

The Return of Great-Power Diplomacy

How Strategic Dealmaking Can Fortify American Power

A. WESS MITCHELL

Since returning to office in January, U.S. President Donald Trump has sparked an intense debate about the role of diplomacy in American foreign policy. In less than three months, he initiated bold diplomatic overtures to all three of Washington's main adversaries. He opened talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin about ending the war in Ukraine, is communicating with Chinese leader Xi Jinping about holding a summit, and sent a letter to Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei about bringing that country's nuclear program to an end. In parallel, his administration has made it plain that it intends to renegotiate the balance of benefits and burdens in Washington's alliances to ensure greater reciprocity.

Trump's opening moves have drawn howls of protest and prompted accusations of appeasement. But the fact is that Washington was in dire

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need of a new kind of diplomacy. After the end of the Cold War, the United States moved away from using negotiations to promote the national interest. Convinced that history had ended and that they could remake the world in America's image, successive U.S. presidents came to rely on military and economic force as the primary tools of foreign policy. When they did use diplomacy, it was usually not to enhance U.S. power but to try to build a global paradise in which multilateral institutions would supplant countries and banish war entirely.

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For a time, the United States could get away with such negligence. In the 1990s and the early years of this century, Washington was so powerful that it could achieve its aims without old-fashioned diplomacy. But those days are gone. The United States no longer possesses a military that is capable of fighting and defeating all its foes simultaneously.

It cannot drive another great power to ruin through sanctions. Instead, it lives in a world of continent-size rivals with formidable economies and militaries. Great-power war, absent for decades, is again a real possibility.

In this dangerous setting, the United States will need to rediscover diplomacy in its classical form—not as a bag carrier for an all-powerful military or as a purveyor of global norms, but as a hard-nosed instrument of strategy. For millennia, great powers have used diplomacy in this way to forestall conflict, recruit new partners, and splinter enemy coalitions. The United States must take a similar path, using talks and deals to limit its own burdens, constrain its enemies, and recalibrate regional balances of power. And that requires engaging with rivals and reworking alliances so that Washington does not need to take the lead in confronting Beijing and Moscow simultaneously.

Talking with China and Russia and insisting on reciprocity from friends is therefore necessary. If done right, it could help manage the gaps between the United States' finite means and the virtually infinite threats arrayed against it, something many other great powers have used diplomacy to accomplish. Indeed, the essence of diplomacy in strategy is to rearrange power in space and time so that countries avoid tests of strength beyond their ability. There is no magic formula for how to get this right, and there is no guarantee that Trump's approach will succeed. But the alternative—attempting to overpower everybody—is not viable,

and a good deal riskier. In other words, strategic diplomacy is the best shot America has at shoring up its position for protracted competition.

ANCIENT WISDOM

In the summer of 432 BC, the leaders of Sparta gathered to consider whether to go to war with Athens. For months, tensions had been building between the two city-states as the Athenians clashed with Sparta's friends and the Spartans sat idly by. Now a group of hawks, egged on by the allies, were eager for action.

But Archidamus II, Sparta's aging king, suggested something different: diplomacy. Talks, Archidamus told the assembly, could forestall conflict while Sparta worked to make new allies and strengthen its hand domestically.

I do bid you not to take up arms at once, but to send and remonstrate with [the Athenians] in a tone not too suggestive of war, nor again too suggestive of submission, and to employ the interval in perfecting our own preparations. The means will be, first, the acquisition of allies, Hellenic or barbarian it matters not . . . [,] and secondly, the development of our home resources. If they listen to our embassy, so much the better; but if not, after the lapse of two or three years our position will have become materially strengthened. . . . Perhaps by that time the sight of our preparations, backed by language equally significant will have disposed [the Athenians] to submission, while their land is still untouched, and while their counsels may be directed to the retention of advantages as yet undestroyed.

At first, Archidamus's address did not sway the assembly; the Spartans voted for war. But in the weeks that followed, the city realized it was unready for battle, and the old man's wisdom sank in. Sparta sent envoys far and wide to slow the rush to war and pull other city-states to its side. When war came a year later, Sparta was in a better position to wage it. And when Sparta triumphed two decades later, it was not because it had the better army but because it had assembled a bigger and better array of allies—including an old archenemy, Persia—than did Athens.

Archidamus's suggestions have worked for countless other great powers over the centuries. Consider, first, using diplomacy to buy time and prepare for war. When new barbarian tribes appeared, the Romans, the Byzantines, and the Song dynasty all made it a practice to send envoys in an effort to buy time for replenishing armories and granaries. The Roman Emperor Domitian struck a truce with the Dacians that allowed

Rome to recollect its strengths until a new emperor, Trajan, was ready for war a decade later. Venice brokered a long peace with the Ottomans after the fall of Constantinople to beef up its fleets and fortresses. And the French chief minister Cardinal Richelieu used diplomacy to stall with Spain for nearly a decade so that France could mobilize.

Archidamus's next suggestion—form alliances to constrain the enemy's options—has been similarly enduring. The French kings allied with the heretic Lutherans and infidel Ottomans to restrict their fellow Catholic Habsburgs. The Habsburgs allied with the Bourbons to constrain the Prussians. Edwardian Britain cooperated with its colonial rivals France and Russia to join forces against imperial Germany.

In each of these cases, success meant cultivating favorable balances of power in critical regions. This is perhaps the core purpose of strategic diplomacy—and what allows countries to project power far beyond their material capabilities. The Vienna system engineered by Austrian Foreign Minister (and later Chancellor) Klemens von Metternich used the balance of power to extend his empire's position as a great power well beyond its natural lifespan. German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck pulled off a similar feat in the late nineteenth century. By cutting deals with Austria, Russia, and the United Kingdom, he was able to isolate France and avoid a two-front war that might have strangled the German empire in its infancy.

These leaders never tried to forge partnerships based on anything other than shared interests. They did not believe they could transform hostile countries into friendly ones through logic and reason. They certainly never believed that diplomacy could overcome irreconcilable visions of how the world should be. Their goal was to limit rivals' options, not seek to remove the sources of conflict. Departing from that logic can lead to catastrophe, as occurred when British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain met with German leader Adolf Hitler in 1938. Rather than use diplomacy to amplify the domestic and international constraints on Hitler, Chamberlain weakened them by giving him what he wanted in hopes that German expansionism would then cease. Doing so emboldened Berlin and paved the way for World War II.

The United States made a similar mistake in the 1990s. Instead of trying to constrain a rising Beijing after the Soviet Union fell, Washington used commercial diplomacy to remove the barriers constraining Chinese economic expansion. U.S. officials negotiated Beijing's accession to the World Trade Organization and opened U.S. markets to

Chinese companies. Doing so, Washington thought, would transform China into a liberal democracy. But instead, Beijing exploited this opening to consolidate control, get rich, and gain the economic upper hand over other countries. Today, China's manufacturing dominance is so profound that even the American military is dependent on many Chinese-made products. As a result, Washington's options would be greatly constrained during a war with Beijing.

DELUSIONS OF GRANDEUR

The American post-Cold War approach to China came about because U.S. leaders believed they no longer needed strategic diplomacy. By the 1990s, after all, there were no more great powers with which to compete. With the Soviet Union's collapse, the United States enjoyed a margin of superiority that would have been unimaginable to earlier great powers. Instead of trying to shape the behavior of rivals, Washington embraced the much more expansive goal of transforming them into liberal societies.

In this unusual setting, most American officials adopted one of two attitudes toward diplomacy. The first camp believed the world was moving toward a globalized utopia and saw diplomacy as a means of speeding that process by building rules and institutions above the level of the state. The second believed the United States could attain comprehensive security through military-technological means and saw diplomacy as a quixotic or pusillanimous enterprise that dishonored and weakened the country.

Both these notions predate the end of the Cold War. For all his legendary realism, U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger was an idealist who believed that the job of American diplomats was to eventually create a world federation. U.S. President Ronald Reagan, hardly a merchant of peace at any price, found his photograph juxtaposed next to that of Chamberlain in a full-page ad (paid for by Republican hawks) in *The Washington Times* after he embarked on nuclear talks with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. After the Berlin Wall came down, both notions flourished. Liberals saw the Soviet collapse as evidence that paradise was nigh, and hard-liners saw it as evidence that diplomacy was not needed. Diplomacy had been declared dead before, but never had the rigor mortis been so advanced.

But rumors of history's demise were premature. Liberalism, it turns out, did not expunge geopolitics from the human story. China, Iran, and Russia did not transform into liberal societies. On the contrary, they

all became confident, civilizational states that remain determined to dominate their regions. Today, great-power rivalry is back, and systemic war is a very real possibility.

Neither liberals nor hawks have viable solutions to this problem. All the international institutions in the world can't prevent a shooting war between the United States and China or Russia or both. And as the last two National Defense Strategies acknowledge, the U.S. military is not postured or equipped to fight wars against two major rivals at the same time. Washington can and should reinvest in its military. But thanks to China's and Russia's advances and the enormous U.S. deficit, it would require a generational effort to make the American military into one capable of matching all its enemies simultaneously.

To compensate, Washington will have to return to strategic diplomacy. It must, as Archidamus would say, remonstrate with its adversaries in "a tone not too suggestive of war, nor again too suggestive of submission," and use the interval gained to get alliances and home resources into a better state for war in the hope of avoiding it. Like past great powers, Washington can start by reducing tensions with the weaker of its main rivals in order to concentrate on the stronger. That is what Kissinger and his boss, U.S. President Richard Nixon, did when they warmed ties with Beijing so the United States could better focus on Moscow in the early 1970s.

Today, the weaker rival is Russia. This has become all too obvious as Ukraine has chewed through Moscow's military resources. The United States should thus aim to use Russia's depleted state to its advantage, seeking a *détente* with Moscow that disadvantages Beijing. The goal should be not to remove the sources of conflict with Russia but to place constraints on its ability to harm U.S. interests.

This process should begin by bringing the war in Ukraine to an end in a way that is favorable to the United States. That means that when all is said and done, Kyiv must be strong enough to impede Russia's westward advances. To achieve this end, the American officials negotiating a peace agreement should learn from the failure of the 2022 Istanbul talks between Kyiv and Moscow, which treated a political settlement as the goal and worked backward toward a cease-fire. Doing that enabled Russia to make its political demands—neutering the Ukrainian state through caps on the size of its army and changing its constitution—a

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precondition to peace. A better model would be 1950s Korea: to prioritize an armistice and push questions about a wider settlement into a separate process that could take years to bear fruit, if it ever does. Washington should still be willing to push the Ukrainians to cede territory when doing so is necessary. But it should make Ukrainian sovereignty a precondition for talks and use U.S. sanctions, military assistance, and seized Russian assets to bring Moscow around.

The United States should pursue a defense relationship with Ukraine akin to the one it maintains with Israel: not a formal alliance, but an agreement to sell, lend, or give Kyiv what it needs to defend itself. But it should not grant Ukraine NATO membership. Instead, the United States should push European states to take responsibility for Ukraine—and for the security of their continent more generally.

To nudge Europe along, American policymakers can again learn from the Nixon administration, which developed a doctrine whereby the United States agreed to provide nuclear protection for its treaty allies in the secondary region (then Asia, now Europe) but expected local states to provide their own conventional defense. As an economic corollary, Nixon's treasury secretary, John Connally, pressured allies to lower restrictions on U.S. goods and increase the value of their currencies to boost American industry. Today, a Nixon-style arrangement might entail a new transatlantic grand bargain in which the United States provides extended deterrence and certain strategic systems to Europe but allies provide the bulk of the frontline fighting capabilities. In the economic domain, Washington might demand reciprocity in market access and stipulate that allies can benefit from U.S. innovation only if they nix regulatory standards that impede it. The goal should be to get allies to accept American standards, not vice versa, and to collectively train the West's sights on Beijing.

So far, the Trump administration seems to be moving in this direction. It persuaded both Russia and Ukraine to pause attacks on each other's energy infrastructure. It upped its leverage, including by convincing Saudi Arabia to increase oil production and by ending Biden's exemption of energy-related banking transactions from sanctions. It signed a mineral deal with Ukraine that increases the connection between the two countries without making Washington responsible for Kyiv's defense. And its sterner tone toward Europe has prompted the continent's largest increase in defense spending in generations: nearly \$1 trillion. Trump's opening tariffs have roiled the Europeans

but could also restart talks about a new transatlantic grand bargain in trade for the first time in a decade. All this may well lead to better outcomes for the United States, provided that Washington keeps its eyes on the prize—which is not disruption itself, but disruption in service of strategic renovation.

DIVIDE AND CONQUER

Once the United States has secured an end to the war in Ukraine, American diplomats can begin more actively trying to complicate Moscow's relationship with Beijing. This, too, will prove tricky. It is unlikely that Russia can be cleaved entirely from China: the countries have more in the way of shared interests, and a more genial political connection, than when Nixon traveled to Beijing. But their interests are not identical. Russia has become very dependent on China since the start of the war in Ukraine, and dependence in geopolitics always chafes. Russia's financial and technological dependence on China, in particular, has increased significantly as a result of the war. The Chinese are also supplanting Russia in its accustomed sphere of influence in Central Asia. And they have obtained a controlling stake in the infrastructure of Siberia and Russia's Far East, to the extent that Moscow's real sovereignty in those places is increasingly in doubt.

This raises an old dilemma for Moscow: whether it is a primarily European or Asian power. Washington should exploit that tension. The goal is not to woo Russia into a conciliatory stance, much less convert it into a U.S. ally, but to create the conditions for it to pursue an eastward rather than westward vector in its foreign policy. U.S. officials should resist Russian efforts to forge a new grand bargain that would involve American concessions in eastern NATO states, which would confirm Russia's westward vector, and instead seek a compartmentalized détente aimed at heightening the constraints on Russia in areas in which its interests are at odds with the United States' and relaxing constraints in areas in which they align. To do so, Washington might lift restrictions preventing Asian allies from offering investment alternatives to China in Russia's eastern territories if Moscow meets U.S. demands on Ukraine.

The same logic should extend to arms control. Because of attrition suffered in its invasion of Ukraine, Russia will need to reconstitute its conventional armed forces, which could require diverting funds from its long-range nuclear arsenal. The situation is reminiscent of the

mid-1980s, when the Soviet Union faced financial pressure to reduce spending on strategic nuclear weapons. Reagan used this as an opportunity to strike a new arms deal with Gorbachev, a model Trump might replicate by offering Moscow a revised arms control framework that sets stricter limits than the countries' previous accord. The goal should be to force the Russians to accept risk in their strategic arsenal to reduce U.S. two-peer deterrence requirements. Washington could then turn most of its nuclear attention to Beijing's buildup. Such an agreement could also create daylight between China and Russia by foiling the former's desire to see the United States saddled with an arms race in Europe.

Washington can use strategic diplomacy to deal with another potential nuclear threat: Iran. The United States has a strong interest in derailing that country's ambitions while limiting the need for future American military interventions in the region. The prospects for success have been enhanced by Israel's recent neutralization of Iranian proxies and air defenses, which gives Washington a chance to expand on the template of the Abraham Accords by fostering Israeli-Saudi normalization. Israel's successful regional military campaign also means the United States can peel off old Iranian surrogates like Lebanon and Syria. In Syria, success will require that U.S. diplomacy promote an internal balance of power that gives a role to the Kurds while keeping Islamist factions backed by Turkey and Qatar at bay. At the same time, the United States should work with Turkey on areas of shared interest, such as Ukraine, and encourage reconciliation between Turkey and U.S. allies such as Greece, Israel, and Saudi Arabia.

The prospects for successful American diplomacy with Iran will increase in proportion to the overall position of strength that the new administration is able to assemble across the region. Although it is hard to imagine Iran giving up its nuclear program, the moment to attempt a gambit like the one Trump made with his recent letter to Khamenei is now, when Tehran holds weaker cards, and the U.S. better ones, than has been the case in a very long time.

POSITION OF STRENGTH

Then there is China. That country poses the stiffest challenge of perhaps any rival in American history. U.S. officials will not be able to contain China in the way they did the Soviet Union; it is simply too

large and too integrated into the world economy. But Washington should try in every way possible to isolate it by turning off its viable options for forming anti-American coalitions. The goal of U.S. diplomacy should be to build the biggest coalitions possible against Beijing while amassing a position of domestic economic strength and, on that basis, seeking a new *modus vivendi* that favors American interests.

Ground zero for such a strategy is Asia. China is flanked in all directions by countries with which it has tense relations. India and

Nepal have land disputes with China; Japan, the Philippines, and Vietnam have arguments with China at sea. American diplomacy should use these dynamics to encourage a regional balance of power that limits Chinese options for military expansion.

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So far, the United States has a mixed track record in this respect. President Joe Biden's administration nominally continued the first

Trump administration's emphasis on treating Beijing as Washington's primary competitor. It ramped up rhetorical support for Taiwan; expanded cooperation with the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or the Quad, comprising Australia, India, the United Kingdom, and the United States; deepened defense cooperation with the Philippines; and worked to mend rifts between Japan and South Korea. But all these initiatives took shape as Washington cut back the U.S. military presence in Asia to focus on crises in Europe and the Middle East. The result was a gap between U.S. rhetoric and capabilities. With Taiwan, for example, the Biden administration broke with its predecessors in undermining strategic ambiguity but simultaneously diverted U.S. military strength to Europe and the Middle East. Washington also sought more help from its Pacific allies for objectives far away from Asia, such as weapons for Ukraine and participation in sanctions against Russia.

With China, the gap between the Biden administration's rhetoric and its capabilities created a paradoxical situation in which the United States positioned itself as both provocative and weak. The White House was provocative in that it talked a big game on disputes such as the future of Taiwan, but it was weak because it reduced the U.S. regional military presence. The lack of respect from China was clear starting in March 2021, when the senior Chinese foreign policy official Yang Jiechi harangued U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken

at a meeting in Anchorage about promoting U.S. democracy. What followed was four years of what some have called “zombie diplomacy,” in which China presented the Biden administration with two options that, for Beijing, were both wins. In one, Washington could relinquish its support for Taiwan, reduce the U.S. military presence in the region, and open U.S. markets and investment to China in exchange for a working relationship. The other was military confrontation. Washington, for its part, treated the preservation of the relationship as an end in itself. It also tried to rope off climate change from geopolitics, which the Chinese refused to do. As a result, the United States encumbered itself with emissions restrictions that hurt American industries as China continued building coal-fired power plants. These missteps meant the Biden administration never managed to create a position of strength for effective bilateral diplomacy.

Going forward, the U.S. approach should be the reverse: to minimize rhetoric and maximize actions that enhance Washington’s leverage for direct diplomacy. At home, that means increasing energy production, reducing the deficit, and deregulating to strengthen the economy. In Asia, it means pressing for greater reciprocity with allies in tariffs and sharing the defense burden, as well as strengthening the United States’ military deterrent in the Indo-Pacific. The goal of pressing friends should be to recalibrate these alliances so that they are more beneficial to Washington and, over time, to draw them more deeply into the U.S. financial and military-industrial systems. The goal of strengthening Washington’s presence should be to reassure partners that U.S. pressure is designed to create stronger alliances, not to pave the way for abandonment, as well as to ensure that resisting China is viable for countries that are frightened by Beijing.

As it strengthens its alliances, the Trump administration should pay particular attention to India. The Biden administration failed to properly activate New Delhi against Beijing because it was too busy fighting with India’s government over unrelated things. The White House, for example, threatened sanctions on India for purchasing Russian weapons and levied them on Indian companies for buying Russian oil. It also criticized New Delhi on human rights grounds (although less than some of its progressive critics would have liked) and brought pressure to bear on a pro-Indian government in Bangladesh, whose subsequent ouster may now ease the way for Chinese inroads in Southeast Asia.

The Trump administration should instead pull India closer to the United States. It should treat New Delhi as an ally on the level of Japan or of NATO partners when it comes to technology transfers, and it should try to ramp up plans for an economic corridor running from India to the Middle East to Europe as a counter to China's Belt and Road Initiative. It should jettison the Biden administration's practice of criticizing India for perceived democratic backsliding and explore a pledge of political support and defense cooperation to New Delhi as it tries to protect its territory from China and Pakistan.

Washington should use the strength generated by rebuilding itself at home and forging better alliances abroad to negotiate for a more favorable balance of power with Beijing. For instance, the Trump administration might use its improved position to insist on a reduced trade deficit with China and expanded access for American financial institutions operating there. It could encourage Chinese investment in targeted industries in the United States. Washington could even attempt a currency revaluation that would benefit both countries. China already wants a stronger renminbi so it can be used to help settle regional transactions, and a weaker dollar could support the U.S. administration's efforts at reindustrialization.

There is no contradiction for Washington between engaging with China and attempting to rebalance relations with Indo-Pacific allies. Great powers throughout history have often found that rivals can act as a productive fillip to friends. Bismarck, for example, used talks with Russia to prompt Austria, Germany's treaty ally, to strengthen its military—which in turn pushed Russia toward accepting Bismarck's demands. The key is making sure that allies know there is a limit to how far their patron's engagement with adversaries will go. Diplomacy with adversaries is about gaining temporary advantages that constrain the other side; diplomacy with allied states is about longer-term entanglements that give the central power more freedom. Calibrating the two in a way that motivates allies but does not alienate them is the art of diplomacy.

So far, the Trump administration's moves with China augur well. The White House is holding out the possibility of a summit with Xi, but it has been coy about the timing. In the interim, it has concentrated on amassing leverage through tariffs and by prioritizing the Indo-Pacific in new defense spending plans. Should détente with Russia, U.S. efforts to rebalance its portfolios with allies, and the use

of diplomacy in the Middle East pay off, Washington will enjoy an even stronger position vis-à-vis Beijing.

All of these policies will, of course, take time to bear fruit. But if the administration can combine the threads effectively, the United States will have the best shot at restructuring its relationship with China since the 1990s, when it fatefully opened up to its adversary.

BACK TO BASICS

The United States is bound to confront many challenges as it works to revive strategic diplomacy as a tool of foreign policy. But in comparison with those of earlier great powers, the country's circumstances are auspicious. The United States has a unique ability, rooted in its open political system, meritocratic society, and dynamic economy, to undo unforced errors and rejuvenate itself as a global power. Diplomacy can help this effort along by translating these advantages into strategic gains in key regions that improve the U.S. position for long-term competition.

For strategic diplomacy to work, however, the United States must get back to basics—as U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio is endeavoring to do. Its Foreign Service officers should be schooled in negotiation as a core competency; they currently are not. They should all be trained in military and economic matters, which is also not happening. U.S. diplomatic funding and priorities should be brought tightly into alignment with the National Security Strategy. And American diplomats should be barred from promoting progressive causes that embolden opponents and undermine friends—causes that most Americans do not support.

This reemphasis will disappoint those who think that diplomacy's primary role is to promote values or create rules and structures above the level of the state. That fallacy is now deeply entrenched in the U.S. mindset, thanks to generations of leaders who believed that diplomacy would create a liberal utopia. But humanity is not progressing toward an apotheosis. War and competition are permanent realities. The job of diplomacy is not to transcend geopolitics but to succeed at it. Diplomacy is neither capitulation nor the doorway to nirvana. It is an instrument of strategy that states use to survive amid the pressure of competition. When applied with skill, it can produce benefits that far exceed the costs. And in these dangerous times, that is worth rediscovering. 🌐