

COVID-19 and the Foreign Policy Perceptions of US Public and Elites

by Barbara Keys

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated American public and elite polarisation on foreign policy issues. Public opinion polls show that Republicans prefer to go it alone and fear China, international terrorism, and immigration. Democrats see COVID-19 and climate change as the biggest international problems, and they prefer multilateral solutions. This divide reflects divergences in elite opinion. Conservatives remain wedded to US military primacy, and the pandemic has increased their appetite for confronting China. Liberal internationalists, while acknowledging weaknesses in the post-1945 order and its unsuitability for managing contemporary challenges, seek various adaptations without abandoning US global leadership. Faced with immense challenges and a toxic political environment, President Joe Biden – very much a 20th century-style politician – may well resurrect old aims rather than embracing new approaches for the new complexities of 21st century world.

United States | Coronavirus | Public opinion | US foreign policy | Foreign trade | China

keywords

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Introduction

"Along with U.S.-Soviet competition during the Cold War, COVID-19 is one of the two greatest tests of the U.S.-led international order since its founding over seven decades ago", wrote Robert D. Blackwill and Thomas Wright in a May 2020 Council on Foreign Relations report.¹ Yet, they, like others, believe that the post-1945 "world order" was already ending under the pressure of great power rivalry and technological changes.² In many areas, COVID-19 has simply exacerbated and accelerated pre-existing problems. Has it also introduced new and decisive factors? Henry Kissinger has declared that COVID-19 "will forever alter the world order and require a new order",³ but others argue that it need not fundamentally alter the global system.⁴

This essay identifies four broad areas in which the pandemic appears to have had the most significant implications for American public and elite perceptions of foreign policy priorities: the future of US leadership; the future of "the rules-based liberal international order" more generally; issues of globalisation and trade; and relations

¹ Robert D. Blackwill and Thomas Wright, "The End of World Order and American Foreign Policy", in *CFR Special Reports*, No. 86 (May 2020), p. 1, <https://www.cfr.org/node/225993>.

² Other claims that world order is dead: Edward Fishman, "The World Order Is Dead. Here's How to Build a New One for the Post-Coronavirus Era", in *Politico*, 3 May 2020, <https://politi.co/2SwvvUy>.

³ Henry A. Kissinger, "The Coronavirus Pandemic Will Forever Alter the World Order", in *The Wall Street Journal*, 3 April 2020.

⁴ Hal Brands, Peter Feaver and William Inboden, "Maybe It Won't Be So Bad. A Modestly Optimistic Take on COVID and World Order", in Hal Brands and Francis J. Gavin (eds), *COVID-19 and World Order. The Future of Conflict, Competition, and Cooperation*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020, p. 297-315, <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/77593>.

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with China. After summarising public opinion, I turn to elite opinion on these four issues. Addressing the results of the US election, the conclusion summarises how these issues are likely to affect foreign policy under the new president. As in so many other areas of American life, a sharp divide between conservative and liberal opinion shapes even how current realities are perceived, let alone how to respond to them.

1. Post-COVID public perceptions of US foreign policy

A recent Pew Research Center public opinion poll found that two-thirds of registered voters (65 per cent) say they feel fearful about the country's state, with fewer than half (45 per cent) hopeful.⁵ The American public remains broadly in favour of ending "forever wars": roughly three-quarters want to withdraw from Afghanistan and Iraq and most want to reduce military spending.⁶ Although the public supported temporary bans on immigration early in pandemic, Gallup polling in early summer found that continued strong majorities see immigration as a "good thing" and only around a quarter favour reducing current levels of immigration.⁷

In light of the country's political polarisation, it is not surprising that public opinion on key foreign policy issues is split between nationalism and multilateralism. A major survey conducted in July by the Chicago Council of Global Affairs finds that most Americans support free trade, globalisation, alliances – including the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) – and continuing an active role in the world. Concerns that the pandemic might spur widespread sentiment in favour of pulling back from the world thus seem unfounded. However, the poll found that half of Republicans feel that the United States is "rich and powerful enough to go it alone".⁸ Asked what the pandemic "made clear", 58 per cent of Republicans responded that it is most important to be self-sufficient and not depend on other nations, whereas 80 per cent of Democrats said they think COVID-19 makes it more urgent to cooperate and coordinate with other countries. Twice as many Democrats as Republicans (72

⁵ Pew Research Center, "Amid Campaign Turmoil, Biden Holds Wide Leads on Coronavirus, Unifying the Country", in *Pew Reports*, 9 October 2020, p. 37, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/?p=20076196>.

⁶ Stephen Wertheim, "Would Biden or Trump End America's Forever Wars?", in *New Statesman*, 23 September 2020, <https://www.newstatesman.com/node/326931>. On reduced military spending and bringing troops back from Iraq and Afghanistan, see also the July 2020 YouGov poll: Koch Institute, *3 in 4 Americans Want Troops Home from Afghanistan, Iraq...*, 6 August 2020, <https://www.charleskochinstitute.org/?p=20069>.

⁷ Dan Balz and Scott Clement, "Americans Support State Restrictions on Businesses and Halt to Immigration During Virus Outbreak, Post-U. Md. Poll Finds", in *The Washington Post*, 28 April 2020, <https://wapo.st/2xdkyja>; Gallup website: *Immigration*, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1660/immigration.aspx>.

⁸ Dina Smeltz et al., *Divided We Stand. Democrats and Republicans Diverge on US Foreign Policy*, Chicago, Chicago Council on Global Affairs, September 2020, p. 26, <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/node/13401>.

to 36 per cent) believe that “problems like climate change and pandemics are so big that no country can solve them alone, and international cooperation is the only way we can make progress in solving these problems”.⁹ Majorities of Democrats favour providing humanitarian aid, negotiating international agreements, and greater US participation in international organisations like the World Health and World Trade Organisations (WHO and WTO) as well as the United Nations. Democrats and Republicans differ sharply on which threats they see as most important, with the top five for each group showing no overlap. For Democrats, the key global threats are COVID-19, climate change, economic inequality, racial injustice, and foreign interference in American elections. For Republicans, the key threats are China, international terrorism, immigration, domestic terrorism, and Iran.

The sharpest shift in public opinion on foreign policy during the pandemic has been a major uptick in negative views of China, which according to Pew have increased by nearly 20 percentage points since President Trump took office, reaching their highest levels since Pew began polling fifteen years ago. In 2005, 35 per cent of Americans polled said they had somewhat or very negative views of China; in summer 2020, that figure was 73 per cent.¹⁰ A majority consider China a military threat. (Notably, more Americans believe the United States should not defend Taiwan if China invades than think the United States should use military force in such an event.¹¹) The July 2020 Chicago Council poll found similar results. A majority of Americans now see China as a critical threat, and American feelings about China are at their lowest point since the history of their polling, dating to 1978. Democrats largely agree that the United States needs to pursue a harder line, but via engagement and cooperation, whereas Republicans prefer more coercive methods, including restricting scientific exchanges, increasing tariffs, and reducing the number of Chinese students studying in the United States.¹²

2. Post-COVID elite perceptions of US foreign policy

2.1 The future of US global leadership

The pandemic arrived when the Trump administration had already withdrawn the United States from what proponents of liberal internationalism call US “global leadership of world order”. The pandemic has sharpened this orientation, most prominently in the form of withdrawal from the WHO. Republicans applaud these developments, generally preferring a go-it-alone approach over “globalist”

⁹ Ibid., p. 6.

¹⁰ Laura Silver, Kat Devlin and Christine Huang, “Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries”, in *Pew Reports*, 6 October 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/?p=48226>.

¹¹ Koch Institute, 3 in 4 Americans Want Troops Home from Afghanistan, Iraq..., cit.

¹² Dina Smeltz and Craig Kafura, “Do Republicans and Democrats Want a Cold War with China?”, in *Chicago Council on Global Affairs Briefs*, 13 October 2020, <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/node/13676>.

and multilateral initiatives that require compromise. They are optimistic about the prospects for continuing US economic and military primacy and continue to embrace assertive foreign policies rooted in confidence in American power. Liberals are more pessimistic. They tend to believe that the country's capacity for global leadership has been dramatically undermined by what is widely viewed both inside and outside the country as one of the world's least effective responses to COVID-19 – chaotic at best and actively harmful at worst. They believe that a rise in nationalism, great-power rivalry, and strategic decoupling will largely be harmful. While acknowledging that the United States remains the world's preeminent military, economic and technological power, many worry that even in the event of a Biden victory the United States will struggle to regain the standing, the will and the resources to reassume the kind of dominance it used to hold. Even if it tried, they suggest, an increasingly multipolar world makes the kind of supremacy the United States has enjoyed since about 1990 impossible to replicate.¹³

What will be the fate of American global leadership? On the far right, commentators rail against calls for reinvigorated international cooperation against threats like pandemics. With encouragement from experts such as China hawk and Stanford historian Gordon Chang, the far right has peddled conspiracy theories about the origins of SARS-CoV-2 (the coronavirus that causes COVID-19), suggesting that it originated in a Wuhan laboratory (as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo also suggested) and was deliberately released to weaken the United States.¹⁴ The John Birch Society condemns "globalists" for proposals aimed at "socialism" and "transforming our entire existence".¹⁵ Its writers claim that the Council on Foreign Relations, (CFR), the New York-based exclusive foreign policy think tank which it calls the "Deep State powerhouse undoing and remaking our world",¹⁶ along with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, former Obama officials, and the WTO, "love communist Supreme Leader Xi Jinping".¹⁷ Other hard-line conservatives labelled Biden and his vice-presidential pick, Senator Kamala Harris, "the Chinese communist regime's dream team"¹⁸ and called Biden "pro-China", "a fool, who is oblivious to China's growing threat" – or a stooge of China thanks to his son's work for the regime.¹⁹ It rankles

¹³ On this point, see, e.g., Shalendra D. Sharma, "Trump and the End of an Era? The Liberal International Order in Perspective", in *The International Spectator*, Vol. 55, No. 3 (September 2020), p. 82-97.

¹⁴ Selwyn Duke, "China Expert: Covid-19 Probably 'Deliberate Leak'; Could Be 'Act of War'", in *The New American*, 22 April 2020, <https://thenewamerican.com/?p=64229>; Ben Lowson, "Did Xi Jinping Deliberately Sicken the World?", in *The Diplomat*, 15 April 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/did-xi-jinping-deliberately-sicken-the-world>.

¹⁵ Steven Neill, "IMF Director Calls for New Bretton Woods", in *The New American*, 20 October 2020, <https://thenewamerican.com/?p=99766>.

¹⁶ William F. Jasper, "Directing the Disorder", in *The New American*, Vol. 36, No. 15 (10 August 2020), p. 10, <https://thenewamerican.com/?p=66205>.

¹⁷ William F. Jasper, "Globalists, Communists Push Coronavirus as Gateway to 'Global Health Governance'", in *The New American*, 21 March 2020, <https://thenewamerican.com/?p=63527>.

¹⁸ Joseph Klein, "The Dems' China Tilt", in *Front Page Magazine*, 24 August 2020, <https://www.frontpagemag.com/fpm/2020/08/dems-china-tilt-joseph-klein>.

¹⁹ Joseph Klein, "China Wins If Biden Wins", in *Front Page Magazine*, 14 September 2020, <https://>

these proponents of hyper-nationalism that Barack Obama and Joe Biden “used American sovereignty as a doormat” and acted as though the United States were “just another” UN member.²⁰ In general, more mainstream Republicans remain committed to a form of American leadership built on military supremacy and economic power, with “values” present but last on the list. Military pre-eminence remains central to their vision.²¹ Long-time isolationist Patrick Buchanan still has a platform but is a lonely voice in suggesting, gingerly, that America simply does not have the resources to defend South Korea and confront Iran and China.²²

Liberal internationalists, with a more pessimistic view of America’s future capacities, have proposed a range of ways to adapt to what they see as significant changes wrought by the pandemic. Though some voices have proclaimed that the post-1945 world order is “dead”, and many see crucial features of that order as no longer fit for purpose, considerable attachment to the so-called liberal international order remains.²³ Few wish to see it replaced by something entirely new, despite acknowledging that the current order was not designed to manage contemporary challenges and in many respects cannot cope with them. Instead they tend to call for varying adaptations, ranging from minor to more fundamental.

In one of the more sustained collective efforts to anticipate the world after this pandemic, participants at a conference at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies in June–July 2020 mostly agreed that American strategy should “adapt but not change fundamentally”.²⁴ One even suggested that the crisis has been salutary in that Americans now see that everything is interconnected and recognise their vulnerabilities to global threats, which could lead them to see the sense in policies that prioritise human welfare over growth for growth’s sake.²⁵ In one optimistic prediction, three participants suggested that a rosy scenario could emerge: the United States would have its hard power advantages reinforced, while a “formidable balancing coalition against China” and renewed cooperation among democracies would emerge.²⁶

www.frontpagemag.com/fpm/2020/09/china-wins-if-biden-wins-joseph-klein.

²⁰ Deroy Murdock, “Trump’s 4 Nobel Peace Prize Nominations Show He’s a Peacemaker – Not Warmonger as Critics Claim”, in *Fox News*, 25 October 2020, <https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/trump-nobel-prize-deroy-murdock>. See also: Deroy Murdock, “Warmonger’ Trump – Latter-Day Peacemaker, Nobel Nominee”, in *Newsmax*, 24 October 2020, <https://www.newsmax.com/murdock/abraham-accords-codes-jacobsson/2020/10/24/id/993582>.

²¹ See, for example, Walter Lohman and James Jay Carafano, “10 Steps America Should Take Now to Respond to the China Challenge”, in *Heritage Foundation Commentaries*, 30 April 2020, <https://www.heritage.org/node/21504689>.

²² Patrick J. Buchanan, “Can America Do it All?”, in *The New American*, 20 October 2020, <https://thenewamerican.com/?p=99487>.

²³ Edward Fishman, “The World Order Is Dead”, cit.

²⁴ Hal Brands and Francis J. Gavin, “COVID-19 and World Order”, in Hal Brands and Francis J. Gavin (eds), *COVID-19 and World Order. The Future of Conflict, Competition, and Cooperation*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020, p. 9, <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/77593>.

²⁵ Edward Fishman, “The World Order Is Dead”, cit.

²⁶ Hal Brands, Peter Feaver and William Inboden, “Maybe It Won’t Be So Bad”, cit., p. 298.

Because they are committed to a world of cooperation but see sharp challenges to cooperation, liberal internationalists propose innovations in cooperative modalities. Ad hoc “clubs” are a popular idea. James Steinberg, a former State Department official in the administrations of Bill Clinton and Barack Obama (and the author of the phrase “strategic reassurance” to describe US–China relations in the Clinton State Department), wants to see more organisations and institutions like the G20, including ad hoc clubs that might develop norms and rules around new biomedical and energy technologies.²⁷ Others envision a more egalitarian system of global governance. With the United States having abdicated its hegemonic role, these liberals would like to see a world governed by “global clubs”: temporary alliances of like-minded nations that rely on a shared interest in tackling a particular global problem.²⁸

Yet for some on a reinvigorated left aligned with past Democratic presidential hopeful Bernie Sanders, any effort to restore US leadership is misguided. The Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, launched in November 2019 with funds from the unlikely combination of the Koch brothers (chief Republican donors) and George Soros’s Open Society Foundations (a bastion of progressivism), among others, was founded out of frustration with what its leaders call a lethargic and dysfunctional foreign policy establishment.²⁹ While advocating a strong *diplomatic* role for the United States, the Quincy Institute’s spokespeople scoff at the notion that the United States must maintain global supremacy, especially military supremacy. “America has no need to be so powerful” was the headline of Quincy Institute cofounder Stephen Wertheim’s October op-ed in the *New York Times*.³⁰

2.2 What is security?

For Quincy Institute thinkers, the COVID-19 crisis offers an opportunity “to fundamentally rethink what national security means”, orienting it away from an obsession with military predominance toward health and economic well-being.³¹

²⁷ James B. Steinberg, “A ‘Good Enough’ World Order: A Gardener’s Manual”, in Hal Brands and Francis J. Gavin (eds), *COVID-19 and World Order. The Future of Conflict, Competition, and Cooperation*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020, p. 277-294, <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/77593>.

²⁸ Oona A. Hathaway and Scott J. Shapiro, “Welcome to the Post-Leader World”, in *Foreign Policy*, 4 July 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/04/after-hegemony>. For a similar call for new, possibly ad hoc institutions, see Anne Applebaum, “When the World Stumbled: COVID-19 and the Failure of the International System”, in Hal Brands and Francis J. Gavin (eds), *COVID-19 and World Order. The Future of Conflict, Competition, and Cooperation*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020, p. 223-237, <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/77593>.

²⁹ See its website: <https://quincyinst.org/about>. On its founding, see, for example, David Klion, “Go Not Abroad in Search of Monsters”, in *The Nation*, Vol. 309, No. 3 (12/19 August 2019), p. 18-21, <https://www.thenation.com/?p=319631>.

³⁰ Stephen Wertheim, “America Has No Reason to Be So Powerful”, in *The New York Times*, 15 October 2020, <https://nyti.ms/3ISsPwv>.

³¹ Catherine Lutz and Neta C. Crawford, “Fighting a Virus with the Wrong Tools”, in *The Hill*, 28

America's vaunted military supremacy "has proven irrelevant" to COVID-19, "the greatest attack on the American people in a generation", argues Wertheim.³² Whereas many on the right have doubled down on traditional views of national security and prefer to see the United States rely on military and economic power for traditional ends, many on the centre-left advocate for reconfiguring notions of security to focus on non-military threats. Though such calls have been common at least since the rise of international terrorism, environmental problems and refugee crises in the 1970s, they are being made now with new vigour. The mantra is "21st century threats". Liberals, noting that military alliances have never been exclusively about military matters, suggest that NATO's capacity be expanded to deal with public health crises such as stockpiling medical equipment. They would like to strengthen the WHO so that it can act as the pivot of a global medical surveillance system and to emulate the model that successfully eradicated smallpox.³³ "Liberal internationalists must move quickly to define a new order", Michael Fuchs urged.³⁴ He proposes a reorientation of foreign policy "toward the gravest threats", including pandemics, climate change, and promotion of democracy and human rights. He suggests that the pandemic offers an opportunity to spend money on climate-change goals that would create jobs and economic growth. While the US government cannot ignore repression in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, he says, the priority needs to be climate change and combatting the next pandemic, which "can be stopped only if Washington and Beijing join forces".³⁵

Former Secretary of State and failed Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton recently offered a similar prescription in *Foreign Affairs*. Though leading with a call for new weapons, she emphasises the need to build capacity to meet "nontraditional threats" like climate change, pandemics, cyberattacks, disinformation, and supply chain security, and she calls for a renewed commitment to diplomacy.³⁶ There is broad agreement on this end of the political spectrum that diversification in the tools of foreign policy is required. As Hal Brands and Jake Sullivan write with regard to China, "the softer tools of competition – from providing alternative sources of 5G technology and infrastructure investment to showing competent leadership in tackling global problems – will be just as important as harder tools in dealing with the Chinese challenge".³⁷

March 2020, <https://thehill.com/node/489733>; and Quincy Institute website: <https://quincyinst.org/?p=1896>.

³² Stephen Wertheim, "COVID-19 and the Costs of Military Primacy", in *RealClear Defense*, 22 July 2020, https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2020/07/22/covid-19_and_the_costs_of_military_primacy_115484.html.

³³ Karen Donfried and Wolfgang Ischinger, "The Pandemic and the Toll of Transatlantic Discord", in *Foreign Affairs*, 18 April 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/node/1125958>.

³⁴ Michael H. Fuchs, "A Foreign Policy for the Post-Pandemic World", in *Foreign Affairs*, 23 July 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/node/1126222>.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Hillary Clinton, "A National Security Reckoning", in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 99, No. 6 (November/December 2020), p. 89, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/node/1126606>.

³⁷ Hal Brands and Jake Sullivan, "China's Two Paths to Global Domination", in *Foreign Policy*, No. 237 (Summer 2020), p. 46–51, available at <https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/81908>.

2.3 Trade and globalisation

The self-imposed economic coma of the global reaction to the pandemic has led to “de-globalisation”, a phenomenon many observers regard as at least partly irreversible thanks to surging nationalism, renewed attention to supply chain vulnerabilities, and preoccupation with domestic recovery. A few internationalists, however, suggest that intensified global engagement is “virtually” inevitable thanks to technology, climate change and other forces.³⁸ Some mainstream conservative foreign policy thinkers argue that the crushing debts governments have assumed to offset the economic consequences of the pandemic will necessitate a return to global trade and provide incentives to increase immigration in wealthy countries.³⁹ Many note that pragmatism and self-interest will push countries toward global cooperation: in treatments and vaccines for COVID-19 and managing the pandemic more broadly, these analysts believe that “it will become clear that no one nation-state will be able to develop those alone”, which will lead to “networks [that] create [a] connective tissue binding nation-states together”.⁴⁰

The pandemic produced greatly heightened attention to global supply chains. According to CFR president Richard Haass, a leading proponent of liberal internationalism, pressure for domestic stockpiling and diversification of foreign supplies will arise, but globalisation is still here, and “responses are better when they’re collective”. Echoing talk of ad hoc clubs, he foresees a new emphasis on working with like-minded countries in more regional, more decentralised, small units, which “may not align with people’s images of the world and collective action – the all-or-nothing universal approach suggested by the United Nations”.⁴¹ Noting the new urgency around shortening supply chains and onshoring, many observers predict replacement of global supply chains with regional ones and heightened attention to border controls.⁴²

The pandemic has inevitably drawn renewed attention to US dependence on China in key areas. China’s control of the supply and price of health-related commodities in the United States has drawn heightened scrutiny and calls for change.⁴³ The new

³⁸ John Lipsky, “Prospects for the United States’ Post-COVID-19 Policies. Strengthening the G20 Leaders Process”, in Hal Brands and Francis J. Gavin (eds), *COVID-19 and World Order. The Future of Conflict, Competition, and Cooperation*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020, p. 215, <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/77593>.

³⁹ Hal Brands, Peter Feaver and William Inboden, “Maybe It Won’t Be So Bad”, cit., p. 305.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Richard N. Haass and James Manyika, “James Manyika Speaks with Richard Haass about Businesses as ‘Global Entities’”, in *McKinsey Global Institute Interviews*, 16 October 2020, <https://mck.co/37eFtSI>.

⁴² Janice Gross Stein, “Take It Off-Site. World Order and International Institutions after COVID-19”, in Hal Brands and Francis J. Gavin (eds), *COVID-19 and World Order. The Future of Conflict, Competition, and Cooperation*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020, p. 259-276, <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/77593>.

⁴³ Andrew Foxall, “Ending the Dangerous U.S. Dependence on China”, in *National Review*, 26 May 2020, <https://wp.me/pcv7X9-3pJq>.

buzzwords are “decoupling” and “reshoring”: an economic break-up of the United States from China that removes high levels of interdependence. Most observers see some decoupling as inevitable, though it will make goods and services more expensive and make common standards, for example around Internet information sharing or privacy, less likely.⁴⁴ Liberals mostly regret these developments and urge caution and careful attention to “recoupling”; as Henry Farrell and Abraham Newman claim, “supply chains are nearly as complex as nuclear physics”.⁴⁵

2.4 Relations with China

US–China relations typically veer between extremes, and the pandemic has pushed the pendulum more sharply toward the hostile end than at any time since 1972. As a State Department China specialist commented in the early 1990s,

When things are going well with China, and China is being good, Americans think China is wonderful. It’s all panda bears, and rosy-cheeked kindergarten children [...]. And then when China does something bad, like Tiananmen, then China can do no right. There is this overwhelming desire [...] to somehow punish and correct China.⁴⁶

America’s outrage at China’s pandemic response appears comparable in scale to its reaction to the Tiananmen Square massacre, sparking similar rhetoric about an “evil” regime.⁴⁷ China appeared in the second presidential debate only as a caricature.⁴⁸ President Trump made his tough stance toward China a cornerstone of his re-election campaign. A raft of individuals, companies and US states have sued China for spreading the virus, signals of a widespread desire to “hol[d] China accountable”.⁴⁹ Calls to investigate the COVID-19 outbreak and somehow make China pay for its spread were common in the spring, including, for example, conservative proposals to litigate over 1 trillion US dollars in pre-People’s Republic

⁴⁴ Clyde Prestowitz, “Time to Wake up and Start Decoupling from China”, in *The American Conservative*, 24 August 2020, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/?p=268731>. On the challenges of decoupling, see Isabella Weber, “Could the US and Chinese Economies Really ‘Decouple’?”, in *The Guardian*, 11 September 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/enn3a>; Ian Bremmer, “A New Cold War? Tensions Rise between US & China” (podcast), in *GZero World*, 8 October 2020, <https://gzeroworld.libsyn.com/a-new-cold-war-tensions-rise-between-us-china>. See also Michael Schuman, “Think It’s Too Hard to Decouple from China? Think Again”, in *Bloomberg Opinion*, 15 July 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2020-07-15/u-s-companies-can-and-will-decouple-from-china>.

⁴⁵ Henry Farrell and Abraham Newman, “The Folly of Decoupling from China”, in *Foreign Affairs*, 3 June 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/node/1126093>.

⁴⁶ Donald Anderson quoted in Nancy Bernkopf Tucker (ed.), *China Confidential. American Diplomats and Sino-American Relations, 1945-1996*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2001, p. 450.

⁴⁷ For an example of condemnation of China early on, see Thomas Joscelyn, “Henry Kissinger’s Illusory World Order”, in *The Dispatch*, 8 April 2020, <https://www.fdd.org/?p=103982>.

⁴⁸ Mark Landler, “China Loomed Large in the Debate, But Largely as a Caricatured Place of Shady Deals and a Deadly Virus”, in *The New York Times*, 23 October 2020, <https://nyti.ms/3kp9frB>.

⁴⁹ Shira Anderson and Sean Mirski, “How Can China Respond to the Coronavirus-Related Lawsuits against It?”, in *Lawfare*, 3 September 2020, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/node/19773>.

of China (PRC) bonds and, conversely, Congressional Republican proposals to repudiate US debt to China.⁵⁰ Among the political class, remarkable unity prevails among Republicans and Democrats in Congress – who agree on almost nothing else – on the need to confront China.⁵¹ Talk of a new Cold War was common before COVID; now, talk of a possible hot war is spreading.⁵²

Conservatives have concluded that “the COVID-19 crisis has proved that Trump’s approach to China is the correct one”, as Russia expert Andrew Foxall writes.⁵³ Trump “has been the first president in our lifetimes to stand up to China and its malign influence”, the Heritage Foundation’s James Carafano approvingly told Fox News.⁵⁴ Conservatives applauded Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s July 2020 call for the United States to “induce China to change” lest Communist China “surely change us”.⁵⁵ For conservatives and China hawks, the pandemic has proven the futility of efforts to engage China.⁵⁶ Henry Kissinger, long a spokesman for China’s interests, has faced increased criticism for his continuing calls for dialogue and accommodation to China’s rise.⁵⁷

Hardliner Gordon Chang, who is the author of a 2001 book called “The Coming Collapse of China”, argues that “the world needs to stop talking to Beijing and start confronting it with vigor”. There is no use in signing “rules-of-the-road agreements” with the PRC, he says, because it simply violates them. The United States has been unwilling to hold China accountable, which in turn emboldens “the worst elements in the Chinese political system”. Dialogue is not an essential part of efforts to contain conflict, for Chang; “it is futile trying to constrain China’s

⁵⁰ Walter Lohman and James Jay Carafano, “10 Steps America Should Take Now to Respond to the China Challenge”, cit.; Jonathan Garber, “\$1.6T in Century-old Chinese Bonds Offer Trump Unique Leverage against Beijing”, in *Fox Business*, 14 May 2020, <https://fxn.ws/35VJpoC>; Tracy Alloway, “Trump’s New Trade War Tool Might Just Be Antique China Debt”, in *Bloomberg Businessweek*, 29 August 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-08-29/trump-s-new-trade-war-weapon-might-just-be-antique-china-debt>; David J. Lynch, “Leading Republicans Want to Send China the Bill for Coronavirus Pandemic’s Costs”, in *The Washington Post*, 24 April 2020, <https://wapo.st/2RYs4FV>; see also Doug Bandow, “Making China Pay for the Pandemic Is Idiotic”, in *Foreign Policy*, 5 May 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/05/trump-pandemic-making-china-pay>.

⁵¹ Orville Schell, “The Ugly End of Chimerica”, in *Foreign Policy*, No. 236 (Spring 2020), p. 28, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/03/chimerica-ugly-end-coronavirus-china-us-trade-relations>; see also Dmitri Solzhenitsyn, “In Pushing Back against China, U.S. Finds Few Allies”, in *National Review*, 31 July 2020, <https://wp.me/pcv7X9-3vPx>; Josh Rogin, “The Coronavirus Crisis Is Turning Americans in Both Parties Against China”, in *The Washington Post*, 8 April 2020, <https://wapo.st/39TiVUY>.

⁵² Christopher Layne, “Coming Storms”, in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 99, No. 6 (November/December 2020), p. 42-48, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/node/1126494>.

⁵³ Andrew Foxall, “Ending the Dangerous U.S. Dependence on China”, cit.

⁵⁴ Holly McCay, “How President Trump Delivered on a Number of Foreign Policy Pledges”, in *Fox News*, 22 October 2020, <https://www.foxnews.com/world/president-trump-foreign-policy-pledges>.

⁵⁵ Dmitri Solzhenitsyn, “In Pushing Back against China, U.S. Finds Few Allies”, cit.

⁵⁶ For example, Joseph Bosco, “Henry Kissinger Is Decades Late in Recognizing China’s Aggressive Nature”, in *The Hill*, 20 October 2020, <https://thehill.com/node/521754>.

⁵⁷ Chris Matthews, “Kissinger Says U.S., China Must Cease Escalating Threats...”, in *MarketWatch*, 7 October 2020, <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/kissinger-says-us-china-must-cease-escalating-threats-or-we-will-slide-into-a-situation-similar-to-world-war-i-2020-10-07>.

militant regime with words". Instead, the United States should buttress "the Quad", with India, Australia, and Japan, which together have the power to confront the PRC effectively.⁵⁸ "We have got to cut our links with China", Chang told Breitbart in March. "We have got to impose costs on China. We've got to defend the American Republic because this is an existential crisis for us."⁵⁹

Conservative outlets trumpet the message that China is America's greatest threat.⁶⁰ or former George H.W. Bush official Jed Babbin, a post-pandemic foreign policy "can be summed up in two words: stopping China".⁶¹ While the libertarian Cato Institute warns of "blowback" in an economic war against China, it advocates international mechanisms to hold China accountable.⁶² A few observers on the right worry that Trump's America First approach risks undercutting American capacity to confront China's rise, a goal that requires the support of allies and the work of multilateral institutions. "This is the time to build new institutions that reflect the realities of a 21st century that pits liberal democracies against an authoritarian surveillance state", commented Matthew Continetti in the conservative *National Review*.⁶³ Conservatives spent the summer worrying that if that Biden were elected, his administration would pursue fruitless efforts to liberalise China that would leave America weakened.⁶⁴

For liberal internationalists, confronting China's rise is necessary, as is securing US technological capacities on issues like 5G, but not while sacrificing all efforts at cooperation. Many proponents of the liberal international order regard China as a threat to that order, but generally disagree with treating China as an enemy, preferring to see rivalry or competition (or perhaps even collaborative competition). "A rising chorus of American voices now argues that confronting China should become the organizing principle of U.S. foreign policy, akin to the Cold War against the Soviet Union", writes Richard Haass, "but this would be a major strategic error".⁶⁵ Haass thinks hawks overstate China's intentions and capabilities. He believes the PRC does not want to overturn the world order but to increase its power within it.

⁵⁸ Gordon G. Chang, "How to Avoid Hot War with Ruthless China", in *Newsweek*, 19 October 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/1540049>.

⁵⁹ Robert Kraychik, "Gordon Chang: Make China Pay for Coronavirus Pandemic", in *Breitbart*, 27 March 2020, <https://www.breitbart.com/radio/2020/03/27/gordon-chang-make-china-pay-for-coronavirus-pandemic>.

⁶⁰ "Mr. President, Confront China Now", in *The Washington Times*, 9 July 2020, <https://go.shr.lc/2BbCwEG>.

⁶¹ Jed Babbin, "Post-Pandemic Foreign Policy", in *The American Spectator*, 6 August 2020, <https://spectator.org/?p=420178>.

⁶² Doug Bandow, Simon Lester and Caleb O. Brown, "The Trouble with 'Make China Pay' over Coronavirus" (podcast), in *Cato Daily Podcast*, 18 May 2020, <https://www.cato.org/node/87834>.

⁶³ Matthew Continetti, "America Can't Face China Alone", in *National Review*, 25 April 2020, <https://wp.me/pcv7X9-3nit>.

⁶⁴ Michael Brendan Dougherty, "Biden's Foreign-Policy Folly", in *National Review*, 15 October 2020, <https://wp.me/pcv7X9-3Cxm>.

⁶⁵ Richard Haass, "A Cold War with China Would Be a Mistake", in *The Wall Street Journal*, 7 May 2020, available at <https://www.cfr.org/node/225652>.

Cooperation when beneficial to both sides must remain an option, he says. Biden, who was a strong advocate of China's accession to the WTO in 1993, wrote earlier in the year that the United States "needs to get tough with China", and has criticised China in campaign events, while abjuring an America First approach.⁶⁶

Many liberals believe a key priority for regaining international strength must be addressing America's domestic problems. CFR fellow and China expert Julian Gewirtz argues in a recent *Foreign Affairs* article that the single most important task for the United States is to reverse the PRC's perception that the United States is weak. Domestic reforms in race relations, immigration, democratic process, and public health are among the areas the United States must improve if it is to be able to credibly counter "problematic Chinese behavior". Working with allies and revitalising international institutions are also key.

[T]he United States and its democratic allies are open societies that still stand to gain from economic, scientific, and people-to-people exchanges with countries around the world, including China, even as they do more to guard against coercion and espionage from foreign rivals. The United States and China also have important shared interests and should strive to prevent the worst outcomes of their competition.⁶⁷

The two countries still have shared interests in confronting joint threats, like pandemics, climate change, and nuclear proliferation, that require coordination.⁶⁸

The Quincy Institute is an outlier in disputing the premise that confrontation of some kind is necessary. Stephen Wertheim writes:

China is open for business, whether on fair terms or not; the world's largest trading nation makes a strange candidate for a totalitarian menace whose every activity closes off the earth. And unlike 20th-century rivals, China has long abstained from armed conquest. Though it threatens Taiwan, no one thinks it is about to invade U.S. allies like South Korea or Japan.⁶⁹

Conclusion

Among myriad other issues facing US foreign policy, most have been dramatically overshadowed by the COVID-19 crisis. Perhaps the most significant downgrading has taken place with regard to Russia. In part because of its poor handling of the

⁶⁶ Joseph R. Biden, Jr., "Why America Must Lead Again", in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 99, No. 2 (March/April 2020), p. 64-76, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/node/1125464>.

⁶⁷ Julian Gewirtz, "China Thinks America Is Losing", in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 99, No. 6 (November/December 2020), p. 72, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/node/1126619>.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Stephen Wertheim, "America Has No Reason to Be So Powerful", cit.

pandemic, it has receded as an American foreign policy concern. Even as millions of Americans have cast their votes in early voting, discussion of Russian election interference has been muted relative to the outcry among Democrats in earlier years. Ukraine, Yemen, and Syria have faded from view. Although two-thirds of Americans wanted more done on climate change before the pandemic took hold,⁷⁰ it is difficult to predict how they will feel about the price tag once the pandemic subsides. Public opinion supports withdrawing from “forever wars”, an issue on which conservatives credit Trump with significant progress.⁷¹ Biden has paid lip service to this goal, while retaining traditional notions of US leadership that rely on continuing military supremacy alongside other tools.

With regard to a COVID-19 vaccine or vaccines, liberal internationalists, not surprisingly, call for generosity. As one wrote,

America should lead a global effort to develop, test, manufacture and deliver these medicines as quickly and broadly as possible. More than anything else, America’s role in ending the pandemic will determine how much moral authority it has to shape the world that comes afterward.⁷²

In the months since the full scale of the global pandemic became apparent, an initial gloom – much more prominent among liberals than conservatives – has been supplanted by greater optimism.⁷³ This tempering partly reflects the fact that, although every advanced economy is either in recession or depression, the US stock market is doing well, buoyed by low interest rates and unprecedented Federal Reserve backing for private bond markets. (Among the reasons to think this may not last are a probable rise in corporate taxes and a possible populist backlash against Wall Street.⁷⁴) China’s much more successful containment of the virus is underpinning a stronger economic recovery, while the United States is experiencing a devastating third wave, reinforcing American perceptions of the fact or the danger of a shift in power from West to East. And even though the tone of predictions is much less dire now than it was in the spring, most

⁷⁰ Cary Funk and Brian Kennedy, “How Americans See Climate Change and the Environment in 7 Charts”, in *Fact Tank*, 21 April 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/?p=313591>; Alec Tyson, “How Important Is Climate Change to Voters in the 2020 Election?”, in *Fact Tank*, 6 October 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/?p=377354>.

⁷¹ Emma Graham-Harrison and Julian Borger, “Trump’s Afghanistan Withdrawal Announcement Takes US Officials by Surprise”, in *The Guardian*, 8 October 2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/p/f3yzk>. On right-wing praise of Trump, see, e.g., Robert Kraychik, “Matt Boyle: Trump Is Ending War in Afghanistan Where Obama, Biden Promised and Failed”, in *Breitbart*, 14 September 2020, <https://www.breitbart.com/2020-election/2020/09/14/matt-boyle-trump-is-ending-war-in-afghanistan-where-obama-biden-promised-and-failed>.

⁷² Edward Fishman, “The World Order Is Dead”, cit.

⁷³ The tone of early predictions, in e.g. John Allen et al., “How the World Will Look After the Coronavirus Pandemic”, in *Foreign Policy*, 20 March 2020 (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/20/world-order-after-coronavirus-pandemic>), was markedly more catastrophizing than most of what is being written now.

⁷⁴ Kenneth Rogoff, “Why Are Stock Market Prices Rising despite the Covid Pandemic?”, in *The Guardian*, 6 October 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/f34gc>.

internationalists would still agree with Richard Haass' lament from May: "A crisis rooted in globalisation will weaken rather than add to the world's willingness and ability to deal with it."⁷⁵

In the week after the presidential election's outcome, Europeans have breathed a sigh of relief at the prospect of having the US as a partner again.⁷⁶ Biden will return to a multilateralism that values allies, in particular the trans-Atlantic relationship to which Biden has a strong personal, even romantic, attachment. Re-joining the WHO, cooperating on vaccine manufacturing and distribution, and agreements with Russia and possibly Iran will be on the agenda. His administration will revitalise the State Department, reemphasise diplomacy, and seek to work toward immigration reforms that would make the country more welcoming.

But observers also predict that a Biden administration will be constrained by a polarised political environment in which Trump and Trumpism retains a large following and by what seems likely to be a Republican-controlled Senate. Biden has promised to re-sign the Paris climate agreement, but he will struggle to deliver spending on climate change. His climate change plan proposes 2 trillion US dollars in spending and making the electricity grid carbon-free in 15 years, plans that could easily be stymied by Republican opposition in the Senate and the judiciary. He will be constrained to pursue a stronger line with China than what might have been possible before the pandemic. A likely emphasis on China's human rights problems could offset a tempering of confrontation in other areas. If the Senate is held by Republicans, he will be tempted to govern by executive orders and executive-branch regulation. A Supreme Court with a 6–3 conservative majority seems likely to strike down many such efforts, and foreign policy by executive order has proven "precarious and ephemeral", as one observer has noted.⁷⁷

To a significant degree, what a Biden administration can do in foreign affairs depends on its capacity to cope with a staggering array of domestic crises: COVID, race relations, inequality, economic woes, and political polarisation. In foreign policy, much hinges on the choices Biden makes for key positions, especially because Cabinet appointees require Senate approval. The risk is that the 77-year-old Biden, who is very much a politician of the late 20th century, will look backwards for aims and approaches rather than engaging in the rethinking that is needed to cope with uniquely 21st century problems.

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⁷⁵ Richard N. Haass, "More Failed States", in John Allen et al., "How the World Will Look After the Coronavirus Pandemic", cit.

⁷⁶ See Nathalie Tocci, "Europe and Biden's America: Making European Autonomy and a Revamped Transatlantic Bond Two Sides of the Same Coin", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 20|81 (November 2020), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/12331>.

⁷⁷ Robin Niblett quoted in Robin Wright, "The Seven Pillars of Biden's Foreign Policy", in *The New Yorker*, 11 November 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/the-seven-pillars-of-bidens-foreign-policy>.

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