

Creating an Effective and Ethical Foreign Policy

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When partnerships with authoritarian allies do become necessary, Washington's association should be the minimum required to achieve crucial goals. The United States has fared best when it has pursued cautious, limited and pragmatic relationships with autocratic allies. Richard Nixon's rapprochement with China in the 1970s fit that description. That move altered the global balance of diplomatic and geopolitical power in the Cold War. The rapprochement forced the Soviet Union to turn its attention from applying pressure on the democratic West because it now had to deal with another adversary working in cooperation with Washington. However, most U.S. officials did not delude themselves or try to deceive the American people about the nature of China's regime. They recognized that it was a ruthless one-party state. Nor did Washington seek to make Beijing a close ally on issues other than countering Soviet power and influence. The two countries were allies of convenience, nothing more. That pragmatic Cold War relationship with Beijing ought to be the model for those other, relatively rare, occasions when a security partnership with an authoritarian regime might be necessary.

Minimize the occasions for entanglements that undermine American values by reassessing U.S. interests and global position. U.S. leaders have a track record of exaggerating threats to America's security and interests in order to, among other goals, justify partnerships with unsavory regimes and political movements. Part of the problem is the carryover of a mindset from World War II and the early Cold War period when powerful enemies did pose a significant security threat. But the situation today is substantially different—and it has been for several decades.

With an enviable geographic position (weak and friendly neighbors to the north and south and vast oceans on both flanks), the largest economy in the world, a conventional military establishment far superior to any competitor and a huge, sophisticated nuclear deterrent, the United States is the most secure great power in history. The lack of an existential, or even a serious, threat means that U.S. leaders have extraordinarily latitude to adopt policies that minimize America's involvement in quarrels in other parts of the world. That factor also means that

only on rare occasions should Washington have to face the dilemma of forging close relationships with authoritarian partners. In most instances, an arm's-length relationship with such regimes is all that is necessary or appropriate. Adopting a more restrained foreign policy would greatly reduce the number of occasions when policy makers have to confront a conflict between America's tangible interests and its fundamental values.

Polling data [also indicate that](#) the American public would like to see the adoption of a more [selective, restrained policy](#). In this instance, the instincts of ordinary Americans more accurately reflect international realities than the views of the "best and brightest" in the foreign-policy community. Washington needs to adopt a global role worthy of pervasive public support—a policy that is more effective and far more ethical than has been the case in recent decades.

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