

# Shaping National Security Decisions: An Insider's View of *The Insiders' Game*

Mara Karlin



## Elizabeth Saunders’s *The Insiders’ Game* offers a rich perspective regarding how legislators, military leaders, and high-ranking civilian officials shape national security decision-making.

Elizabeth Saunders’s recent book, *The Insiders’ Game*, offers a positive contribution to the literature on war-making. By exploring the role of democratic elites in shaping major decisions regarding war and peace—including the approach, the parameters, and the length of a conflict—Saunders underscores that more people are at the decision-making table than readers may have previously considered. She focuses on three groups—legislators, military leaders, and high-ranking civilian officials—and the book is particularly useful in outlining how and in what ways these cohorts shape decision-making by imposing resource or informational costs on leaders. Although Saunders’s book provides a broad and rich view of multiple cases, her book is particularly illuminating in how it treats these dynamics during the formation of US policy toward Lebanon in the 1980s, and in comparing different administrations’ approaches to strategy during America’s post-9/11 wars.<sup>1</sup>

### How Insiders Shaped a Fuzzy Mission in Lebanon

The calamitous national security decision-making that characterized President Ronald Reagan’s approach to Lebanon in 1982–84 has been well recounted. Saunders’s book provides clarity about the impact of this dysfunctional process; as she compellingly argues, the elite debates in Reagan’s administration ultimately constrained the US mission in Lebanon.

Lebanon’s political and security scene during this period was convoluted, given the myriad actors involved in the internecine civil war that had been raging for seven years by the time Reagan sent US troops. The complex dynamics of the conflict were further exacerbated by repeated Israeli invasions and the interventions of other regional actors, including Syria and Iran. “Some days, we had no idea who was fighting who,” one former senior Lebanese government official explained to me during field research I conducted in Lebanon.<sup>2</sup> Reagan’s Middle East envoy, Philip Habib, felt similarly. He cabled

back to Washington his attempt to summarize the fighting as follows: “It may be typical of the complex Lebanese problem that as many as five factions may be involved in this gunfire: the Lebanese army, the Syrian army, the Murabitun, the Palestinian Liberation army, along with a Shi’a faction and an Iraqi-supported group.”<sup>3</sup>

Saunders’s exploration would therefore have benefited from a bit more background on the war, as the confusing environment inside Lebanon added to the Reagan administration’s confused approach. American officials assumed that the US contingent of the Multinational Force would be deployed for a few weeks—far less than the nearly two years that became their reality. And the Marines’ mission, which began as fuzzy, only became more distorted as it continued.

As Saunders also shows, however, confusion about the US Marines’ role in Lebanon stemmed from Reagan himself. Reagan told Congress that “the intervention would be brief and succeed in its limited aims.”<sup>4</sup> Reagan’s decision-making process, however, compounded the administration’s turmoil—the president was unwilling to clearly adjudicate differences of opinion among his senior leadership team. Some advisors from the State Department, the CIA, and the White House wanted the US military directly involved in supporting one side in Lebanon’s war, whereas the Department of Defense opposed direct involvement and preferred an indirect role that prioritized American efforts to train, equip, and advise the Lebanese Armed Forces. These dynamics were worsened by perturbation within and between US government departments and agencies, information hoarding across the interagency, power imbalances due to special envoys, routine efforts to bypass chains of command, and a limited and ad hoc interagency decision-making process.<sup>5</sup>

As the administration debated what the Marines would actually *do* in Lebanon, Reagan failed to clarify the parameters of the US military’s role. The president may have thought he knew why US Marines were in Lebanon—to strengthen the Lebanese government’s sovereignty and enable foreign militaries to withdraw—but he couldn’t articulate

1 Mara E. Karlin, *The Inheritance: America’s Military After Two Decades of War* (Brookings Institution Press, 2021).

2 Mara E. Karlin, *Building Militaries in Fragile States: Challenges for the United States* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 110.

3 Karlin, *Building Militaries in Fragile States*, 110.

4 Elizabeth N. Saunders, *The Insiders’ Game: How Elites Make War and Peace* (Princeton University Press, 2024), 191.

5 Karlin, *Building Militaries in Fragile States*, chapter 2.

it clearly and persuasively.<sup>6</sup> “The people just don’t know why we’re there,” he wrote in his diary.<sup>7</sup> Reagan was accurately reading public opinion; Saunders cites a September 1983 survey that reveals similar sentiments among the American public about the US approach.<sup>8</sup>

As a fuzzy mission grew fuzzier and US rules of engagement shifted, different actors on the ground began to see the United States, understandably, as choosing sides. In fall 1983, the US military began using naval power in support of the Lebanese government, including by firing on positions held by the Syrian military and Druze militia. Reagan, however, did not see this change in the US military’s posture to be meaningful; after the first time that the United States used naval gunfire in support of the Lebanese Armed Forces, he wrote in his diary, “This still comes under the head of defense.”<sup>9</sup> That was not, of course, the perception on the ground—Reagan failed to recognize that allegedly neutral American peacekeepers were now using force on behalf of an antagonist, and had chosen a side. Within weeks, Hezbollah bombed the Marine barracks in Beirut, killing 241 US military personnel.

Eventually, Saunders finds that “elite pressure forced Reagan to choose some kind of definitive outcome, rather than settling for kicking the can further down the road.”<sup>10</sup> Choosing among thorny options for US policy in Lebanon was difficult for Reagan, but fundamental disagreements between his top advisors on using force to support the Lebanese government ultimately required him to calibrate US support. In particular, disputes between the White House and the State Department (which both hoped for deeper US involvement in Lebanon) and the Department of Defense (where civilian and military leaders remained skeptical) shaped the US approach. “Reagan was not able to push the mission as far as he, Shultz, and the NSC [National Security Council] preferred, in part because of the need to accommodate the preferences of Weinberger and the JCS [Joint Chiefs of Staff], as well as to avoid congressional scrutiny,” explains Saunders.<sup>11</sup> She highlights a striking vignette: Following the Marine

barracks bombing, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger apparently failed to carry out Reagan’s orders on expanding the rules of engagement for using force in response to the attack, a worrisome dynamic between civilian leaders.<sup>12</sup> Weinberger’s efforts to collaborate with Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff John Vessey do not improve this picture, since neither supported following the president’s guidance.<sup>13</sup> Their unwillingness to support Reagan’s approach further illustrated the gap between Reagan’s senior advisors—a gap between elites that grew so large that Reagan could no longer avoid making a decision on the fundamental issue of US military presence in Lebanon. Saunders’s finding that elites were heavily influential in constraining “the conduct, scope, and duration of war” in the Reagan administration’s decision-making on Lebanon is far from a bad outcome.<sup>14</sup> Substantial elite involvement in shaping leadership decisions on the most critical issues of national security can be beneficial, as this case study shows, owing to the profound disagreement among Reagan’s senior advisors, which made it increasingly difficult for him to promulgate a confused policy. The Department of Defense leadership recognized that the US deployment was having a limited impact and saw the danger of a chaotic and unclear mission in a failing state. When Reagan pulled the Marines out of Lebanon in early 1984, Lebanon’s military melted away, and the state essentially disappeared. Muddling through and continuing along the slippery slope in Lebanon with more losses and few accomplishments would have been a poor decision indeed. In this case, the cautionary role played by Reagan’s military advisors helped American foreign policy cut its losses.

## Elite Influence Across America’s Post-9/11 Wars

Saunders’s book also considers how elites shaped decision-making at key junctures in the conduct of America’s post-9/11 wars. In one particularly compelling example, she outlines how President Barack

6 President Reagan approved a new policy toward Lebanon in October 1982. See Ronald Reagan, “Next Steps in Lebanon: National Security Decision Directive 64,” October 28, 1982, Federation of American Scientists, *Reagan Administration National Security Decision Directives*, <http://www.fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsdd/>; Karlin, *Building Militaries in Fragile States*, 113.

7 Saunders, *The Insiders’ Game*, 203.

8 Saunders, *The Insiders’ Game*, 208.

9 Karlin, *Building Militaries in Fragile States*, 136.

10 Saunders, *The Insiders’ Game*, 201.

11 Saunders, *The Insiders’ Game*, 212.

12 Saunders, *The Insiders’ Game*, 211.

13 Saunders, *The Insiders’ Game*, 211.

14 Saunders, *The Insiders’ Game*, 184.

Obama reshaped the findings of an Afghanistan review in 2009 to ensure that the strategy had military support.<sup>15</sup> The president agreed to surge US troops to Afghanistan—for the second time in his presidency and with enthusiastic support from the Department of Defense—but simultaneously announced when those forces would withdraw. He did not pursue his own desired approach, and chose instead a middle ground between the counterinsurgency strategy preferred by the military and the counterterrorism approach preferred by Vice President Joe Biden, to ensure that the United States' strategy received the widespread backing of the American national security establishment that the president believed was necessary.

**Saunders's finding that elites were heavily influential in constraining "the conduct, scope, and duration of war" in the Reagan administration's decision-making on Lebanon is far from a bad outcome.**

The rigor of President Obama's national security decision-making approach on Afghanistan compares favorably to President Reagan's approach in Lebanon in terms of the conscious effort made to ensure broad support among key administration stakeholders. President Obama required his entire senior national security team to endorse the new strategy toward Afghanistan. "The president had all the key players read and agree to it in the final round of meetings, where he emphasized that everyone had to voice disagreement at that moment, after which their 'wholehearted support' would be expected," explains Saunders.<sup>16</sup> Given that the policy review process engendered substantial disagreements among Obama's senior advisors about which approach his administration should take, he clearly wanted to ensure that his senior advisors would focus on implementing his decision—regardless of whether they supported it. The relevant departments and agencies largely fell in line. Strategically, Obama

could then assess the impact of his policy decision rather than fight his team on the actual decision.

There is no evidence of a similar set of discussions on President George W. Bush's decision to invade Iraq. Despite conventional wisdom that Secretary of State Colin Powell did not support the Iraq War, Saunders recounts a somewhat different interpretation of this history. When President Bush asked Powell for his endorsement of the decision to invade in January 2003, Powell responded affirmatively. Powell's voice was particularly crucial to Bush on this issue, by virtue of both his position and the public respect he held in the United States and globally. With Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld enthusiastically supporting a potential war against Iraq, and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice playing a relatively restrained role, it fell to Powell to offer a cautionary perspective on the prospects of an invasion. Powell, however, had been rebuffed when he had attempted to raise these concerns six months earlier, and ultimately endorsed Bush's decision to invade.

This episode in Saunders's book offers a valuable corrective to the conventional wisdom, but also raises questions: How do elites assess their ability to inform key decisions under consideration by the president? And how does that assessment shift throughout their tenure, as different decisions either follow their advice or don't? For example, these questions might affect how we could use Saunders's framework to understand the role of outsider elites in shaping the Iraq surge decision in late 2006. How did elites at the American Enterprise Institute, for example, decide it would be useful to have Gen. (ret.) Jack Keane brief a report recommending this course of action?<sup>17</sup> Given the significance of that decision, and the broader pattern of think tank elites attempting to influence administration decisions, this example would be a compelling additional test of Saunders's framework.

Another strength of Saunders's book is that its assessment of the importance of elites in shaping America's post-9/11 wars is grounded in a sobering but well-supported claim that the American public plays much less of a role than observers might think. Saunders notes that elite opinion matters in a context in which the US public generally expresses broad but shallow support for the US military, in part due to a lack of knowledge about the military and its activities. Here, Saunders's evidence is telling—only 8 percent of those surveyed could correctly identify

15 Saunders, *The Insiders' Game*, 234.

16 Saunders, *The Insiders' Game*, 234–35.

17 Peter Feaver, "The Right to Be Right: Civil-Military Relations and the Iraq Surge Decision," *International Security* 35, no. 34 (Spring 2011): 110–11.

how many combat troops the United States had in Iraq in 2012, a percentage that didn't rise much over a decade.<sup>18</sup> This gap between those who serve and the society they serve is a stark reminder of a dynamic that has characterized the United States throughout its post-9/11 wars.<sup>19</sup>

## Concluding Thoughts

*The Insiders' Game* convincingly analyzes the role that American elites play in shaping decision-making on national security affairs, arguing that elites play a much more significant role than is often appreciated. The book stands as a historical tour de force, grounded in serious and rigorous research, and contains insights that speak to patterns in American uses of force throughout history as well as the nature of democratic politics in foreign policy decision-making and implementation.

Future research might expand on where these crucially important elites get their information. Is it through personal experience? Visits to war zones? Reading think tank reports? Convening briefing roundtables with outside experts? How do these sources of information vary in the three constituencies that Saunders studies—presidential advisors, military officials, and legislators? And how does the

process of acquiring information change over time, particularly over the course of the time an official is in office? The intense, exhausting, and often overwhelming pace of elite decision-making in American national security policy can make it difficult to thoughtfully and deliberately take in information from a wide range of diverse sources—and yet at the very time when it is the very hardest to continue learning, leaders must try to find a way to do so, or risk serious strategic consequences.

**Mara Karlin, PhD**, is a professor of practice at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies and a visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution. She served in national security roles for six US secretaries of defense, advising on policies spanning strategic planning, defense budgeting, the future of conflict, and regional affairs involving the Middle East, Europe, and Asia. She is the author of two books on defense policy and military history, including, most recently, *The Inheritance: America's Military After Two Decades of War* (Brookings Institution Press, 2021).

**Image:** Complete renovations of the White House Situation Room on August 16, 2023. Carlos Fyfe / The White House via AP.<sup>20</sup>

18 Saunders, *The Insiders' Game*, 80.

19 Karlin, *The Inheritance*, particularly "Chapter 3, The Military's Relationship to Society: The Crisis of Caring."

20 For image, see <https://dms.apnews.com/dims4/default/bc29b85/2147483647/strip/true/crop/3000x2000+0+0/resize/599x399/quality/90/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fassets.apnews.com%2Ffc%2F44%2F3dba0751c1872739d73e6854a938%2F232e7c19fa3c492f933d0a8377e0a355>.

# Would a China War Scenario Break the Insiders' Hold?

Mathew Burrows

Elizabeth Saunders has written a chilling book, *The Insiders' Game*, showing that the “facts on the ground” or the nation’s longer-term interests have often taken a back seat to partisan political exigencies when it comes to foreign policy. After a string of disastrous wars in recent decades, the public’s trust in policymakers’ capacity to make the right decision has taken a beating. Unless China attacks first, a decision to intervene against it over Taiwan is unlikely to be left up to the foreign policy elite. Not only would any military action threaten a potentially ruinous escalation, but a war between the two largest economic powers would ensure the downfall of the global economy no matter who won militarily. Recent presidents Biden and Trump have sensed that the public has grown increasingly opposed to taking any major military risks.

US elites have led foreign policy for decades, with disastrous results. As Elizabeth Saunders writes in her recent book, *The Insiders' Game*, partisan divides and identities have played an important role. Partisanship’s grasp on policy is not inevitable, however, and the future challenge of China might offer opportunities to break the insiders’ hold.

Saunders has written a chilling and provocative book documenting how foreign policy is the province of elites on both sides of the political aisle, with the publics whom they serve playing an ancillary part, brought into the decision-making process when convenient but mostly pushed aside. The sad fact is that for most close-in witnesses—including my own experience of twenty-eight years as a CIA analyst—all of this comes as no surprise. In addition to the undemocratic character of foreign policymaking, there is the awful US record over the past seventy-five years of turning military interventions into forever wars, most notably in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

After reading *The Insiders' Game*, one wonders why the United States cannot find a way of better grounding its decision-making on the “facts on the

ground” and on the country’s longer-term interests, instead of letting inertia take over and hoping for the best. The same story keeps repeating itself, like the one so deftly described by Les Gelb and Richard Betts in their famous analysis<sup>1</sup> of Vietnam War decision-making: planning for failure. Many of the decisions to continue to fight were made to satisfy other objectives, such as President Lyndon Johnson’s efforts to save his domestic aspirations in Congress, rather than facing reality and trying to end the conflict and restore peace. Even more objectionable was President George W. Bush’s adventurism, spawned by his yearnings for revenge after the 9/11 attacks and the timidity of much of the opposition.

## Hawks and Doves: Partisan Identities Shape Elite Actions

Despite what appears on the surface as the perverted nature of US foreign policymaking, Saunders shows there is a rationale behind it—a sort of “method” to the elite’s “madness.” Democratic presidents usually prioritize a domestic agenda and fear risking that agenda if they follow their more

1 Les H. Gelb and Richard K. Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (The Brookings Institution Press, May 31, 2016).

dovish inclinations on foreign policy. Republicans are in a stronger position, being naturally more hawkish, which sometimes gives them the ability to be “dovish”—like President Richard Nixon working to open up Communist China, which he otherwise loathed and lambasted. Nevertheless, even if the Democratic Party leaned heavily toward getting out of Vietnam, particularly after their 1968 electoral defeat, Nixon faced pressures from the Republican right wing not to admit defeat. Nixon and his national security advisor Henry Kissinger also feared losing US credibility on the world stage if the United States simply gave up, prompting them to expand the conflict with an invasion of Cambodia before aggressively pursuing a peace deal that they thought would guarantee an honorable retreat. As it was, two years later, the game was up for all to see in the humiliating fall of Saigon. Nixon was no longer president, having had his own ignominious fall, but Kissinger remained secretary of state under Gerald Ford. When writing about that day, Kissinger did not admit any responsibility for the failure, seeming to blame Watergate instead: “For the sake of our long-term peace of mind, we must someday undertake an assessment of why good men on all sides found no way to avoid this disaster and why our domestic drama first paralyzed and then overwhelmed us. But, on the day the last helicopter left the roof on the embassy, only a feeling of emptiness remained.”<sup>2</sup>

More recently, President Barack Obama only partly avoided the endless-war trap. Having campaigned against the war before he was elected to the Senate in 2005, Obama could not completely free himself from the “dove curse,”<sup>3</sup> labeling the Afghan conflict as the “good” war during his presidential campaign. As Saunders describes it, Obama—like most of his predecessors—succumbed to pressure for a bigger military surge in Afghanistan than he favored. Politically, Obama felt that it was important to show that he and his Democratic Party were not “wimps” because they condemned the “bad” war in Iraq. Obama was against any large surge and closer to Vice President Joe Biden’s idea for a targeted counterterrorism approach, but he was fearful of military opposition, which forced him to compromise with the Department of Defense (DoD) on a surge of thirty thousand soldiers. In doing so, he missed an opportunity to wind down the war and save American lives.

Like other Democratic presidents, Obama’s priority was domestic reform, but unlike many of them, he was fortunate that his party controlled both houses, including a brief filibuster-proof Senate supermajority of sixty members when he entered the White House in 2009. Obama was not dependent on Republican votes for passing his controversial health-care reform, so it remains a bit of a mystery why he angered some of his fellow Democrats by backing a troop surge in Afghanistan in 2009. Saunders quotes Democratic Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi as recalling that “I have to admit that this [sending 21,000 troops at the start of Obama’s term before the later surge] wasn’t what we had in mind.”<sup>4</sup> In 2010, Congress approved “Obamacare,” even though all Republicans in the House and Senate opposed it, plus thirty-four Democrats in the House—demonstrating the Democrats’ strength at that time and raising a question about whether Obama needed to compromise on the issue of Afghanistan.

Instead of Obama being worried about Congress, Saunders believes that the new president was more intent on keeping his “team of rivals” intact, especially Robert Gates,<sup>5</sup> who had served in the Bush administration and who Obama appointed as defense secretary. Demonstrating that presidential toughness is more than just a political necessity—as in the Harry Truman and John F. Kennedy cases—Obama showed that it was a deep-seated psychological trait of Democratic doves.

### An Important Exception

Saunders, however, mostly ignores one crucial example of a Democratic president demonstrating “toughness” through compromise to avoid war. The Cuban Missile Crisis risked turning into a nuclear Armageddon. The 1962 ten-day crisis could have been one of those occasions when a Democratic president felt he had to be a hawk. Kennedy received advice from no less than the dean of US post–World War II diplomacy, Dean Acheson, as well as from generals, such as Air Force Chief of Staff Curtis LeMay, who urged him to bomb the missile sites on Cuban soil. Acheson later admitted that such bombings could very well have elicited a military retaliation from Moscow. Fortunately, Kennedy had read Barbara Tuchman’s book *The Guns of August*, about World War I, published just months before the Cuban Missile Crisis.<sup>6</sup> In his memoir, *Swords*

2 Henry Kissinger, Letter to the Fall of Saigon Marine Association, <https://fallosaigon.org/orig/kissinger.htm>.

3 Elizabeth N. Saunders, *The Insiders’ Game: How Elites Make War and Peace* (Princeton University Press, 2024), 231–35.

4 Saunders, *The Insiders’ Game*, 232.

5 Saunders, *The Insiders’ Game*, 230.

6 Library of America, “How Barbara Tuchman’s *The Guns of August* Influenced Decision Making During the Cuban Missile Crisis,” March 19, 2012, <https://blog.loa.org/2012/03/how-barbara-tuchmans-guns-of-august.html>.

and *Plowshares*, Gen. Maxwell Taylor recalled how the book came up during his discussions with the president during the crisis:

*An avid reader of history, Kennedy has been greatly impressed by Barbara Tuchman's The Guns of August, which he often quoted as evidence that the generals are inclined to have a single solution in a crisis and thus tie the hands of the political leaders by leaving them with the choice between doing nothing and accepting an inflexible war plan. As he read Tuchman's book, it was the rigidity of the mobilization plans both of the Triple Alliance and of the Triple Entente which made it impossible for the diplomats to avert a world war in 1914. . . . In the midst of the crisis, he told his brother Bobby: "I am not going to follow a course which will allow anyone to write a comparable book about this time [and call it] The Missiles of October."<sup>7</sup>*

As with other Democratic presidents, Kennedy had ambitious domestic plans that he did not want to give up, but, in this case, Congress had little or no direct influence, not knowing what was under consideration by the Kennedy administration. Arthur Schlesinger wrote in *The Imperial Presidency* that “there was no legislative consultation, there was most effective executive consultation . . . but Congress played no role at all. . . . It was only after he had made his decision that Kennedy called in congressional leaders. The object was not to consult them but to inform them.”<sup>8</sup> A greater congressional role could have complicated the back-channel deal that he and his brother, Robert F. Kennedy, worked out: The Soviet Union would withdraw its missiles and, in return, the United States would go ahead with the already-planned dismantling of its Jupiter missiles in Turkey that were pointing at the Soviets—something that Kennedy wanted to keep a secret for fear of the potential congressional and public blowback.

We now know how close we came to nuclear disaster. In pursuit of a Soviet submarine to enforce the naval quarantine of Cuba, the US Navy used training depth charges to force it to surface with-

out knowing that the Soviet submarines carried nuclear-tipped torpedoes. The crew of the targeted B-59 submarine had lost contact with Moscow and, hearing the depth charges, thought war had broken out. The Soviet captain wanted to retaliate, but he needed the concurrence of two other senior officers. One of them, Vasili Alexandrovich Arkhipov, refused.<sup>9</sup> It was a fraught moment and one in which Congress was thankfully cut out. Kennedy could pursue his dovish sentiments and end the threat of a nuclear war.

## Overmilitarizing US Foreign Policy

Saunders makes much of the interplay of elite politics, but she doesn't mention the wider causes underlying the breakdown of effective policymaking. Diplomacy has been the poor stepchild in the panoply of foreign policy tools, which has helped to boost hard-power options. Even defense secretaries, such as Gates, have argued against the “overmilitarization” of US foreign policy, advocating more funding of the State Department.<sup>10</sup> Even in the case of Iraq—in which the State Department, the US Agency for International Development, and others were patently more skilled—the Department of Defense was left in charge of nation-building.<sup>11</sup> I remember one exchange with a senior-level diplomat who captured the disparity: When State screws up, it is punished and Congress takes away funding, but it's different for the CIA, which Congress sees and favors (along with the DoD) as one of the hard-power components of US national security. Unlike the State Department, every “intelligence failure” earns the CIA more funding—as happened after 9/11—to correct the problem. In numbers of personnel and resources, US foreign policy is overmilitarized. Hence, if you only have a hammer, every national security problem is a nail. Moreover, from my own personal knowledge, many DoD officers dislike having responsibility for tasks—such as nation-building—that they are not trained for, and yet US foreign policy leaders tend to assign such tasks to the military.

What's behind this penchant for hawkishness? It's not clear. After the Vietnam War, there was certainly

- 
- 7 Rachel Lipson, David Deming, Jerren Chang, Jacob Greenspon, Stephanie Nussbaum, and Mariano Parro, “The Search for Stability: A Review of Worker Transitions,” American Enterprise Institute, February 17, 2021, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/the-search-for-stability-a-review-of-worker-transitions/>; Maxwell D. Taylor, *Swords and Plowshares: A Memoir* (Da Capo Press, 1972).
- 8 Quoted in Patrick Hulme, “Congress, the Cuba Resolution and Cuban Missile Crisis,” *Lawfare*, April 4, 2021, <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/congress-cuba-resolution-and-cuban-missile-crisis>.
- 9 Bryan Walsh, “60 Years Ago Today, This Man Stopped the Cuban Missile Crisis from Going Nuclear,” *Vox*, October 27, 2022, <https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/2022/10/27/23426482/cuban-missile-crisis-basilica-arkhipov-nuclear-war>.
- 10 Robert M. Gates, “The Overmilitarization of American Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-06-02/robert-gates-overmilitarization-american-foreign-policy>.
- 11 Kenneth M. Pollack, “The Seven Deadly Sins of Failure in Iraq: A Retrospective Analysis of the Reconstruction,” Brookings Institution, December 1, 2006, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-seven-deadly-sins-of-failure-in-iraq-a-retrospective-analysis-of-the-reconstruction/>.

an element of guilt for all the suffering endured by servicemen during the war and afterwards when they were not all welcomed home. At the time, much of the public and many politicians saw the military leadership as digging an ever-deeper hole for the United States—calling for more conscripts to be sent to fight a war that some government leaders believed was futile. From burning flags in the 1960s and early 1970s, the public mood has shifted to trying to honor those who give service, and soldiers returning from wars in Afghanistan and Iraq came home to a more supportive reception.

The overmilitarization of US foreign policy is even more ironic when you consider that, of all the great powers, the United States benefits from two natural barriers on either side—the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans—and friendly neighbors to the north and south. Even after the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact collapsed beginning in 1989, the US military continued to grow after a short pause, with current spending totaling more than 40 percent of all military expenditure worldwide and troops being stationed in 150 countries.<sup>12</sup> The United States has undertaken more military interventions—nine, from the ouster of Manuel Noriega in Panama to the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq—than the six significant military operations from 1945 to 1988 when the Soviet Union could be said to have presented an existential risk.<sup>13</sup> After 9/11, Bush declared a War on Terror, ignoring the advice of many terrorism experts who saw “war” as the wrong frame for fighting terrorism.<sup>14</sup>

## Shifts in Partisanship

But Republicans—more than other Americans—may be changing, in that the small or forever wars don’t now seem in favor, according to opinion polls.<sup>15</sup> While the Republican Party has been out front calling for pouring money into the DoD and praising military valor, beginning with his 2016 term, Pres-

ident Donald Trump—whose victory was helped by military veterans voting for him by a 2-to-1 margin<sup>16</sup>—brought about a sea change, as he criticized Republican and Democratic predecessors alike for their inability to shut down the forever wars.

More recently, we have seen Republicans split on support for Ukraine despite Russia’s brutal aggression against it. Some older Republicans like Sen. Mitch McConnell see parallels between Adolf Hitler and Vladimir Putin, but other Republicans, following Trump’s lead, argue that funding for Ukraine would be better spent at home. There are conflicting reports about Republican House Speaker Mike Johnson’s change of mind and decision in April 2024 to bring the Ukraine aid bill to the floor, but it seems that the intelligence<sup>17</sup> that the Biden administration showed him played an important role—along with the subtle threat that, without the bill, the Republicans would be responsible for Ukraine “los[ing] on the battlefield by the end of 2024,”<sup>18</sup> and Johnson did not want that on his conscience. This scenario is far different from what Saunders has described for past critical national security decisions. In this case, the Democratic president was the hawk and the conservative Republicans were doves, more concerned about funding for domestic ends.

Moreover, what also has changed, which Saunders hints at,<sup>19</sup> is the increasing polarization. In a fascinating 2021 study of Senate votes, Lee Drutman summarized the problems with bipartisanship:

*The political environment most senators inhabit makes public bipartisanship anywhere from difficult to politically suicidal. This is for a variety of reasons. . . . Party leaders keep most potential “bipartisan” bills from reaching the floor and, perhaps most importantly, . . . the national parties are now geographically isolated, meaning there’s minimal overlap in the interests and values the parties represent.<sup>20</sup>*

12 Anna Stavrianakis and Jan Selby, eds., *Militarism and International Relations: Political Economy, Security, Theory* (Routledge, 2013), 121–22.

13 Stavrianakis and Selby, *Militarism and International Relations*, 121–22.

14 Brian Michael Jenkins, Bruce Hoffman, and Martha Crenshaw, “How Much Really Changed About Terrorism on 9/11?,” *The Atlantic*, September 11, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/09/jenkins-hoffman-crenshaw-september-11-al-qaeda/499334/>.

15 Dina Smeltz and Craig Kafura, “Americans Grow Less Enthusiastic About Active US Engagement Abroad,” Chicago Council on Global Affairs, October 12, 2023, <https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/americans-grow-less-enthusiastic-about-active-us-engagement-abroad>.

16 Dan Lamothe, “How Swing-State Military Veterans Played a Key Role in Donald Trump Winning the White House,” *The Washington Post*, November 10, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2016/11/10/how-swing-state-veterans-played-a-key-role-in-donald-trump-winning-the-white-house/>.

17 Adam Cancryn and Jennifer Haberkorn, “How Johnson and Biden Locked Arms on Ukraine,” *Politico*, April 18, 2024, <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/04/18/biden-johnson-ukraine-aid-00153237>.

18 Cancryn and Haberkorn, “How Johnson and Biden Locked Arms on Ukraine.”

19 Saunders, *The Insiders’ Game*, 243.

20 Lee Drutman, “Why Bipartisanship in the Senate Is Dying,” *FiveThirtyEight*, September 27, 2021, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/why-bipartisanship-in-the-senate-is-dying/>.

This deep-seated partisanship has made it impossible for either party to work with the other. Cooperation is seen as a political sin. Partisanship is not new, but there's agreement among observers and congressional members that it never has reached this level in their lifetimes. Critical national security issues such as immigration and control of the borders have been politicized: "The last comprehensive immigration reform was enacted almost four decades ago, during Ronald Reagan's presidency."<sup>21</sup>

## China: An Exception to Growing Partisanship

The old dynamic described by Saunders also doesn't apply to the all-party alarm over China. Biden promised to defend Taiwan against any Chinese invasion, ending "strategic ambiguity," and for the first time, in late 2023, signed off on an admittedly small grant,<sup>22</sup> not a loan, setting a precedent for the United States to arm Taiwan. In 2024, he also provided \$345 million of military aid to Taiwan using a drawdown authority passed by Congress in December 2022, fostering "a closer military relationship."<sup>23</sup> There was no quid pro quo that Biden was after with the Republicans, as even if he sought to appeal to them for help on his domestic agenda, they would not have given it to him. The Inflation Reduction Act and COVID-19 relief passed on party line votes; only on the infrastructure bill did thirteen Republicans join in the House to ensure its passage.

Both Trump and Biden have said they don't want war, but with numerous bipartisan delegations traveling to Taipei to offer their support, there is no hiding the growing consensus on Capitol Hill that Taiwan (which China labels as an errant province) is a US strategic asset that must not fall into Beijing's hands. Some see the situation as the new Berlin Wall, in which there cannot be any compromise between the United States and China. The most vocal advocates for US protection for Taiwan against China come from the Republican right. A series of bills in 2020 and 2021,<sup>24</sup> including "a preemptive authorization for the use of military force to defend Tai-

wan, the reestablishment of the US Navy's Taiwan Patrol Force, and an end to the policy of strategic ambiguity," were introduced by a group of hawkish Republican senators and members of Congress but received Democratic support. At the same time, when the Biden administration was trying to tamp down tensions with Beijing, Pelosi made a visit to Taipei despite White House and DoD opposition.<sup>25</sup>

**More often than not, pressure to appear strong against China is bipartisan, and the competition is not between hawks and doves but over who can be harsher on China.**

Soon after Pelosi's trip to Taiwan, the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations debated the Taiwan Policy Act—legislation that had the dual sponsorship from then chair Democratic Sen. Robert Menendez and his Republican counterpart, Sen. James Risch. The legislation would have upgraded US ties with Taiwan, making Taiwan a major non-NATO ally and giving \$6 billion in defense funds, as well as preauthorizing sanctions against China in the event of its aggression. The bill was watered down but became part of the Taiwan Enhanced Resilience Act, with bipartisan support.<sup>26</sup>

As Christopher S. Chivvis and Hannah Miller write: "Those pushing for a more aggressive response have mostly had the upper hand and those who might prefer a more moderate approach have found themselves on the back foot, concerned that attempts to moderate could be portrayed as weakness or as un-American to voters."<sup>27</sup> More often than not, pressure to appear strong against China is bipartisan, and the competition is not between hawks and doves but over who can be harsher on China. In case of a Chinese invasion,

21 William A. Galston, "The Collapse of Bipartisan Immigration Reform: A Guide for the Perplexed," Brookings Institution, February 8, 2024, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-collapse-of-bipartisan-immigration-reform-a-guide-for-the-perplexed/>.

22 Rupert Wingfield-Hayes, "The US Is Quietly Arming Taiwan to the Teeth," *BBC*, November 5, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-67282107>.

23 Mark F. Cancian and Bonny Lin, "A New Mechanism for an Old Policy: The United States Uses Drawdown Authority to Support Taiwan," Center for Strategic and International Security, August 2, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/new-mechanism-old-policy-united-states-uses-drawdown-authority-support-taiwan>.

24 Christopher S. Chivvis and Hannah Miller, "The Role of Congress in US-China Relations," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 15, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/11/the-role-of-congress-in-us-china-relations?lang=en>.

25 Christine Wilkie, "Pelosi's Taiwan Trip Is a New Headache for Biden, Increases Tension with China," *CNBC*, August 2, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/08/02/white-house-struggles-to-insulate-bidens-china-policy-from-pelosis-taiwan-trip.html>.

26 Chivvis and Miller, "The Role of Congress in US-China Relations."

27 Chivvis and Miller, "The Role of Congress in US-China Relations."

the US president—no matter which party—would face strong bipartisan congressional pressure to defend Taiwan. Gone is the Republican hawk and Democratic dove dynamic that Saunders analyzed in cases running through Obama’s presidency. On China, the congressional moderates in either party are increasingly in the minority.

## But Will the American Public Go Along?

In Saunders’s examples, public opinion doesn’t play a big role—that’s why she brands foreign policy as an elite plaything. Certainly, Americans’ views of China are negative. In a 2024 Pew Research Center survey,<sup>28</sup> for the fifth year in a row “about eight-in-ten Americans report an unfavorable view of China, including 43% who hold a very unfavorable opinion.” But in a review of polls testing whether Americans would support defending Taiwan against China, only between a third and half of respondents between 2018 and 2023 said they would approve sending troops.<sup>29</sup> In the 2024 Pew poll, younger voters were less likely to see China as an enemy. And the Chicago Council on Global Affairs found in a March 2023 survey that “pluralities of these younger generations think military approaches are overused in US foreign policy.”<sup>30</sup>

A military intervention to stop a Chinese invasion would likely turn into a major war, making it a harder sell for many Americans leery of war. A 2022 Center for Strategic and International Studies wargame scenario of a Taiwan invasion by China

saw the United States succeeding in stopping China from conquering the island, but the “cost of war for all sides was high with estimates of 10,000+ total casualties. The US lost 10–20 warships, two aircraft carriers, 200–400 warplanes, and around 3,000+ troops were killed in three weeks of fighting.”<sup>31</sup> Other wargames tell the same story. In such circumstances, going to war against a nuclear China would be a domestic as well as international gamble for a US president. The war would not be fought with limited consequences at home, as happened with the forever wars. According to the economic analyst examining the 2022 wargame: “China is . . . the world’s top manufacturing hub, [and] Taiwan is the leading producer of advanced semiconductors.”<sup>32</sup> In addition, global shipping would be severely disrupted. Chinese ports accounted for roughly 40 percent of shipping volume among the world’s one hundred largest ports<sup>33</sup> in 2020. In 2022, nearly half of the global container fleet and 88 percent of the largest ships transited<sup>34</sup> through the Taiwan Strait. Taiwan is also a critical node<sup>35</sup> connecting submarine cables<sup>36</sup> from China with the rest of the world.”<sup>37</sup>

I doubt these costs and others could be covered up—unlike what happened in the lead-up to the Iraq invasion in which the Bush administration successfully dodged much discussion, firing Army Chief of Staff Gen. Eric Shinseki<sup>38</sup> when he was up-front in a congressional hearing that a much larger number of troops would be needed for the war in Iraq. Bush also let go his economic advisor, Lawrence Lindsey,<sup>39</sup> when he predicted the cost would

- 
- 28 Christine Huang, Laura Silver, and Laura Clancy, “Americans Remain Critical of China,” Pew Research Center, May 1, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2024/05/01/americans-remain-critical-of-china/>.
- 29 Russell Hsiao, “Recent Trendlines in American Public Opinion on the Defense of Taiwan,” Global Taiwan Institute, Nov. 1, 2023, <https://globaltaiwan.org/2023/11/recent-trendlines-in-american-public-opinion-on-the-defense-of-taiwan/>.
- 30 Dina Smeltz and Emily Sullivan, “Young Americans Question US Global Engagement,” Chicago Council on Global Affairs, March 22, 2023, <https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/young-americans-question-us-global-engagement>.
- 31 For information on the wargaming, see Justin Katz and Valerie Insinna, “‘A Bloody Mess’ with ‘Terrible Loss of Life’: How a China-US Conflict over Taiwan Could Play Out,” *Breaking Defense*, August 11, 2022, <https://breakingdefense.com/2022/08/a-bloody-mess-with-terrible-loss-of-life-how-a-china-us-conflict-over-taiwan-could-play-out/>.
- 32 “Semiconductor Wafer Capacity by Geographic Region (2020),” <https://any silicon.com/semiconductor-wafer-capacity-by-geographic-region-2020/>.
- 33 Lloyd’s List, “One Hundred Ports 2021,” <https://lloydslist.maritimeintelligence.informa.com/-/media/lloyds-list/images/top-100-ports-2021/top-100-ports-2021-digital-edition.pdf>.
- 34 Kevin Varley, “Taiwan Tensions Raise Risks in One of Busiest Shipping Lanes,” *Bloomberg*, August 2, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-08-02/taiwan-tensions-raise-risks-in-one-of-busiest-shipping-lanes?sref=VZPf2pAM&leadSource=uverify%20wall>.
- 35 Christine McDaniel and Weifeng Zhong, “Submarine Cables and Container Shipments: Two Immediate Risks to the US Economy If China Invades Taiwan,” Mercatus Center, August 29, 2022, <https://www.mercatus.org/research/policy-briefs/submarine-cables-and-container-shipments-two-immediate-risks-us-economy-if>.
- 36 Matthew P. Goodman and Matthew Wayland, “Securing Asia’s Subsea Network: US Interests and Strategic Options,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 5, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/securing-asias-subsea-network-us-interests-and-strategic-options>.
- 37 Gerard DiPippo, “What Are the Economic Stakes of a Taiwan Conflict?,” in Center for Strategic and International Studies, “Are Washington and Beijing on a Collision Course over Taiwan?,” October 6, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/are-washington-and-beijing-collision-course-over-taiwan>.
- 38 Nicolaus Mills, “The General Who Understood Iraq from the Start,” *Dissent*, April 25, 2008, [https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online\\_articles/the-general-who-understood-iraq-from-the-start/](https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/the-general-who-understood-iraq-from-the-start/).
- 39 James Fallows, “Paying the Cost of Iraq for Decades to Come,” *The Atlantic*, March 29, 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/03/paying-the-costs-of-iraq-for-decades-to-come/274477/>.

be \$200 billion, four times higher than the Bush administration's 2003 projections of a \$50–60 billion war. Today, the total price is estimated to be over \$3 trillion, with veterans' medical and other costs still accumulating.<sup>40</sup> With public trust in the US government at historic lows,<sup>41</sup> it's unlikely the human and economic costs of a Sino-US war could be swept under the rug. In such a war scenario, US public opinion may break through, widening the narrow elite debates that Saunders describes and finally bringing democracy to bear on foreign policy. At least that's my hope.

**Mathew Burrows** serves as counselor in the Executive Office at the Stimson Center and program lead of the Strategic Foresight Hub. He works with a broad range of partners, including the US government, other governments, businesses, non-governmental organizations, and foundations on analyzing trends and possible scenarios and their broad implications. He is coauthor of a 2023 book on the United States and China sliding into war, *Die Traumwandler: Wie China und die USA in einen neuen Weltkrieg schlittern*. In August 2013, he retired from a twenty-eight-year career in the State Department and CIA, the last ten of which were spent at the National Intelligence Council.

---

40 Joseph E. Stiglitz and Linda J. Bilmes, "The True Cost of the Iraq War: \$3 Trillion and Beyond," *The Washington Post*, September 5, 2010, <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/publications/true-cost-iraq-war-3-trillion-and-beyond>.

41 Pew Research Center, "Public Trust in Government: 1958–2024," June 24, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/06/24/public-trust-in-government-1958-2024/>.