



SENSE AND INDISPENSABILITY: AMERICAN LEADERSHIP IN AN AGE OF UNCERTAINTY

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Former ambassador to Sweden Azita Raji proposes a way forward for a renewed and sustainable American foreign policy. This would require a re-examination of America's interests, institutional reforms, and a revival of American ideals. To wit: reflection, reform, and renewal.

Like many people of a certain age, I vividly remember the landing of Apollo 11 on the moon more than 50 years ago. I held my breath as the lunar module approached the moon's surface, and when the camera showed the American flag standing on the surface of another world, I was filled with pride, like millions of Americans. But I wasn't an American yet. I was an Iranian citizen, a young girl watching television in our house in Tehran. And although I wouldn't move to the United States until several years later, I knew from an early age that America was the place for me.

The America I admired as a young girl was the America that put a man on the moon, the America that stood for democracy in the face of the Soviet monolith, the America that struggled righteously and courageously to bring justice to all, regardless of color or creed.

Over the past century, the United States has served as the world's premier example and defender of freedom and human rights. Most people on this planet admired America's foundational values — perhaps not universally, but broadly and deeply.¹ I saw this when I studied in Switzerland. I saw it when I worked as an investment banker in Japan. And I especially saw it when I served as the U.S. ambassador to Sweden. Even when they disagreed with American policies, people abroad had faith in the American people and, by and large, believed that the United States would ultimately do the right thing and lead by example.

It is true that, from America's beginning, a certain distance has separated its ideals from its practices, particularly in issues related to race, such as slavery and segregation. The great comfort is that,

over time, this disparity has shrunk as America's practices have approached its ideals. For example, many young people like me, viewing the United States from the outside, saw the achievements of the Civil Rights movement as a historical catharsis that righted old wrongs and helped America purge itself of the Jim Crow era.

But now the distance between America's ideals and practices seems not to be shrinking, but widening. Countries around the world take note when the United States abandons desperate friends, shrugs when dictatorial partners murder critics, or appears to politicize the prosecution of domestic political opponents.² Their observations will have consequences. They may partner less often with the United States, and more often with America's more dictatorial geopolitical competitors. Already some European allies, faced with chaotic and contradictory U.S. policies, are thinking about a possible accommodation with Russia over Crimea.³

This suddenly widening gap between what America stands for and what it does grates deeply against the grain of the country's overwhelmingly beneficial role in post-World War II global history. The United States was instrumental in designing the post-war architecture of international cooperation that created the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, and other institutions.⁴ It created the conditions, space, and security that led from the European Coal and Steel Community to the European Union, conditions that transformed Europe from a driver of global conflict twice in one century into one of the world's most remarkable economic and political successes. That security was underwritten by NATO — the world's

1 See, for example, Anne-Marie Slaughter, *The Idea that Is America: Keeping Faith with Our Values in a Dangerous World* (New York: Basic Books, 2007).

2 On abandoning friends, see, Peter Baker and Catie Edmondson, "Trump Lashes Out on Syria as Republicans Rebuke Him in House Vote," *New York Times*, Oct. 16, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/16/world/middleeast/trump-erdogan-turkey-syria-kurds.html>. On minimizing the murder of American-based journalist Jamal Khashoggi, see, Michael D. Shear, "Trump Shrugs Off Khashoggi Killing by Ally Saudi Arabia," *New York Times*, June 23, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/23/us/politics/trump-khashoggi-killing-saudi-arabia.html>. On politicizing the prosecution of political opponents, see, Katie Benner and Adam Goldman, "Justice Dep't Is Said to Open Criminal Inquiry Into Its Own Russia Investigation," *New York Times*, Oct. 24, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/24/us/politics/john-durham-criminal-investigation.html>.

3 See, for example, David Chazan, "France Says 'Time Has Come' to Ease Tensions with Russia," *The Telegraph*, Sept. 9, 2019, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/09/09/france-says-time-has-come-ease-tensions-russia/>.

4 See, G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

most effective military alliance — which successfully deterred the Soviet Union for decades until what Ronald Reagan aptly called the “evil empire” was consigned to the dustbin of history.

All of these institutions were created to tame international anarchy and promote global cooperation that would enable the spread of free political systems and free markets. Given the violence endemic to human affairs, they were enormously successful, particularly in Europe. But these global institutions require an engaged, productive United States, no less so nearly 30 years after the end of the Cold War. For example, NATO without the United States is less than the sum of its parts. The question isn’t simply one of power, but of legitimacy and leadership. An America that leads NATO in the pursuit of legitimate goals turns a summation of military forces into a multiplier of both hard power and soft power.⁵ A United Nations without the United States is a debate club, barren of ideals or purpose, overwhelmed by disinformation and autocratic bluster. The G7 relies on active leadership from Washington for its success.

But in a few short years, the Trump administration has taken an axe to these institutions by praising and partnering with authoritarians, railing against longtime democratic allies, and straining or breaking international alliances and agreements.⁶ As many voices predicted, “America First,” is mostly “America Alone,” with only the occasional bad company of faithless autocrats and noxious hyper-nationalists.

America occupies a privileged, but assailable position, rivaled by revisionist powers. If it continues on its current course of disengaging from global leadership and adopting “America First” policies, those of us who watched in wonder the landing on the moon may live to see a darker, more terrifying era set in. Arguably this era has already begun, given that Turkey’s intervention in Syria — made possible by President Donald Trump’s decision to pull back U.S. troops — could lead to an even more

unpredictable downward spiral of that conflict, and the president is demanding dramatically increased monetary contributions to defense from stalwart Asian allies, such as Japan and South Korea.⁷

As the country prepares for what is sure to be a contentious and tense electoral season, presidential aspirants and analysts of all stripes are offering their visions for America’s role in the world in the forthcoming era. Many of these visions are inspiring. Too many, however, lack a process for identifying specific policies. The “vision thing” is surely important for guiding the country forward, but the devil is in the details, and a way to create these details is needed in order to find the devil inside them. Pivotal moments in history hinge on the hard cases, and these tend to defy high-minded principles.

Surviving Contact with Reality

A durable vision for foreign policy that can survive contact with hard cases must grapple with the following inter-related realities.

First, the post-Cold War era, defined by America’s “unipolar moment,” is ending.⁸ That would be true regardless of who is in the White House. But the global distribution of power that will define the next world order is still up for grabs. Whoever wins the 2020 presidential election will have the unenviable task of reaffirming alliances and rebuilding trust with partners made skeptical that America can make promises that last from one administration to another. The task is essential in order to preserve and promote America’s values in a multipolar world. Rather than America First, the country should strive to be America *primus inter pares* — first among equals, or leader by general acclamation rather than by proclamation.

Second, while the international institutions that America built over the last 70 years — military, economic, and beyond — remain critical, they are no longer as fit-for-purpose as they once were. Ris-

5 Alexandra Gheciu, “Security Institutions as Agents of Socialization? NATO and the ‘New Europe,’” *International Organization* 59, no. 4 (October 2005): 973–1012, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818305050332>.

6 For praising and partnering with authoritarians, see, for example, Domenico Montanaro, “6 Strongmen Trump Has Praised — and the Conflicts It Presents,” *NPR*, May 2, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/2017/05/02/526520042/6-strongmen-trumps-praised-and-the-conflicts-it-presents>; and “The Strange Love-In Between Donald Trump and Recep Tayyip Erdogan,” *The Economist*, Nov. 14, 2019, <https://www.economist.com/united-states/2019/11/14/the-strange-love-in-between-donald-trump-and-recep-tayyip-erdogan>. For railing against longtime democratic allies, see, for example, Paul D. Shinkman, “Trump Attacks France, Germany while Praising Turkey at NATO Summit,” *U.S. News and World Report*, Dec. 3, 2019, <https://www.usnews.com/news/world-report/articles/2019-12-03/trump-attacks-france-germany-while-praising-turkey-at-nato-summit>. For straining or breaking international alliances and agreements, see, for example, “Donald Trump: European Union Is a Foe on Trade,” *BBC*, July 15, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-44837311>; Lisa Friedman, “Trump Serves Notice to Quit Paris Climate Agreement,” *New York Times*, Nov. 4, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/04/climate/trump-paris-agreement-climate.html>; and Mark Landler, “Trump Abandons Iran Nuclear Deal He Long Scorned,” *New York Times*, May 8, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/08/world/middleeast/trump-iran-nuclear-deal.html>.

7 See, Lara Seligman and Robbie Gramer, “Trump Asks Tokyo to Quadruple Payments for U.S. Troops in Japan,” *Foreign Policy*, Nov. 15, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/15/trump-asks-tokyo-quadruple-payments-us-troops-japan/>.

8 The phrase “unipolar moment” was popularized by Charles Krauthammer in an influential essay in *Foreign Affairs*. Charles Krauthammer, “The Unipolar Moment,” *Foreign Affairs*, Sept. 18, 1990, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/1991-02-01/unipolar-moment>.



ing competitors may offer compelling alternatives such as China's Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Old institutions are also increasingly challenged from within as governments in countries like Hungary, Poland, and Turkey develop autocratic characteristics. And America's own foreign policy institutions are also in need of modernization, recapitalization, and reform.

Third, the American people have been disengaged from foreign policy for far too long. This is not necessarily a question of public ignorance. As Emma Ashford recently wrote, "[A]fter almost two decades of an unwinnable 'War on Terror,' it's somewhat condescending to assume that the problem is with the American people, not with the foreign policy itself."⁹ It may be true that there are aspects of U.S. foreign policy that demand better explanations to some segments of the electorate, such as the value of multilateral agreements and military alliances. But it is also time for America's foreign policy elite to listen to the American people. While Trump's visceral hostility to NATO is wrong, for example, his antagonism has shined a light on legitimate questions regarding burden-sharing that deserve fair debate. Rather than just pivoting to Asia, America will need to balance itself carefully in the east and the west to counter terrorist threats and an emerging Sino-Russian bloc that supports autocratic practices and policies. For this job, America's allies — particularly in Europe — must be better invested both ideologically and financially in their own defense.

Toward a Sustainable American Foreign Policy

How do we restore U.S. leadership in a sustainable way that advances American interests without overextension? It's a big question, but difficult times call for ambitious thinking. As John F. Kennedy said when he announced America's intention to go to the moon, we do these things "not because they are easy, but because they are hard."

I propose three groups of priorities for a renewed and sustainable American foreign policy. They consist of a period of public deliberation and debate to re-examine, clarify, and perhaps redefine assumptions about America's interests; wide-ranging institutional reforms as a result of those deliberations;

and a corresponding revival of American ideals and the hard and soft power behind them. To sum up, America needs to begin the process for reflection, reform, and renewal.

First, reflection. America needs a national conversation about how to rekindle the power of its ideals. The 1945 Joint Congressional Committee on the Organization of Congress, and subsequent iter-



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ations in 1965 and 1991, offers a model.¹⁰ A new Joint Committee for a Renewed American Foreign Policy would serve a useful political purpose, showing the public that both parties can come together again for the country's greater good. It would also inject needed congressional oversight into foreign policy formulation during a time when it is dangerously concentrated in the executive branch.

The problem is party polarization. I assume, perhaps optimistically, that following the next election cycle policymakers from both sides of the aisle will crave a period of relative political peace, irrespective of the victor. After every presidential election, a period of good feelings — mixed with exhaustion — invariably settles upon Washington. Politicians

9 Emma Ashford, "The Gentleman from Nebraska Misfires on America's Foreign Policy Debate," *War on the Rocks*, May 6, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/05/the-gentleman-from-nebraska-misfires-on-americas-foreign-policy-debate/>.

10 For a useful overview of these committees, see, Donald R. Wolfensberger's "A Brief History of Congressional Reform Efforts," The Bipartisan Policy Center and The Woodrow Wilson Center, Feb. 22, 2013, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/brief_history_congressional_reform_efforts.pdf. Wolfensberger concludes that such committees have had, at best, mixed results. But a new joint committee could be a useful way to begin a conversation about how to rebalance power between the legislative and executive branches, particularly in areas of foreign policy and defense. It could also help lead the way to reforming legislation.

from both parties pledge to work on a bipartisan basis and the newly elected president is toasted at an inaugural luncheon hosted by the bipartisan Joint Congressional Committee on Inaugural Ceremonies. All the rancor of the 2016 election did not stop President Barack Obama from graciously welcoming President-elect Trump to the White House while making a call for national unity.¹¹ Perhaps those good feelings could be channeled into a Joint Committee for a Renewed American Foreign Policy, with all the appeal to political independents that such high-minded bipartisanship would hold. They could use that time to rebuild bridges and ponder ways to ensure that America's policies are consonant with its ideals.

The United States is the oldest democracy in the world: a self-perfecting nation based on the ideals of equality. If it is again to become Reagan's "shining city on a hill," America must remember that all eyes are upon it.¹² It must also be willing to recognize and correct its mistakes. If America stays true to its core values, it will continue to attract the sympathies and support of right-thinking people around the world. This is a subtle kind of power, but it extends wherever people demand freedom and justice, which is to say everywhere.

In that vein, perhaps the greatest failure of the current administration is the perception, widely held abroad and sometimes at home, that U.S. foreign policy has ceased to defend democratic rules, ideals, and norms, and instead has become an instrument that American elites use to pursue their own corrupt interests — or like many other countries whose foreign policies are extensions of autocratic agendas.

Therein lies the fundamental contradiction of "America First." Eisenhower once said, "America is great because she is good." But an America that uses all means to place herself first cannot be great because she is just like everyone else, throwing around sharp elbows to grab whatever scraps lie on the geopolitical table. And if America's great-

ness is measured only by the size of its economy or the strength of its military, rather than the appeal of its ideals, then it will eventually likely be overtaken by a country like China, which has a larger population and more natural resources. Where such a country can never overtake America is in its commitment to universal ideals that respect and enable the fundamental potential and goodness of all people. When I was a young girl watching Apollo 11 descend onto the lunar surface, I did not think of the United States as advancing a narrow and self-interested agenda while fighting with others at the geopolitical table. America was the only table worth sitting at, and all of us wanted a seat. Apollo 11 represented the vanguard of humanity's desire to transcend its limits, and the stunning accomplishment of putting a man on the Moon had a seismic foreign policy impact far beyond our ability to measure. It was freedom's ultimate success story: Dare to be free, and you could reach for the stars.

Second, reform. The outcome of this national conversation would serve as the basis for wide-ranging institutional reform.

America must invest in and modernize its diplomacy. As U.S. ambassador to Sweden, I had the privilege of leading a team of career diplomats, military officers, and civil servants from numerous government agencies and departments as we worked together to advance American interests abroad. Those people remain some of the most capable professionals I have had the pleasure to work with in my career. Diplomats testifying in the ongoing House impeachment hearings have demonstrated for the American people the high standards of professionalism in the Foreign Service, as well as the seriousness and consequential nature of U.S. diplomacy. They are not exceptions, but the rule.

But even the most capable individuals need adequate resources to do their jobs, and in his 2020 budget, the president proposed a 23 percent cut in State Department and USAID funding.¹³ Gen. Jim Mattis famously said in 2013, "If you don't fund the

11 David Nakamura and Juliet Eilperin, "Trump Meets with Obama at the White House as Whirlwind Transition Starts," *Washington Post*, Nov. 10, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2016/11/10/obama-to-welcome-trump-to-white-house-for-first-meeting-since-election/>.

12 In Reagan's election eve address, he said, "I know I have told before of the moment in 1630 when the tiny ship *Arabella* bearing settlers to the New World lay off the Massachusetts coast. To the little bank of settlers gathered on the deck John Winthrop said: 'we shall be a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us, so that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a byword through the world.' Well, America became more than 'a story,' or a 'byword' — more than a sterile footnote in history. I have quoted John Winthrop's words more than once on the campaign trail this year — for I believe that Americans in 1980 are every bit as committed to that vision of a shining 'city on a hill,' as were those long ago settlers." Ronald Reagan, "Election Eve Address: 'A Vision for America,'" American Presidency Project, Nov. 3, 1980, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/election-eve-address-vision-for-america>.

13 "A Budget for a Better America: Promises Kept. Taxpayers First," The White House, March 11, 2019, 71, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/budget-fy2020.pdf>.

State Department fully, then I need to buy more ammunition.”¹⁴ His meaning was that the hard daily work of diplomacy, rarely acknowledged in public, defuses disputes before they break out into military conflicts. Both of Trump’s secretaries of state, however, have driven junior and senior members of the Foreign Service out of the department at a time when U.S. foreign policy is in tatters across the globe.¹⁵ As former Deputy Secretary of State William J. Burns recently wrote in *Foreign Affairs*, the damage now being done to the State Department “will likely prove to be more severe to both diplomatic tradecraft and U.S. foreign policy” than any previous political assault on the institution.¹⁶

All that said, it is not enough to simply provide more funding. The State Department’s challenges have become more complex, from the rise of China to the impact of artificial intelligence on foreign policy. The way that it does its work must be fundamentally re-imagined. I cannot claim to know exactly how the department should be reformed. Ideally, the results of a Joint Committee for a Renewed American Foreign Policy, informed by career staffers and specialist academics, would help to provide more specific prescriptions. But I can say that while diplomacy cannot achieve everything, it is the most cost-effective way to build support for America’s priorities abroad and promote the mutual understanding so necessary for international cooperation.

Part and parcel of reforming U.S. diplomacy is communicating its necessity and value to Americans who are often skeptical of what taxpayer dollars purchase at the State Department. America seems more willing to fund what it can count. To borrow Mattis’ words, ammunition is easy to quantify, but soft power is not. It is important to help people understand that America’s military forces aren’t based in Europe out of altruism; they are there to keep the peace in a continent that has spawned two world wars that killed tens of millions, including hundreds of thousands of Americans. America isn’t in the United Nations because it likes getting harangued by its adversaries; it is there to push back against their hostile policies, and to help ensure that conflicts get resolved before they flame out of control and become armed

conflicts that drag America in.

American primacy in international affairs has allowed the United States to set standards and reach markets in a way that a less engaged nation never could.¹⁷ And American consumers have gained enormously from trade, with access to affordable goods undreamt of when Neil Armstrong was taking big steps on the moon. The benefits to average Americans are real. Policymakers need to work harder to communicate these benefits, while not dismissing concerns about trade out of hand.

Finally, out of reform would come renewal. With faith in America’s ideals renewed, the country would have a newfound confidence in supporting those ideals without hypocrisy, using both hard and soft power. U.S. foreign policy works best when American ideals and aspirations are at its core. But the country would also have to stop turning a blind eye to behaviors that contradict its fundamental values. A “transactional” foreign policy leaves America short-changed because autocracies inevitably gain more from it, and rules-based democracies gain less. If American leaders shrug when autocrats murder journalists or repress their own people, America’s natural allies are repelled, and by acquiescing to authoritarianism the country helps corrode the international order. Friend or competitor, ally or enemy, the United States must hold other nations to account when they step over the line. This can take the form of quiet diplomacy and arm-twisting behind the scenes, public rebuke and peer pressure, or even bilateral or multilateral sanctions. But the message should be clear: Autocratic regimes cannot enjoy the benefits of the West while taking actions that undermine it.

Perhaps the first goal for an American foreign policy revival would be to try again on international trade accords. The Obama administration began to negotiate the Trans-Pacific Partnership, signed the Paris Climate Agreement, and advocated for the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, while the Trump administration withdrew the United States from the climate accord and suspended negotiations on the two trade agreements. But all these agreements had real benefits for the United States, from setting the “rules of the game”

14 Mattis frequently reprised this theme, even while serving as secretary of defense. See, for example, his remarks of Oct. 30, 2018: “I was frustrated enough with some aspects of State Department’s budget that, in my testimony, I said if you don’t fully fund up on Capitol Hill, my testimony, if you don’t fully fund the State Department, please buy a little more ammunition for me because I’m going to need it.” “Secretary Mattis Remarks on the National Defense Strategy in Conversation with the United States Institute for Peace,” Department of Defense, Oct 30, 2018, <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/1678512/secretary-mattis-remarks-on-the-national-defense-strategy-in-conversation-with/>.

15 Max Greenwood, “State Dept. Saw 12 percent Drop in Foreign Affairs Workers in First 8 Months of 2017,” *The Hill*, Feb. 10, 2018, <https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/373299-state-dept-saw-12-percent-drop-in-foreign-affairs-workers-in-first-9>.

16 William J. Burns, “The Demolition of U.S. Diplomacy,” *Foreign Affairs*, Oct. 14, 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2019-10-14/demolition-us-diplomacy>.

17 See, for example, G. John Ikenberry, “Why the Liberal World Order Will Survive,” *Ethics and International Affairs* 32, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 17–29, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679418000072>.

for global trade before China can do so itself, to tackling the existential threat of climate change, to forming the world's largest free trade zone with wealthy nations eager to buy American goods. It's not too late to resurrect all these agreements or negotiate new ones. Doing so would lay the foundation for years of mutually beneficial economic exchange that would do much to lower the chances of great power warfare.

In the past, America has thrown open its doors to refugees, kept the peace in war-racked regions, stemmed the tide of AIDS in Africa, and kept the light of freedom alive in hopeless corners of the world. After the unbelievable horror of World War II, the United States helped build an international system that has prevented another global catastrophe. It has become the richest country in the world through trade and helped bring unimaginable levels of prosperity to the rest of the globe.

The United States may have hit a rough patch in its history. But for me, it will always be that gutsy country that dared to dream that a person could walk on the moon. A momentary crisis of confidence doesn't change the fact that America is a positive force for good in the world.

That's what America is: a place where hope compels us to believe that great things can still be done. That's who Americans are. And if Americans are true to their values, then the United States will once again be a guiding light in the night for the world. 🇺🇸

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