U.S. leadership internationally. Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan raised basic questions about the cost of our role in the world and eroded the consensus that America must lead.

In such an environment, where costs are increasingly seen as decisive, the U.S. may not (https://time.com/7263232/kyiv-pride-fear-after-zelensky-confronts-trump/) continue to support Ukraine in the face of Russia's ongoing aggression. Indeed, it may no longer be axiomatic that the U.S. will support the basic norm that aggression is wrong and bigger states don't have the right to dictate to their smaller neighbors. If we don't want that to be the case and we are to play a sustainable role internationally, we need to act in a way that is consistent with American traditions and be far more effective in our statecraft.

The former is necessary to strike a chord with the American public. The latter is necessary to marry our objectives with our means, the essence of good statecraft, especially because only in this way are our policies going to succeed. It has been the mismatch of objectives and means that has produced failures and undermined the consensus. And in a world of challengers on the outside and questioning on the inside, we no longer have the luxury of practicing statecraft badly.

I explore our traditions in foreign policy in my new book (https://global.oup.com/academic/product/statecraft-

20-9780197698914?cc=us&lang=en&) because they create a context in which presidents make choices and contribute to how they conduct our statecraft. One might think that President Trump does not reflect all of these traditions, but he does represent one of them: unilateralism. Historically, our self-image of **exceptionalism (https://time.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/ceaser.pdf)** —we are selfless, we are free, and our values are universal—justified two very different approaches to the world. One was passive and believed we could serve as a model to the rest of the world, and the other was activist and believed we needed to export our values to others. For our first century, the American sense of exceptionalism justified not being sullied by others, not being tied down by alliances, and not having our freedom of action limited. America was not isolationist, it was unilateralist. Throughout the 19th century, the U.S. did not shy away from military interventions to protect our trade and commercial interests internationally, fighting the Barbary pirates in North Africa, sending the navy to open Japan and later to attack in Korea, and deploying the marines to deal with the Boxer Rebellion in China.

However, our interventions were generally not in the service of alliances or for a higher purpose. It was to serve our economic interests. Donald Trump fits that tradition. He even referred to our exceptionalism twice in **his inaugural address (https://ru.usembassy.gov/president-donald-trumps-inaugural-address/)** on Jan 20. But his version of exceptionalism is justified through an argument that we should be free to do whatever serves our immediate interest. He may not always frame his decision in terms of the U.S. being a model for the rest of the world. But, he certainly does communicate a desire to succeed in foreign policy—and for that he should have an interest in **conducting statecraft better (https://time.com/7174666/donald-trump-return-could-bring-a-more-peaceful-middle-east/)** .

In general, one would think that marrying objectives and means would be a given. Why would one pursue a policy where we don't have the means to fulfill our objectives? The answer, unfortunately, is that Republican and Democratic presidents alike have often adopted the wrong objectives.

Why? There are multiple reasons. First, we often don't understand what we are getting into. The Bush decision to implement a regime change in Iraq is **a striking example (https://time.com/archive/6669691/so-what-went-wrong/)** . Second, political pressures lead us to adopt objectives that are wrong-headed or are not ones we are prepared to apply the necessary means to achieve. Lyndon B. Johnson had **doubts (https://www.history.com/speeches/lyndon-johnson-expresses-doubts-about-vietnam-war)** about getting mired in Vietnam, but feared the political consequences of being accused of losing Vietnam the way the Democrats had paid a price for being charged with the loss of China. Barack Obama, with the Syrian regime killing increasing numbers of Syrians, felt the pressure to do something and it led him to **announce (https://www.reuters.com/article/world/obama-says-syria-s-assad-has-lost-legitimacy-needs-to-leave-idUSW1N12Z01I/)** that Bashar al Assad had lost his legitimacy and had to leave—even though he had no plan of doing much to make this happen. Third, frequently we adopt objectives at too high a level of generality and they can't be easily operationalized. Trump has called to end the wars in Ukraine **(https://time.com/7221989/trump-putin-russia-ukraine-war-talks/)** and in Gaza **(https://time.com/7221832/donald-trump-gaza-israel/)** —those are important objectives but won't just happen. One can publicly frame objectives like these but it makes sense to think through what it will take to succeed and what means we and/or others have to make them happen.

The lesson is to think carefully about our stakes and the feasibility of the objectives we adopt. The higher our stakes, the greater the means we should be ready to apply to achieve them. How we frame or explain our objective is also essential not just to win domestic support but also to gain international backing. President Trump has not prioritized strengthening connections with our **allies (https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/27/world/europe/trump-eu-allies.html)** , and yet allies have means that could augment our own. Similarly, smart and early framing of objectives can win greater international support and backing for what we seek.

Take the issue of Iran and its nuclear program **(https://time.com/7213695/iran-trump-nuclear-deal-supreme-leader-ayotallah-khamenei/)**. If Iran gets a nuclear bomb, the Saudis, Egyptians, and Turkish will likely feel they must have one as well, and a region characterized by conflict will become far more dangerous. And yet, the Iranians are moving closer to having such a weapon by accelerating the program and enriching 30 kilograms a month of uranium to 60%, very close to weapons grade. With Iran now accumulating more than 10 bombs worth of highly enriched uranium, the danger of it moving relatively quickly to a bomb is real—as is the likely Israeli belief that it must act militarily against Iran before that happens.

What should Trump's objective be? It is not enough to stop Iran from producing a nuclear bomb; the goal must be to prevent it from preserving the option of producing one later. For that he must put pressure on Iran that the Iranians find meaningful: it needs to be political, as isolation is something the Iranians seek to avoid; it needs to be economic so that Iran feels the increasing alienation of its public; it needs to be military so that the Iranians know that they could lose their entire nuclear infrastructure, one they have been investing in for nearly 40 years, if diplomacy fails.

The Trump Administration will need to frame the issue, explain the danger of what Iran is doing, and mobilize the world to isolate the Iranians and demonstrate that there is an option for a diplomatic outcome, one in which Iran is permitted civil nuclear power, provided Iran takes it. The instinct to go it alone will leave us without partners and reduce the prospect of succeeding without the use of force—something President Trump clearly prefers **(https://time.com/5696955/donald-trump-military-strategy/)**.

The art of statecraft is adopting the right objective and maximizing all our tools to get others to join with us in achieving it. Can the Trump Administration do that? If President Trump wants to "win," he will have to make sure it does.

Dennis Ross is the counselor and Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute. This article was originally published on the Time Magazine website **(https://time.com/7263996/the-u-s-no-longer-the-worlds-only-superpower/)**. ❖

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