

WHAT NOW?

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In his introductory essay for Volume 4, Issue 1 of TNSR, the chair of our editorial board, Frank Gavin, looks ahead at the future of American grand strategy and the challenges the new administration will face in crafting it.

A painful confession: I have never defeated my 12-year-old daughter Olivia at a board game. Chess, Catan, Go, Ticket to Ride, Mancala — it doesn't matter the game or the circumstances, she wins, often easily. Obviously, I love her to pieces, and she is clearly brilliant. At this point, however, it is simply embarrassing for me. Over Thanksgiving, as the family played an especially high-stakes round of Harry Potter Clue, I thought I finally had her. Just before I was about to (correctly) guess the place, weapon, and criminal, she struck first and beat me to the punch. Later, seeing me glum, she said, "Dad, I really considered letting you win. But in the end, I couldn't. You see, I have a reputation to maintain." Great powers don't like to lose. Family games, like world politics, are what international relations theorists call a "self-help" world: They do not allow for charity — even for dad.

Or do they? Over Christmas, we played a new game, Ravine. The players find themselves stranded on an island after a plane crash and the goal is to avoid madness and endure the horrors of the wild until they are rescued. Similar to the world described by certain schools of international relations, the goal is survival and the environment anarchical. Yet, the chances for staying alive increase when the players cooperate. At one point, Olivia strategically shared tools she could have hoarded in order to keep me alive. This was no act of kindness or even *quid pro quo*, nor was there any hierarchical institution, just strategic calculation. Helping me benefitted her. Later in the game, I deployed my assets to protect her, because I had gained as well. We both survived.

This volume of the *Texas National Security Review* is titled "Something old, something new." What might be thought of as old issues — counter-insurgency, the security dilemma, cyber operations, naval strategy, information diplomacy, and the militarization of domestic police — ought, according to the authors in this outstanding issue, to be understood and assessed through new analytical lenses, appropriate to the world of 2021 and beyond. A theme running through each article is the need for scholars and policymakers to make sense of which aspects of our world are similar to the past, which are profoundly different, how these old and new fac-

tors interact, and how to develop smart policies to successfully navigate threats and opportunities.

Are contemporary international relations more like the "every family member for themselves" world of Clue, a zero-sum battle where the most ruthless wins and deception is rewarded? Or is it more like Ravine, where self-interested coordination, information sharing, and cooperation generate better, Pareto optimal outcomes? And are the challenges confronting the United States old, new, or an uncertain mix of both?

The Old and the New

Answering these questions is now the daunting task that President-elect Joe Biden's national security team faces. After four years of what might be generously defined as the erratic foreign and national security policies of the Trump administration, there will be a powerful temptation to return solely to the *status quo ante*, almost as if the last four years had never happened: to focus on reassuring allies, reasserting global leadership, and reminding the world that core values such as democracy, markets, and rule of law will shape America's policies. In other words, to embrace the comforting instinct of something old. There is no doubt that these themes will and should animate aspects of the Biden administration's grand strategy. The warm bath of nostalgia, however, cannot replace the need for sharp, cold-hearted analysis and an appreciation of the world as it is, not as it once was or as we might want it to be. Crafting an effective American grand strategy that mixes the best of "something old, something new" will not be easy, for at least four reasons.

First, while he will certainly go down as the worst American president of the modern era, Trump was not wrong about everything. The American public has tired of the post-9/11 surge of military activity in parts of the world that seem weakly connected to America's interests, to say nothing of the day-to-day lives of most citizens. They also wonder about the race to globalization, which appeared, for many, to accelerate de-industrialization and increase income inequality within the United States while underwrit-



ing the extraordinary growth of a great-power rival, China. Although Trump was a crude and inconsistent messenger, his views were supported by many Americans who have developed a real antipathy to the country's engagement abroad over the last two decades. The success and support of any new grand strategy depends upon its ability to demonstrably deliver better outcomes for Americans.

Second, while traditional challenges remain, many aspects of world politics appear to be changing in fundamental respects, making old ways of thinking about threats, interests, and power potentially outdated, if not obsolete. Consider the dilemma shaping the two biggest, interrelated global challenges facing Biden: transnational issues, like global public health and climate, and the rise of China.

More Americans may be felled by Covid-19 in one year than the total number of military deaths that the United States suffered during all of World War II. The pandemic is not only deadly — it is the kind of threat that ignores borders and is best contained and defeated through international coordination and cooperation. In the years to come, there will be equally pressing challenges — climate change, migration, economic volatility, proliferation of dangerous new technologies, and new, potentially deadlier public health crises — that will be hard to manage, let alone solve, without engagement between the two most important powers in the system, the People's Republic of China and the United States.

Despite the clear, shared interests in solving these issues, however, hostility between the two countries has escalated to dangerously high levels. China flagrantly violates human rights, from Hong Kong to its treatment of the Uighurs in Xinjiang, pursues mercantilist economic policies, and has violated agreements in the South China Sea while threatening America's friends throughout the Indo-Pacific. Tensions over Taiwan are likely to rise dramatically as China increasingly pursues gray-zone tactics designed to pressure the island. Strategic ambiguity, which has helped to maintain stability in the Taiwan Strait for over 40 years, appears to have lost its appeal to hardliners on both sides. A war between the United States and China, which would be a catastrophe for all involved, is no longer unthinkable.

Threading the needle between competition and cooperation with China will require extraordinary strategy and statecraft. The task is especially daunting in a polarized political environment where the only thing that Democrats and Republicans agree on appears to be a simplistic willingness to blame China for all of the woes of the nation and the world. Furthermore, no one can confidently predict either China's ambitions or its future course: It may continue its extraordinary rise and

surpass the United States, it could stagnate, or it may be overwhelmed by its many internal and external challenges. How should the United States proceed? There are no "off-the-shelf" solutions from either international relations theory or applied history that will save the day. Recent analogies to the Cold War cloud more than they reveal, and the never-ending debates over restraint versus primacy seem at least a decade or two behind and are of little help in guiding the difficult choices that the Biden administration will have to make.

Consider a small sample of the tough issues the incoming team will face. What is the best policy toward Europe, the world's wealthiest and most advanced continent, which appears to be suffering a crisis of identity and purpose? What, if anything, can the United States do to arrest the apparent decline of democracy around the world? How should the new administration think about international institutions and their role in advancing American interests? Is it best to reform existing organizations, create new ones, or, as Trump did, ignore them? Should these organizations and new initiatives be open to all countries, regardless of their political system or disposition, or only to those with shared interests and values? What adjustments does the United States have to make, if any, to its longstanding policy of encouraging openness, globalization, and interdependence? What role will nuclear weapons — which have cast a long, if often underrecognized, shadow over world politics and American grand strategy over the past eight decades — play moving forward? What are the possible unexpected crises or disruptions that we are not thinking about?

To make matters even more difficult, it is not clear what factors and forces will shape America's international environment in the years to come. We intuit that the international system is changing, likely in profound and consequential ways. But we lack the clarity that sharp, world historical moments, like the end of a major war or a geopolitical collapse, provide: a clear divide between "something old, something new." 2021 is not like 1815, 1919, 1945, or 1989, when the evidence of a transformed world was all around. The 2020s are more likely to be like the 1820s, 1890s, or 1970s, when powerful, but often hidden, tectonic forces were reshaping the world in profound and unsettling ways that were often hard to understand. For as dangerous as traditional geopolitical changes and challenges can be, they at least play to the strengths of national governments planning a grand strategy. When international change is driven by technology, demographics, socio-economics, identity, or cultural forces, and when the

very nature of the human experience undergoes great pressure and transformation, devising effective grand strategy is much harder. It can often be years, if not decades, before national and international governmental institutions adapt and effectively respond to these changes. The global landscape that the United States faces is more uncertain than in any time in recent memory. Biden's grand strategy will require possessing strategic ingenuity, stress-testing strongly held assumptions, making structured trade-offs, and developing long-term thinking.

This highlights a third difficulty: The United States government is not well structured or situated to pursue an innovative grand strategy to meet new challenges. The American national security bureaucracy is a slow and unwieldy vehicle, largely constructed after the 1947 National Security Act to fight the Cold War before having an expensive, if ugly, addition fused to it to fight the post-9/11 wars. This behemoth is compartmentalized and stove-piped at a time when the issues facing the United States transcend traditional categories. It is built to win the last war, not fight the next one, even as it relies too much on kinetic tools despite the fact that many of America's challenges are immune to military solutions. This bureaucracy possesses little ability to understand the interests and perspectives of other nations at a moment when strategic empathy toward friend and foe alike is required. It defaults to coercion when the powers of attraction can be far more influential. And while it can mobilize for a sharp crisis, it has little ability to reflect upon and plan for the critical structural shifts that play out over the long term.

These are not new problems.

On closer inspection, the 231-year history of U.S. grand strategy is decidedly mixed. America presents students of world politics with a dilemma of sorts: The nation has long boasted favorable geography and demographics, a dynamic economy, and extraordinary technological prowess, while possessing a (comparatively) open, tolerant, and creative society, which remains widely admired and often imitated. At the same time, it is burdened with a governing structure and process that often makes effective, concerted foreign policy difficult. Before the country was even 25 years old, for example, the Madison administration picked an arguably unnecessary fight with the world's greatest superpower, lost almost every military battle due to incompetence and the misallocation of resources,

and sparked savage political polarization that almost led to a civil war. Yet, somehow America managed to emerge stronger and more confident as a nation, with a national anthem to boot. Many times in its history, it has alienated friend and foe alike with its sanctimonious diplomacy. The United States often enters wars too late, unprepared, or against the wrong enemy.

We don't like to admit it, but the United States has always been constitutionally (in both senses of the word) a tad skeptical about the whole notion of grand strategy and what is required to craft and implement one. The idea reeks too much of European *realpolitik*, centralized power, and elite, aristocratic foreign policy officials. Every four or eight years, we hear the predictable calls for the new administration to undertake something akin to President Dwight Eisenhower's much misunderstood 1953 Project Solarium exercise. Even Eisenhower bungled the national rollout of the extraordinary polio vaccine developed by Jonas Salk and his team at the University of Pittsburgh.

There is a fourth challenge, one that is both heartbreaking and difficult to assess and remedy: the deep sense of polarization, distrust of institutions, and populist anger that shapes the contemporary American political landscape today.

The storming of the U.S. Capitol building on Jan. 6, 2021, by violent thugs, incited to violence by a sitting president, was one of the darkest days

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in modern American history. There is no getting around the ugliness generated by an insurrection aimed at destabilizing the constitutional process of affirming a democratic election. Many people who should have known better stoked these flames of distrust, both recently and over the last four years, out of ambition, cowardice, or both. This deepens the stain on Trump and those who aided and abetted his worst instincts. It is hard to calculate what the costs will be or how long it will take to repair. It will not make the new administration's effort to protect and promote America's interests in the world any easier.

Where does the January 6 insurrection fall on the spectrum of "something old, something new?" One only has to look at the bitter 1800 presidential



election and painful transition between the presidencies of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson to recognize that deep political polarization is baked into America's DNA. The United States has a long, troubled history with white nationalism and political xenophobia, mob violence, and conspiratorial thinking; the Know Nothing movement before the Civil War; the Ku Klux Klan in the post-reconstruction South; the ugly rhetoric of Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and Charles Lindbergh during the dark days of the Great Depression; the White Citizen Councils that flourished in the South in the 1950s and 1960s; and the militia movements that spawned the Ruby Ridge confrontation and the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. While the messages of QAnon and other conspiracy movements have been amplified by social media, we need to acknowledge that the underlying forces of resentment, anger, prejudice, and violence are not new.

Are We Doomed?

Biden and his team have a daunting task before them: crafting a grand strategy in an international system shaped by new and uncertain challenges, armed with a sclerotic bureaucracy built for a different time, and serving a profoundly divided and angry public that is wary of deeper engagement with the world and is focused on domestic crises. Russia's President Vladimir Putin and China's leader, Xi Jinping, must be ecstatic.

I would be careful, however, before breathlessly embracing visions of inevitable American decline. Recently, I have been reflecting on the state of America in August 1974, when President Richard Nixon left the White House in disgrace. The country had seen two years of embarrassing public hearings, investigations, and partisan fighting. There were secret recordings and dangerous strains between the branches of government, all leading to a constitutional crisis that played out before the world, with America's adversaries and even its friends mocking or, worse, pitying the United States. The Watergate scandal took place in a nation that appeared rotten to the core, defeated in Vietnam, its cities crumbling, crime and drug use on the rise, moral decay rampant, the economy stagnant, and a society deeply polarized. How could America, burdened with a cacophony of divided, angry voices, ever compete with an empire whose government appeared designed to ruthlessly pursue a unified, efficient grand strategy? The future seemed bleak.

Only a decade and a half later, of course, the Cold War ended on terms favorable to the United States and America's great ideological and geopolitical ri-

val disappeared. Why? There is, of course, intense debate among scholars about this question. One key element was policy: smart policies pursued by the United States and terrible policies undertaken by the Soviet Union. Critical choices made toward the end of the Carter administration and during the Reagan and George H.W. Bush administrations helped improve America's economic and foreign policy position in the world. A more effective grand strategy, in other words, turned the tide.

It is important to remember, however, that deeper historical forces were also at play. The Cold War was "won" as much by the powerful technological, socioeconomic, and cultural forces emerging in America during the 1970s. The films and television of Hollywood, the jeans of Levi Strauss, the venture capitalists and technology of Silicon Valley, the rights revolution emerging from the Castro, the muscle-heads of Venice Beach, the stand-up from the Comedy Store in Los Angeles, the shipping containers from the port of Long Beach, the amazing ability to make great wines in Napa Valley — all this and much more helped reshape the nation, and many parts of the world, for the better (and sometimes the worse). The Soviet Union could not compete with these deep, tectonic forces, and many people around the world embraced them. None of these world-historical transformations originated, were shaped, or, frankly, were understood in the White House situation room at the time.

History unfolds in complex, disjointed ways, according to a timeline that has little to do with two- or four-year election cycles. "What matters" — both in terms of our own lives and the power and purpose of the nation — is very difficult to determine in real time. This is perhaps the hardest part of grand strategy. It will be important for the new Biden team to recognize the balance and interplay between traditional policy choices and the seemingly amorphous but powerful forces shaping America and the world in 2021 and beyond. Remember, 2020 was the year the U.S. federal government performed abysmally trying to contain the Covid-19 crisis. It was also the year that American entities, like Amazon, Netflix, and Pfizer in the private sector, and the Gates Foundation and my own university, Johns Hopkins, in the nonprofit world, achieved remarkable things. And as always in America, 2020 witnessed innumerable stories of innovation, kindness, and sacrifice from individuals, communities, and organizations that rarely penetrated the distorting lens of doom-scrolling. America in 2021 looks, so far, to be in crisis. Just like it was in 1974 — or 1955, or 1938, or 1891, or 1855, or 1828, or 1800, or frankly most any other year.

To be clear, I am not predicting that the United

States — either its government or its society — will continue some inexorable rise and overcome its many challenges and burdens. As January 6 revealed, things can always get worse. I'd be lying if I didn't confess that the last four years have dented my previous, perhaps over-exuberant, Tocquevilian faith in the exceptional nature of the American project. That said, my best guess is that the United States will, as it often does, figure things out and get its act together — more slowly, more inefficiently, more hypocritically than it should and, most regrettably, perhaps more unfairly and violently than it ought to. The nation will also, no doubt, pause only long enough after fixing things to get into its next disaster. Along the way, Americans will argue and fight and claim that the end of this noble experiment, flawed as it has always been, is near. The story doesn't look so great up close and in real time — it rarely does. A longer historical and comparative perspective, however, cautions against the inevitability of American decline, either at home or in the world. For all its faults, the United States possesses a deep wealth of attributes and qualities admired (and feared) by friend and foe alike. We are, as the young people say, a hot mess, but with history as our guide, I like our odds.

This is especially true if the new president and his administration devise and implement a wise, forward-looking grand strategy. To do so, they will need to remember that the international system is never completely the same as it was in the past, nor completely different. They will have to understand what aspects of America's fortunes are tied to policy choices and what parts have to do with the strengths and weaknesses of America's society, economy, and culture. They will need to continually challenge their assumptions, update their analysis, and understand the world changes at a speed and in ways rarely captured by the headlines of the *New York Times*. Perhaps the most important task ahead for Biden is to figure out when the United States should be playing Clue, when it is better to play Ravine, and when it needs to play both at the same time.

Will the new administration be successful? I know we all hope so. The incoming president's experience, rhetoric, and excellent choices to fill key foreign policy positions are certainly encouraging. As Yogi Berra once said, however, "It's tough to make predictions, especially about the future." For nothing about the future is certain — except, perhaps, that Olivia will continue to easily outsmart her father in whatever game we play. ■

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