



## **The Link Between Geography and U.S. Foreign Policy Has Grown More Complex**

Aaron David Miller

April 10, 2023

In the real estate business, the old saw goes, the key to success is all about location, location, location. But location is also central to an enterprise much further afield: foreign policy.

A decade ago, I examined this idea in a piece for Foreign Policy. I concluded that our physical location is the single most important factor in shaping our attitudes and actions abroad. Sure, location can't explain everything (no single factor can): culture, religion, politics, and the lack or presence of natural resources play roles as well, as do the vagaries of chance. But location speaks volumes about the American view of the world and how we operate in it, and if where you stand in life has a great deal to do with where you sit, then America's sitting pretty.

Having served at the Department of State during several administrations and watched events unfold over the past decade, I'm even more convinced of geography's relevance and salience in shaping the way we view the world. But I've also come to three other conclusions that make the interaction between geography and U.S. foreign policy a bit more complex.

The first concerns the overriding purpose of U.S. foreign policy. In the broadest sense, the organizing principle of any nation's foreign policy—democracy, autocracy, or something in between—is the protection of the homeland. And here America occupies a truly unique position.

With a few exceptions—in the late eighteenth century, when the young republic had three great imperial powers in its backyard, and in 1814, when the British burned much of Washington—the United States has faced no existential threats from invasion or occupation. Neither Germany's submarine warfare in the run-up to World War I nor Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor were preludes to an invasion of the United States. As traumatic and tragic as 9/11 was, jihadi terror never presented an existential threat to the country, though some would argue that nonstate actors with biological, chemical, or nuclear weapons could. Still, in the twenty-two years after 9/11, the United States has not faced a single successful terrorist attack directed by a foreign terror organization against the homeland. The real security threat, one could argue, came from within: homegrown jihadi terrorists and white nationalist extremist groups.

If the immediate threat to the homeland wasn't the motivating force for U.S. foreign policy, what was? Robert Kagan argues correctly that it wasn't any immediate serious threat to the continental United States that motivated U.S. policy in the run-up to two world wars, Korea, and Vietnam, but a defense of the liberal international order that compelled U.S. action. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were something of an outlier in the wake of 9/11. A majority of Americans supported then president George W. Bush's decision to invade, largely because they were concerned about America's security—though the threat was never existential. Later, Americans would sour on these wars as they dragged on, powered by muddled and unrealistic aspirations about stabilizing and democratizing these societies.

Increasingly, the United States projects its power abroad in defense of that much maligned liberal international order. (It's never as liberal, international, or orderly as we would like to imagine it.) We have been dedicated to creating and enforcing norms and international rules that create a favorable climate for U.S. interests too. What we

sometimes lose sight of is that much of the world sees those U.S.-defended norms as America's brand of imperialism—and even as a form of hegemony.

Today, a majority of Americans support President Joe Biden's administration's decision to arm Ukraine against Russia's invasion—not because Moscow is an immediate threat to the United States, but to maintain a world where dictators cannot impose their will on smaller powers without cost or consequence.

America's capacity to defend this liberal world flows partly from the confidence and resources it maintains because of its own unparalleled security. But we need to think very carefully, especially given our own domestic constraints, about how and when we project that power and for what purpose. In Ukraine, the United States is rightly standing fast and marshalling many like-minded allies to oppose Russian aggression. But much of the world doesn't see the Ukraine war as either the fulcrum of Western civilization to be supported as long as it takes or as a battle between democracies and autocracies that must be won at all costs. It would be the cruelest of ironies if those interventions abroad made possible because of our unrivaled security made us less secure and damaged our interests.

Second, despite the security that our geography provides, the United States tends to engage in a good deal of threat inflation, exaggerating threats to the homeland that can distort sound decisionmaking in foreign policy. At times we feel—and are made to feel by our leaders—much more insecure than we actually are. But for most Americans, the world is far, far less treacherous than it is for many others.

So what's going on? Enemies and adversaries, real or imagined, provide compelling organizing principles for the nation's foreign policy, from the Cold War to the global war on terror to current bogeymen such as Iran and China. Threat inflation drives up military budgets, aids in justifying commitments abroad that may be more discretionary than vital, and is always a convenient political device to use in the hawks-versus-doves debates that have skewed the national dialogue on security for decades. If you don't see the dangers abroad, then you're labeled as weak, an appeaser, or somehow not committed to U.S. values or interests.

The botched and chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan nonetheless served the right objective. And yet it was condemned out of fear that leaving would only heighten the odds of another major terror attack against the homeland. Yes, there was risk—we cannot hermetically seal the homeland from terror attacks. But was that a sufficient explanation to maintain thousands of U.S. troops and expend billions of dollars over the course of two decades to eliminate any possibility of a threat?

Given America's extraordinary security, it is curious that we too often imagine monsters to destroy, to paraphrase President John Quincy Adams. It's almost as if our leaders need to exaggerate threats to bring a wary public along with an interventionist foreign policy. With perhaps the best of intentions, those who believe America must lead in the world and that the world is best guaranteed by international rules favoring the United States need to portray their policies as an effort to lessen threats to the homeland.

In an intriguing article for the Cato Institute, Benjamin H. Friedman argues that nothing sells foreign policy like danger. And that requires threat inflation, which leads to an even more fascinating paradox: "security increases the sense of insecurity." To be secure, you need to be made to feel insecure so as to enhance your security. A good deal more research needs to be done on why we seem to need to scare ourselves to death in the process of separating out what really threatens us from what doesn't.

Finally, without any exaggeration, the most severe threats to the American republic have not been external, but internal: a bloody civil war that cost nearly a million lives, the unresolved problem of race in America, and the democratic backsliding we've witnessed in recent years. Against these and others, the advantages of non-predatory powers and fish for neighbors don't offer much protection. Add to that climate threats and pandemic challenges that don't respect borders and it's clear the boundaries of what has traditionally been viewed as homeland security need to be expanded.

A rising China, an aggressive Russia, a nuclear weapons-capable North Korea, and an Iran seeking to become a nuclear power represent serious threats and challenges. But the source of America's power and resilience has always been the strength of its political system, its industrial base and economy, and its political institutions. Weaknesses and

vulnerabilities in these areas directly influence America's capacity to project its power, to compete, and to offer itself up as a force for good in the world.

Sadly, of late, America's own domestic dysfunction has served to showcase not its strength and power but its deficits—delighting its adversaries and worrying its allies and friends. The Biden administration's focus on a foreign policy for the middle class has started an important conversation about the need to look inward and to repair some of what ails us without retreating to solipsistic, isolationist policies that undermine the importance of America's role in the world.

Nonetheless, we must take advantage of the extraordinary security that nature has bestowed on us in terms of our geographic position to prioritize our own broken house. We ignore our domestic challenges at our own peril. At times it feels like we've seen the enemy, and it's us. In 1838, then president Abraham Lincoln said it best:

Shall we expect some transatlantic military giant, to step the Ocean, and crush us at a blow? Never!—All the armies of Europe, Asia and Africa combined, with all the treasure of the earth (our own excepted) in their military chest; with a Buonaparte for a commander, could not by force, take a drink from the Ohio, or make a track on the Blue Ridge, in a trial of a thousand years.

At what point then is the approach of danger to be expected? I answer, if it ever reach us, it must spring up amongst us. It cannot come from abroad. If destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of freemen, we must live through all time, or die by suicide.

Despite its many transgressions abroad, the United States has been—and can continue to be—a force for good in the world. We remain the most powerful and consequential actor on the world stage and are likely to retain the best balance of political, economic, military, and soft power for some time to come. We need to be smart and humble about how we use that power, avoid overreaching, and never forget to tend to our own house—the true source of our power. And we must always remember, as we use that power, that not everyone in this world is lucky enough to have friends and fish for neighbors.

