

## Renewing US Global Engagement in a Changed World

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### Abstract

The world of 2021 that awaits the Biden-Harris administration is not the straight-forward frame of post-World War II U.S.-USSR competition, or of the dominant position the U.S. briefly held in the post-Cold War period of the 1990s. The economic, social, and political disruption wrought by the coronavirus, along with retrenchment from global leadership by the Trump administration, have unmasked and accelerated what has been an evolving alteration in the international order and the position of the United States in that system. The disruption to the international order is forcing a reassessment of the notion of “American exceptionalism” and what is meant by “U.S. global leadership” maybe “leadership” in a multipolar/multi-actor world means listening and partnering rather than driving the train?

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## **Background to the Study**

### **Key Dynamics**

To understand how the U.S. can best maneuver in this increasingly complex world, it is important to recognize a few basic dynamics.

One is that the U.S. and the West's success in winning the Cold War was built on, not our military prowess, an important backstop for sure but on *values and results*. Inherent flaws in the Soviet system undoubtedly contributed to victory by the West, but more fundamental were basic American values and accomplishment. People around the world have been inspired by the ideals upon which this nation was founded—individual rights, liberty, rule of law, and the vibrancy of our democracy and culture. They have been awed by our accomplishment—economic success, top universities, cutting edge technology, ability to innovate, and strong, well-managed companies. America has been viewed as the “can-do-country.”

A second factor is these values and way of life prevailed in the Cold War, not just through actions and policies of the United States government (deemed “U.S. Leadership”), but through the panoply of American civilian assets and actions (“American Leadership”), such as compelling values, international student exchanges, non-profit organizations working in the most difficult places, private philanthropy, the ubiquity of our culture (e.g., movies, TV, blue jeans, music, literature, internet, English language). Thousands of institutions and organizations, and millions of individual Americans, mobilized across the American landscape and bolstered by principled U.S. leadership, have and can drive many aspects of global development.

The third dynamic is *revised geopolitics*. The U.S. is no longer the stand-alone dominant global economic and political power, as it was at the end of World War II and then again at the close of the Cold War. The U.S. is now sharing a multipolar world stage with many other actors, both an assertive China and a panoply of traditional and emerging middle powers, and a host of powerful and influential private organizations and even movements.

### **COVID-19 Unmasks Shifting Global Dynamics**

The economic, social, and political ramifications of COVID-19 are well known from a 5.7 percent decline in global economic output in 2020 and tens of millions of lost jobs, to growing social inequities, to autocratic governments further closing political space and abusing human rights touching every aspect of national and personal life. The abject failure of U.S. government policy response to the pandemic, along with the diffusion of global power and the Trump administration subversion of U.S. global engagement, is accelerating the rethinking of the notion of “American exceptionalism” America as the shining city on the hill, as the model of enlightened governance. This mythology was reinforced by victory in World War II and the expanding middle class and shared economic prosperity during the 1950s and 1960s, but has since been eroded by failed wars and other well-meaning but errant foreign policy decisions, several decades of growing economic inequality in America, and public unrest born of social inequities. People are left wondering, if America, with all its resources and expertise, cannot

contain COVID-19, maybe it's not so great, maybe it's not so exceptional! Maybe the bursting of the myth of American exceptionalism can have the salutary effect of making U.S. international policy a little more humble, more collaborative.

There are alternative medium-term outcomes for the international image and understanding of America. One is the perception of American democracy in crisis, as fragile and weak in dealing with difficult situations, and its international leadership as undependable and untrustworthy. The other is American democracy as strong and resilient as it is able to withstand direct attack even by a president. AH, that's the same question we ask on many levels of the 57 developing countries the OECD deems fragile!

### **The Path Forward: Renewal and Partnership**

Reasserting U.S. global leadership/engagement will be a principal task confronting the Biden-Harris administration. The president-elect has stated that America is back and will resume its seat at the head of the table. While it appears from reaction to the U.S. election in other countries that America will be welcomed back, it is less certain that it can just assume the head position. That presumed position was already being questioned prior to the Trump administration. As it re-enters the room, American diplomacy must be seen as a team player.

Along with restoring order and competence to domestic policies and politics, there are a number of components to its international playbook that will contribute to rebuilding U.S. global participation and partnership. It starts with elevating diplomacy and development, long insufficiently valued and resourced as tools central to advancing U.S. national security, but particularly hollowed out by the Trump administration. The Biden-Harris team has started the process admirably in announcing experienced and respected officials to handle international affairs. Among other steps that can be taken to further enhance development are to quickly nominate leaders of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the Millennium Challenge Corporation, and the Development Finance Corporation; place the USAID administrator in the Cabinet and on the National Security Council; and build out the number and diversity of career staff, place them in senior policy positions, and ensure respect and protection of their professionalism.

Further, following through on a return to a more active and collaborative engagement with international organizations, most immediately in re-joining the Paris Climate Agreement and the World Health Organization, the administration can propose to the Congress to make good on our growing arrears to international and multilateral organizations, help lead on a solution to the burgeoning debt problem of developing countries, and work to revise the governance of international institutions so they are better fit for purpose and more representative of the 21st century international order. The administration is expected to commit to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and will need to determine how to encompass the SDG frame in development policies and programs and how they connect to domestic priorities.

### **Recommendation/Conclusion**

There are a range of other policies the Biden-Harris administration can take that will signal a collaborative approach to engaging with other countries. But equally important as taking

policy actions is the task of selling them to the American people. A prominent lesson of the history of other well-meaning administrations is that political and popular support does not automatically follow good policy. Big decisions need to be explained to the American people, repeatedly and in clear, simple terms. If President Biden and his teams are to pursue a “foreign policy for the middle class,” they will need to carve out the time to explain how it benefits the country and its citizens.

**Reference**

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