



What Is a Winning Foreign Policy? Being the Planet's Imperial Guardian, Apparently

Doug Bandow

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With an increasingly enfeebled Joe Biden as president, Republicans are on the attack. The GOP has abandoned virtually every moral principle that it once defended, but the desire to regain power at all costs holds it together.

On foreign policy congressional Republicans have no policy other than endless war, irrespective of cost, but they sell their bloody vision of global domination as a continuation of what early Americans called "manifest destiny." The latter believed that the U.S. had been anointed by providence to rule over North America and much more. To paraphrase the biblical account of creation in Genesis, Uncle Sam "saw all that he had made, and it was very good."

Except that the world today is not very good. Consider the recent foreign policy catastrophes of Republican rule: extending the Vietnam War, blundering into Lebanon's terrible civil war, invading Iraq, attempting to nation build in Afghanistan, applying sanctions to half the known world, and abandoning the nuclear accord with Iran while launching an economic war that triggered violent Iranian retaliation. The GOP's role in destabilizing today's world is abysmal and embarrassing.

No wonder the Hudson Institute's Walter Russell Mead is distressed that Washington does not sit atop the world as it once did. He recently argued: "The harsh reality is that the US and its allies are losing ground to their adversaries, and the balance of power is moving sharply against us. Worse, many Western leaders seem to have forgotten what it means to win."

Which raises an interesting question. What does it mean to win? What are Washington's objectives? How important are they? Does winning actually matter to America?

Mead offers some guidance. He declared: "Winning means getting Russia to withdraw from Syria, the Donbas and Crimea. A diplomatic victory is when China agrees to dismantle military

bases on artificial islands in the South China Sea. Success involves getting Iran to stop arming and funding armed militias and terrorist groups in Lebanon, Syria, Yemen and Iraq."

His choices are interesting in that none of them has much to do with American security. They might be defined as wins in the sense that foreign policy is a "great game" between international powers. But not one of them much affects how Americans will live their lives tomorrow or in 50 years.

Syria is a humanitarian tragedy. But Russia is closer geographically than America to that nation and has had an alliance with Damascus for decades. Ukraine, with or without the Donbas and Crimea, spent centuries as part of the Russian Empire and then the Soviet Union. What is or is not part of Ukraine today doesn't matter much to the US or, frankly, Europe. Nor does what Ukraine is or is not part of. A democratic Ukraine free to make its own geopolitical choices is the best outcome, of course. However, hysterical warnings that Vladimir Putin is a new Hitler, ready to follow conquest of the Donbas with a march on Europe ring hollow.

The artificial islands are an obvious irritant, but not particularly useful or survivable in war. Moreover, the US claims no territory in the South China Sea and has suffered no limitation on its ability to navigate freely. The issue is of much greater concern to allied states which routinely skimp on their militaries since they expect America to arrive in an emergency.

As for Iran's role in "Lebanon, Syria, Yemen and Iraq," all of them matter to other nations far more than to the US. And America's behavior has created blowback, bringing many of its problems on itself. For instance, Lebanon's Hezbollah and Yemen's Houthis have no interest in the US other than when Washington is attacking them, such as bombarding Shia militias during the Lebanese civil war, and supporting states, Israel and Saudi Arabia, respectively, that are attacking those groups today. In Iraq the Iranian-supported militias *would not exist* but for Washington's disastrous invasion of Iraq and would have no interest in America if the US did not station troops there and use its bases *to strike the militias* as well as Iranian officials.

In Syria *it is Washington that is supporting terrorists*, including the al-Qaeda-related insurgents who currently dominate the Idlib area. Indeed, the Islamic State is an outgrowth of al-Qaeda in Iraq, which resulted from America's invasion. As for Tehran's antagonism toward America, again look to US policy. Washington helped destroy Iranian democracy (the 1953 coup), promoted decades of dictatorship in Iran (backing the Shah, who was no liberal humanitarian), supported years of brutal war against the Iranian people (aiding Saddam Hussein), constantly threatened to attack Iran and did so on occasion (shot down an airliner and assassinated a top government official), and impoverished and starved the Iranian people (endless sanctions).

How about the other side of the equation? Mead sees a lot more losing than winning:

"Losing, on the other hand, is something the West has become quite good at. Losing is watching construction continue on the Nord Stream 2 pipeline as Russia declares the country's largest opposition party an illegal conspiracy. Losing is moaning about Chinese behavior in the South China Sea as the military balance tilts toward Beijing. Losing is crafting intricate webs of ineffectual sanctions as Russia's reach and control inexorably expand. Losing is wringing one's

hands and issuing eloquent critiques as China intensifies its crackdowns in Tibet, Hong Kong and Xinjiang."

The US is a superpower with global interests. Although these issues affect America and could count as losses, none are serious. Some are barely noticed outside of Washington.

The Nord Stream 2 pipeline merely offers another transportation option for an ongoing natural gas trade – between an ally, which has not transferred its sovereignty to Washington, and Moscow, which no longer poses a serious threat to US interests. (Russia is not going to conquer Europe or nuke America. It lacks the navy to contest control of the oceans. It has little appeal to developing states. Rather, to Washington's irritation, Moscow has rebuffed the US attempt to impose a reverse Monroe Doctrine *up to Russia's borders*.) Moscow's human rights violations are real, but less severe than in many allied nations – Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Bahrain, and United Arab Emirates all enjoy Washington's favor while lacking any serious opposition parties or candidates to threaten, mistreat, or ban.

It was inevitable that the military balance would tilt toward China. Not only is it growing wealthier, but Beijing did not waste thousands of lives and trillions of dollars in moronic, counterproductive endless wars in the Middle East and is focused on its vital interests rather than attempting to run the world – such as worrying about the territorial status of Crimea and who is fighting in Syria. The latest rounds of US sanctions so far have failed everywhere, including against Russia, North Korea, Iran, Cuba, Venezuela, China, and Syria because America's allies rarely share Washington's determination and America's adversaries rarely are inclined to yield power and sacrifice national objectives even if their people are hurting.

What Beijing is doing in Hong Kong, Tibet, and Xinjiang is awful, but not nearly as bad as what China did during the Great Leap Forward and Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. Or what countries as different as Indonesia, Cambodia, Rwanda, Burundi, Liberia, Pakistan, and Yugoslavia, did to their peoples over the years. Or even what Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, with US assistance, *are doing to the people of Yemen today*. Anyway, what does Mead imagine the current administration doing other than "wringing one's hands and issuing eloquent critiques"? Invading? Bombing? Launching an economic war which no ally would join?

Mead provides no answers. He complained: "Since Russia invaded Georgia in 2008, democracies have failed to respond effectively to a long series of attacks by revisionists against the international status quo. From seizing Crimea to building illegal military bases on artificial islands, from invading Ukraine to crushing democracy in Hong Kong in a flagrant violation of international commitments, the revisionist autocracies have made one gain after another without eliciting anything like a serious allied response."

Yet there probably is nothing short of war – a real, kinetic conflict in which there would be a lot of shooting and dying – that would have made a difference. He seems to share the typical Washington conceit that all Uncle Sam need do is move his pinky finger while stating his opinion to cause foreign leaders to prostrate themselves, grovel, and apologize for their misdeeds. Alas, that is not the experience of the real world. When President Donald Trump left

office he was still waiting for Nicolas Maduro, Raul Castro, Kim Jong-un, Bashar al-Assad, and Ali Khamenei to trek to Washington to surrender.

The US foreign policy won/loss record means little in the abstract. Americans believe they know how everyone on earth should live their lives and, especially those in government, are ever willing to share their opinions with everyone else. Indeed, US officials increasingly are determined to force their views on others. However, virtually none of the issues involved have much to do with America's security and prosperity.

Worse, some of Washington's peculiar priorities interfere with more important and fundamental American interests. It is more difficult to get German support in dealing with China when Washington sanctions Berlin because Americans believe they should decide who Germans do business with. Acting as Saudi and Israeli catspaws against Iran entangles the US in a broad sectarian conflict. Constantly imposing sanctions on the entire world encourages the Europeans to join Russia and China in creating alternative payment mechanisms. Embracing Saudi Crown Prince and "slice and dice" specialist Mohammed bin Salman makes a mockery of human rights criticism of Vladimir Putin.

Ultimately, Washington is more likely to win if it adopts the idea of a "humble" foreign policy as mooted by candidate George W. Bush. America's most important objective should be to protect and advance the interests of the American people, not transform the world. The US should set priorities rather than attempt to do everything. For instance, China matters more than Russia and vastly more than the Middle East. Washington's allies will start taking care of themselves and their regions only when the US stops doing the job for them. Human rights matters, but the US can do little to force other nations to comply with its wishes. Better to focus on allies, with whom Washington has greater leverage. And so on.

As Mead argues, Joe Biden does not impress on foreign policy. However, he is pulling the US out of Afghanistan and seems to be diminishing America's role in Iraq. That is doing more good than Donald Trump, Barack Obama, and George W. Bush combined. At least Trump got through his entire term without starting a new war, which is a standard to which Biden should aspire.

The US should seek to "win" at foreign policy, but by putting the interests of the American people first while seeking to build a better world, rather than treating international affairs as a winner-take-all sports competition. Not everything matters, let alone matters equally. So far, at least, even a weak Biden looks a lot better than the endless Republican War Party.

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire.