



QUINCY INSTITUTE  
FOR RESPONSIBLE  
STATECRAFT

# Ending Primacy to End U.S. Wars

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# Executive Summary

- If America’s decision-makers are to learn from the Iraq War (2003–11), they must recognize it not as an aberration or an isolated mistake, but as a direct consequence of the U.S. search for primacy in the Middle East. The Iraq War was overdetermined in that tensions between the U.S. and Iraq were rooted fundamentally in Iraq’s perceived challenge to U.S. regional dominance. Consequently, in the “unipolar moment,” a U.S. effort to change the regime in Baghdad was bound to occur after some spark, such as the September 11 attacks, set it in motion.
- Today, a similar desire to sustain dominance in Asia places the U.S. on a collision course with China. To avoid war with China, policy elites must reconceive their commitment to primacy and recognize that the United States will not be able to dictate terms in its relations with others in an emergent multipolar world.
- Some competition between the United States and China is probably inevitable. But this competition does not present an existential threat to the U.S. and therefore must not be allowed to prevent necessary cooperation to address the major threats of the 21st century: inequality, population movements, pandemics, and climate change.

## Introduction

The United States has been a territorially, culturally, and economically expansionist power for the whole of its history.<sup>1</sup> In the early 1940s, decision-makers in Washington embraced a grand strategy of “armed primacy” — that is, the pursuit of global dominance based on military superiority and expressed in policies that presume domestic and global peace and prosperity depend on the United States being the

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<sup>1</sup> Grandin, Greg. *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America*. New York. Metropolitan Books, 2019.

world's strongest power. Throughout the Cold War and post-Cold War periods, U.S. officials pursued primacy, which engendered numerous wars and interventions.<sup>2</sup>

The Gulf War of 1990–91 was of particular importance in this context: It was the opening salvo in an attempt to create a post-Cold War order with the United States as its sole center of power. The quick victory over Iraq, its popularity among elites and the public, and broad international participation in the operation demonstrated to U.S. officials that wars could be fought relatively cheaply, humanely, and easily. The Gulf War also provided a *bête noire* for policymakers in the person of Saddam Hussein – whose bravado and anti-American attitude led many U.S. elites to compare him with Hitler as an existential threat to U.S. security interests. Put another way, the United States' swift victory in the Gulf War indicated to many observers that the U.S. could serve as the world's policeman and, in President George H.W. Bush's evocative phrase, establish a "new world order" with the United States as the prime military power.

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As U.S. elites embraced the new world order, it was crucial to them that America brook no challenges to it, even by smaller states. Though defeated in the Gulf War, Iraq was such a state throughout the 1990s and early 2000s: Saddam remained in power and in control of a strong military that served as a constant (perceived) threat to U.S. dominance in the region. This was a major reason that only a precipitating incident was needed to produce a confrontation, which the September 11, 2001, attacks provided.

Despite the failures that the pursuit of primacy generated – most obviously the 2003 invasion of Iraq, but also the invasion of Afghanistan two years earlier and the NATO intervention in Libya in 2011 – the United States remains committed to the primacy

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<sup>2</sup> While primacy had been adopted as a strategy in the 1940s, the existence of the Soviet Union meant that, in practice, the United States did not have the ability to be a genuinely global hegemon until after the U.S.S.R.'s collapse.

grand strategy. This is especially apparent in its increasingly hostile relationship with China, a country that many U.S. elites argue seeks hegemony in East Asia — an outcome the Trump and Biden administrations have both attempted to prevent. It is inevitable, given the present geopolitical context, that the United States and China will compete for regional and even global influence. But this competition must not be allowed to explode into war.

Indeed, the United States must reconceive its fundamental commitment to primacy and recognize that, in the emergent multipolar world, it can no longer dictate terms in its relations with others as it has in the past. The U.S.–China competition presents the most pressing case in point. The United States must embrace a more constructive position toward the People’s Republic that respects its emergent status and creates the conditions that will enable the cooperation necessary to address the primary threats of the 21st century: inequality, population movements, pandemics, and climate change. This holds not only in East Asia, but in other regions and relationships as well.

Competition, in other words, must not be allowed to prevent cooperation. Even as the United States competes with China, it needs to establish conditions that, first, ensure this competition is constrained and, second, enable the creation of novel international and regional institutions that incentivize exchange. The coming multilateral world has the potential to engender innovative forms of transnational and international interaction. For this to occur, however, the United States must rethink its commitment to a strategy of armed primacy.

To take another obvious case, it is important to recognize that Washington’s response to Russia’s recent invasion of Ukraine must not be to sustain American military hegemony. On the contrary, the pursuit of primacy is a key reason the United States’ global position has declined — which, in turn, arguably emboldened the Kremlin’s ambitions in Ukraine. Additional investments in the illusion of global American hegemony will only advance this trend.

## U.S. primacy and intervention, 1776 to 1989

From its beginnings as a settler-colonial nation, the United States has been an expansionist power. Over the course of the 19th century, it pressed its boundaries relentlessly westward across the continent, displacing indigenous tribes. It then dominated the Western Hemisphere through both economic and military means. After the Spanish–American War of 1898, U.S. officials seized Spain’s colonies in the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam. Today, the United States retains formal control over five populated territories: American Samoa, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

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By World War I, the United States was the unquestioned hegemon in the Western Hemisphere. But it was only in 1940 that U.S. elites began to think global primacy was possible. The main cause for this shift was the fall of France in the summer of 1940. As Stephen Wertheim has documented, France’s rapid collapse in the face of the Nazis’ onslaught persuaded American elites in and out of government that America’s and the world’s peace and prosperity depended on the achievement of U.S. “armed primacy”—not only in the Western Hemisphere but in most of the world as well.<sup>3</sup> The fact that France’s fall rapidly followed the radical expansion of Japan’s war against China in 1937 — when the Imperial Army moved from low-level skirmishes around Manchukuo to a full-scale invasion of the mainland — underlined the perceived need for global dominance in face of authoritarian militarism. The idea was that if the United States failed to achieve primacy, an antiliberal and antidemocratic power would do so, engendering war, economic competition, and other deleterious outcomes.

This belief intensified considerably during the early Cold War, when U.S. policymakers were convinced that containing and reducing Soviet power around the globe was

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<sup>3</sup> Wertheim, Stephen. *Tomorrow, the World: The Birth of U.S. Global Supremacy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020.

essential for the United States' security. They thus pursued armed primacy around the world through U.S. military buildups and expansive and novel military alliances such as NATO, SEATO (Southeast Asia's short-lived equivalent of NATO), and CENTO (otherwise known as the Baghdad Pact, which brought together countries in the Middle East and Central Asia). For much of the Cold War period, however, it was not possible for the United States to dominate regions in the communist sphere of influence. U.S. elites thus refused to intervene overtly when the Soviet Union put down resistance in East Germany (1953), Hungary (1956), and Czechoslovakia (1968), as decision-makers considered these states to be in the Soviet sphere.

*Compared with earlier eras of U.S. history, the Cold War decades – the first period in which the United States attempted to secure armed primacy – were by far the most violent when it came to foreign affairs.*

But in regions or nations that American policymakers believed were under their rightful purview – Korea and Vietnam, for instance – decision-makers spent an enormous amount of time and money, and deployed increasing amounts of force, to keep countries on their side. As Lindsey O'Rourke has shown, during the Cold War the United States attempted to overthrow foreign regimes dozens of times.<sup>4</sup> In the cases of North Korea (1950), Lebanon (1958), the Dominican Republic (1965), Grenada (1983), Libya (1986), and Panama (1989), the United States did so overtly. But in most instances, U.S. officials preferred covert means to impose regime change. In an astonishing 66 cases, the United States planned or tried to topple regimes covertly; it succeeded 25 times.<sup>5</sup> To take a related dataset, Sidita Kushi and Monica Duffy Toft of Tufts University's Military Intervention Project have established that from 1946 to 1989, the United States mounted foreign interventions 119 times, including full-scale wars in Korea

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<sup>4</sup> O'Rourke, Lindsey. *Covert Regime Change: America's Secret Cold War*. Ithaca. Cornell University Press, 2018. 3.

<sup>5</sup> These plans succeeded in France (1947–52), Italy (1947–68, 1972–73), Iran (1952–53), Guatemala (1952–54), Japan (1952–68), Lebanon (1957–58), Congo (1960), Dominican Republic (1960–61, 1961–62, 1965–68), British Guyana (1961–71), Chile (1962–73, 1984–89), Bolivia (1963–66, 1971), South Vietnam (1963, 1967–71), Brazil (1964), Portugal (1974–75), Afghanistan (1979–89), Nicaragua (1980–89), Chad (1981–82), Poland (1981–89), and the Philippines (1984–86). See O'Rourke. *Covert Regime Change*. 3.

(1950–1953) and Vietnam (1954–1975).<sup>6</sup> Compared with earlier eras of U.S. history, the Cold War decades — the first period in which the United States attempted to secure armed primacy — were by far the most violent when it came to foreign affairs.<sup>7</sup>

## The Gulf War and its aftermath

When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, European communist regimes disintegrated and the Cold War ended. Two years later, the Soviet Union collapsed, leaving the United States the undisputed global superpower. But even before the Soviet Union's final downfall, the Gulf War of 1990–91 made two things clear to the world community. First, it demonstrated that the United States would remain militarily predominant in global affairs whether or not it confronted an existential enemy of the kind policy elites had historically used to justify America's post-1945 search for armed primacy. Second, the Gulf War revealed that U.S. elites intended to establish a world order with America as its undisputed head. As President George H.W. Bush announced on September 11, 1990 — a little more than a month after Iraqi President Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait — “[t]he crisis in the Persian Gulf” would result in the creation of “a new world order... freer from the threat of terror, stronger in the pursuit of justice, and more secure in the quest for peace.” Crucially, Bush also made clear that “our involvement in the Gulf is not transitory” and that “[l]ong after all our troops come home... there will be a lasting role for the United States in assisting the nations of the Persian Gulf.”<sup>8</sup> Put another way, Bush connected an intervention to stop a specific incursion to the larger project of global primacy, embodied here in the assurance that the United States would continue to dominate the Middle East into the foreseeable future.

Of special importance were the lessons U.S. elites drew from the conflict, which suggested that primacy was politically and militarily feasible. In particular, the rapid

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<sup>6</sup> Kushi, Sidita, and Monica Duffy Toft. “It’s Worse Than We Realize: US Military Interventions since 1776.” Tufts University. Center for Strategic Studies, Military Interventions Project. Working paper. 36.

<sup>7</sup> The United States intervened abroad 76 times from 1776 to 1864; 108 times from 1865 to 1917; and 42 times from 1918 to 1945. See Kushi and Toft. “It’s Worse than We Realize.” 36.

<sup>8</sup> Bush, George H.W. “Address Before a Joint Session of Congress.” University of Virginia. Miller Center, September 11, 1990.

<https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/september-11-1990-address-joint-session-congress>.

success of Operation Desert Storm, which resulted in only 143 American combat deaths, indicated to many observers that a “revolution in military affairs” had made military intervention – and primacy itself – humane and easy.<sup>9</sup> As H.R. McMaster, an officer in the Gulf War and later one of President Donald Trump’s national security advisers, described it, RMA advocates insisted “that new technologies in the areas of surveillance, communications, long-range precision weaponry, and stealth made possible a new way of waging war.”<sup>10</sup> Stated simply, the revolution in military affairs was understood to have made war cheap (at least in terms of American lives and expenditure) and primacy politically and diplomatically viable.<sup>11</sup>

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The Gulf War was also critical in providing a bête noire for U.S. foreign policy in the person of Saddam Hussein. Ever since policymakers decided to pursue a grand strategy of global armed primacy in the 1940s, U.S. foreign policy has been predicated on identifying an existential enemy.<sup>12</sup> Oftentimes, this enemy is personalized. Hitler, Mussolini, and Hirohito played this role during World War II; Stalin and his successors assumed it afterward. But the Soviet Union’s collapse removed the threat (whether perceived or actual) that had justified the large military expenditures Washington’s pursuit of primacy required. A new enemy was needed, and Saddam Hussein quickly became that enemy. In fact, after Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, Saddam was regularly compared with Hitler – a salient indication of the Iraqi leader’s place in the American

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<sup>9</sup> See “U.S. Military Casualties – Persian Gulf War Casualty Summary Desert Storm (As of February 7, 2022).” [https://dcas.dmdc.osd.mil/dcas/pages/report\\_gulf\\_storm.xhtml](https://dcas.dmdc.osd.mil/dcas/pages/report_gulf_storm.xhtml).

<sup>10</sup> McMaster, H.R. *Crack in the Foundation: Defense Transformation and the Underlying Assumption of Dominant Knowledge in Future War*. U.S. Army War College. Center for Strategic Leadership, November 2003, vol. S03–03. 13.

<sup>11</sup> The Gulf War in actuality was hardly “clean”; it inflicted tremendous suffering on the Iraqi people. In fact, an estimated 142,500 to 206,000 “Iraqi deaths [are] directly attributable to the Gulf War.” See Salvage, Jane. “Collateral Damage: The Health and Environmental Costs of War On Iraq.” Medact, November 12, 2002. 2. <https://web.archive.org/web/20200719070432/https://www.ipnw.org/pdf/medact-iraq-2002.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Bessner, Daniel. “The American Empire and Existential Enemies.” *Foreign Exchanges*, September 7, 2020. <https://fx.substack.com/p/the-american-empire-and-existential>.



imagination.<sup>13</sup> George H.W. Bush drew this analogy most notably in an August 1990 speech.<sup>14</sup> In Saddam, who remained in power after the Gulf War, U.S. officials and ordinary Americans found someone whose threat justified the continued search for primacy.<sup>15</sup>

The “easy” U.S. success in the Persian Gulf War, as well as the absence of a peer competitor, combined to encourage reckless adventurism. In the three decades after the Gulf War, the United States pursued a staggering number of global military interventions – 122 from 1990 to 2017, more than 25 percent of all interventions the U.S. had undertaken since 1776.<sup>16</sup> The war also strengthened jingoist and nationalist tendencies among senior policymakers, who argued that, when using force, the country could do no wrong. The late Madeleine Albright, then serving as secretary of state, embodied the spirit of the age when she declared in 1998 that the United States had the right to use force “because we are America; we are the indispensable nation. We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future.”<sup>17</sup>

Iraq occupied a central place in U.S. foreign policy throughout the 1990s, in part because of its symbolic significance in legitimizing the strategy of armed primacy after the Cold War. And in many ways, the country served as an American punching bag. After the war, the United States imposed extensive economic sanctions on Iraq’s imports and exports, as well as no-fly zones.<sup>18</sup> In 1996, President Bill Clinton ordered a missile strike on Iraq to respond to Baghdad’s attack on Erbil, an Iraqi Kurdish city; in 1998, he ordered

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<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., Schmookler, Andrew B. “Hussein as Hitler.” *The Sun*, January 12, 1991. 9A; Rosenthal, A.M. “Always Believe Dictators.” *The New York Times*, March 29, 1994. 23; Wright, Robin. “Hussein Invasion Mimics Hitler in Central Europe.” *Los Angeles Times*, August 3, 1990. A10; Will, George. “Saddam Hussein is No Arab Bismarck; Hitler Would Be a More Apt Comparison.” *The Gazette*, August 9, 1990. B3.

<sup>14</sup> Bush, George H.W. “Address on Iraq’s Invasion of Kuwait.” University of Virginia. Miller Center, August 8, 1990. <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/august-8-1990-address-iraqs-invasion-kuwait>.

<sup>15</sup> The United States was historically committed to dominating the Persian Gulf region for several strategic reasons, which waxed and waned over time. First, it wanted to ensure the free flow of oil to the United States and the global economy and hoped that doing so would help keep oil prices down. Second, the Middle East is strategically positioned and allows the United States to project power into Russia and Central Asia. Third, in the 1990s U.S. strategy was at least partially oriented toward defending human rights, which Saddam Hussein regularly violated, and it was therefore believed to be the “mission” of the United States to overthrow him. Fourth, U.S. decision-makers were dedicated to preventing the emergence of a regional hegemon able to displace the United States as the Gulf’s preëminent power.

<sup>16</sup> Kushi and Toft. 2, 36.

<sup>17</sup> “Interview on NBC–TV ‘The Today Show’ with Matt Lauer.” U.S. Department of State. Office of the Spokesman, February 19, 1998. <https://1997-2001.state.gov/statements/1998/980219a.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Gordon, Joy. “The Enduring Lessons of the Iraq Sanctions.” *Middle East Research and Information Project*, No. 294, Spring 2020. <https://merip.org/2020/06/the-enduring-lessons-of-the-iraq-sanctions/>.

air strikes on Iraq for its failure to comply with various United Nations resolutions that required the country to allow inspectors access to its weapons facilities. That same year, Clinton also signed the Iraq Liberation Act into law. This act stated unequivocally that it was U.S. policy “to support efforts to remove the regime headed by Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq and to promote the emergence of a democratic government to replace that regime.”<sup>19</sup> Clinton further pursued a strategy of “dual containment” against Iraq and Iran that, as former Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates summarized, “meant relying on military force to prevent Iraq from attacking its neighbors, combined with stricter enforcement of the no-fly zones, additional economic sanctions, and support for Iraqi opposition groups.”<sup>20</sup>

As this record makes plain, years before the U.S. invasion of 2003, policymakers were set on a course of confrontation with Iraq because they were committed to a strategy of U.S. primacy; were persuaded that war could be fought cheaply and with few consequences for Americans; had made it difficult to back down or compromise with Saddam, having compared him to Hitler, and had instituted sanctions and no-fly zones that were effectively war by another name.

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The Iraq War from 2003 to 2011, therefore, was not an aberration or the isolated mistake of an especially reckless George W. Bush administration: It was the consequence of the broad U.S. commitment to primacy and more proximate developments in the U.S.–Iraq relationship that occurred after the Cold War’s end. One cannot easily dismiss the possibility that a Gore administration, if elected in 2000, would have also invaded the country after the September 11, 2001, attacks. Al Gore had voted

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<sup>19</sup> H.R. 4655 – Iraq Liberation Act of 1998. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/105th-congress/house-bill/4655/text/enr>.

<sup>20</sup> Gates, Robert M. *Exercise of Power: American Failures, Successes, and a New Path Forward in the Post–Cold War World*. New York. Knopf, 2020. 205.

for the Gulf War, favored intervention throughout the 1990s, endorsed the Iraq Liberation Act, and said in 2002 “that the goal of removing Saddam Hussein from power is a worthy objective, and I support that.”<sup>21</sup> Put another way, the Iraq War was overdetermined and was likely to occur after some inciting incident set it in motion.

## China and primacy

It is painfully obvious today that U.S. officials remain committed to primacy even though the strategy has led the United States into several expensive wars of questionable value to the nation’s fundamental security interests – Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria – all of which have diverted resources that could have been better spent on improvements at home. Moreover, polling suggests that younger generations are becoming increasingly skeptical of primacy and more interested in participating in international organizations, which indicates that now is an apt time to reconsider a grand strategy that decision-makers embraced more than 75 years ago.<sup>22</sup>

Biden’s August 31, 2021, speech announcing the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan makes Washington’s continued devotion to primacy very clear. The president declared that the United States remains committed to combating threats from “across the world,” from Somalia to Syria, from Iraq to Africa and Asia, and will use its “over-the-horizon capabilities” to launch attacks when and where it thinks it should.<sup>23</sup> The entire globe, it appears, remains under the U.S. ambit. Thus the United States retains 750 military bases and other facilities abroad, and thus the nation devotes almost \$800 billion per annum to its military budget.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> “Gore Talks of Iraq, al-Qaeda – and What He’d Do Differently.” CNN, November 20, 2002. <https://www.cnn.com/2002/ALLPOLITICS/11/19/kl.gore/>; Harvey, Frank P. “President Al Gore and the 2003 Iraq War: A Counterfactual Test of Conventional ‘Wisdom.’” *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 45, no. 1, March 2012. 1–32.

<sup>22</sup> Huang, Christine, and Laura Silver. “U.S. Millennials Tend to Have Favorable Views of Foreign Countries and Institutions – Even As They Age.” Pew Research Center, July 8, 2020. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/07/08/u-s-millennials-tend-to-have-favorable-views-of-foreign-countries-and-institutions-even-as-they-age/>; “Views of foreign policy.” Pew Research Center, December 17, 2019. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/12/17/6-views-of-foreign-policy/>.

<sup>23</sup> “Remarks by President Biden on the End of the War in Afghanistan.” The White House, August 31, 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/08/31/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-end-of-the-war-in-afghanistan/>.

<sup>24</sup> Vine, David, Patterson Deppen, and Leah Bolger. “Drawdown: Improving U.S. and Global Security through Military Base Closures.” Quincy Brief No. 16, September 20, 2021.

In his Afghanistan speech, Biden cast China as the central threat to U.S. interests.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, in his first speech to Congress as president, on April 28, 2021, Biden affirmed that the United States is “in competition with China and other countries to win the 21st Century.”<sup>26</sup> While competition does not necessarily imply military conflict, Biden’s speech was followed by an increased military budget as opposed to other sorts of investments – in science, technology, and education, for instance. In early April 2022, Biden approved an additional \$29 billion increase in defense spending.<sup>27</sup> This suggests that the Biden administration remains fundamentally committed to primacy – that is, armed global domination. The idea seems to be that either the United States militarily dominates China or China militarily dominates the United States. Among the policy planners, no third scenario can be imagined.

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According to primacy’s advocates, the globe cannot peacefully encompass a plurality of powers and interests: It can accommodate only one power that rules through domination, or what is euphemistically termed “leadership” when the U.S. is the hegemon. This is why “primacists” are so worried about China: They view international relations as a zero-sum game. As Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay argue in *The Empty*

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<https://quincyinst.org/report/drawdown-improving-u-s-and-global-security-through-military-base-closures-abroad/>; Singh, Kanishka. “U.S. President Biden signs \$770 billion Defense Bill.” Reuters, December 27, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-president-biden-signs-770-billion-defense-bill-2021-12-27/>.

<sup>25</sup> Similar claims had been made in the 2018 National Defense Strategy and in the 2021 Interim National Security Strategic Guidance. See “Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy.” Department of Defense, January 19, 2018. <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>; “2021 Interim National Strategic Guidance.” The White House, March 3, 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>.

<sup>26</sup> “Remarks by President Biden in Address to a Joint Session of Congress.” The White House, April 29, 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/04/29/remarks-by-president-biden-in-address-to-a-joint-session-of-congress/>

<sup>27</sup> Bugos, Shannon. “Biden Approves \$29 Billion Increase in Defense Budget.” Arms Control Association, April 2022. <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2022-04/news/biden-approves-29-billion-increase-defense-budget>.

*Throne*, “a world with no leader would leave the United States poorer and less secure than if it continued to lead globally.”<sup>28</sup> Indeed, Daalder and Lindsay are quite worried about China, affirming in no uncertain terms that “[a] Chinese-dominated world would not be friendly to the United States.”<sup>29</sup> When making arguments such as this, primacists fail fully to consider that a more multilateral world might be defined by cooperation instead of security competition.

Rush Doshi, who is currently a member of Biden’s National Security Council, likewise frames international relations in zero-sum terms. In *The Long Game*, Doshi worries that China has developed “a grand strategy to displace American order” and become “the world’s leading state.”<sup>30</sup> The only thing the United States can do, Doshi concludes, is “adopt an asymmetric approach that blunts Chinese advances at lower cost than China expends in generating them.”<sup>31</sup> Cooperation is barely thinkable.

Over the past several years, U.S.–China relations have soured markedly. The Trump administration, which was replete with China “hawks,” instituted several tariffs on Chinese imports that provoked retaliatory measures and resulted in a minor trade war between the two countries. Trump also undertook several other actions that indicated his administration’s hostility toward China. He launched a vigorous campaign to limit the reach of Huawei, the highly competitive telecommunications giant, eventually pressuring Canadian authorities to arrest Meng Wanzhou, the company’s chief financial officer, on bank fraud charges (charges since dropped). In 2019, Trump’s Treasury Department officially labeled China a currency manipulator; that same year, the president signed the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act, which authorized sanctions against those who commit human rights abuses in Hong Kong. Trump’s insistence that Covid–19 was a “Chinese virus” was merely the crudest reflection of his administration’s view that China was the main threat to U.S. supremacy.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Daalder, Ivo, and James Lindsay. *The Empty Throne: America’s Abdication of Global Leadership*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2018. 171.

<sup>29</sup> Daalder and Lindsay. 172.

<sup>30</sup> Doshi, Rush. *The Long Game: China’s Grand Strategy to Displace American Order*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. 332.

<sup>31</sup> Doshi. 333.

<sup>32</sup> “Timeline: U.S. Relations with China, 1949–2022.” Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-relations-china>.

The Biden administration has similarly pursued a number of policies intended to counter China's rise. The Federal Communications Commission, the Commerce Department, and the Treasury have blacklisted numerous Chinese companies as the administration has sanctioned several individuals in connection with Beijing's Hong Kong policy and its treatment of the Uighur population in Xinjiang Province. The administration has also prevailed upon NATO to declare China a security risk. Moreover, Biden has continued Trump's ban on U.S. investment in Chinese defense-technology companies and, earlier this year, forbade U.S. officials from attending the Winter Olympics in Beijing.<sup>33</sup> Finally, last June the Senate passed the U.S. Innovation and Strategic Competition Act, which is specifically intended to combat China (particularly in the technological sphere); the House approved a related America COMPETES Act in January 2022.<sup>34</sup>

*What, exactly, is Biden willing to risk in his attempt to ensure the U.S. remains the prime power wherever and forever? Might he, or a future president, risk war?*

It is clear that the United States remains committed to retaining its hegemony in East Asia and, indeed, primacy on a global scale. But this grand strategy may result in pernicious consequences. If the United States fails to recognize China's legitimate interests in East Asia and Beijing's understandable desire to participate in shaping the global order, the U.S. might wind up fighting it. As with the Gulf War of 1990–91 and the Iraq War of 2003–11, an ill-considered commitment to primacy might engender violent conflict by pushing the United States toward confrontation instead of cooperation and engagement. This is especially worrisome given Biden's portrayal of China as an existential threat to U.S. interests. As the president remarked to reporters in March 2021, he believes "China has an overall goal... to become the leading country in the

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<sup>33</sup> Martina, Michael and Karen Freifeld. "Biden Order Bans Investment in Dozens of Chinese Defense, Tech Firms." Reuters, June 3, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-biden-china-investment-idTRNIKCN2DF20Y>; Conrad, Jennifer. "A Year in, Biden's China Policy Looks a Lot Like Trump's." *Wired*, December 30, 2021. <https://www.wired.com/story/biden-china-policy-looks-like-trumps/>.

<sup>34</sup> Leslie, Raquel, and Brian Liu. "House of Representatives Passes China Competition Bill." *Lawfare*, February 7, 2022. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/house-representatives-passes-china-competition-bill>.

world, the wealthiest country in the world, and the most powerful country in the world,” and he is personally dedicated to ensuring that this doesn’t “happen on my watch.”<sup>35</sup>

What, exactly, is Biden willing to risk in his attempt to ensure the U.S. remains the prime power wherever and forever? Might he, or a future president, risk war?

There are, of course, obvious differences between the Iraq and China cases. Unlike Iraq, China is a peer competitor, has nuclear weapons, and is a genuine threat to U.S. regional hegemony in East Asia. Furthermore, China is the world’s largest economy in terms of purchasing power parity. The United States and China are also far more economically interdependent than the United States and Iraq ever were.

If the two wars with Iraq were destructive, then, a war with China would be catastrophic. The value of continued U.S. primacy in East Asia is insufficient to justify the enormous cost of such a conflict. For this reason, the United States must adjust to new geostrategic realities, abandon the illusion of indefinitely sustained primacy, and work with allies, partners, and China itself to avoid a deleterious competition that will divert attention from the truly existential threats of our era: inequality, population movements, pandemics, and, above all, climate change.

## Conclusion

The United States learned the wrong lessons from the Gulf War and the Iraq War that followed. A “cheap” primacy was never achievable, and while many analysts and decision-makers today accept the latter intervention as an unprecedented strategic mistake, it has nevertheless been treated as an isolated event disconnected from the United States’ broader grand strategy. In reality, the Iraq War grew out of the U.S. search for primacy. Fundamentally, U.S.–Iraq tensions were rooted in Iraq’s challenge to U.S. dominance in the Middle East. Consequently, a U.S. effort to change the regime in

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<sup>35</sup> “Biden Says China Won’t Surpass U.S. as Global Leader on His Watch.” Reuters, March 25, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-biden-china/biden-says-china-wont-surpass-u-s-as-global-leader-on-his-watc h-idUSKBN2BH2ZE>.

Baghdad was likely to occur after some inciting incident, regardless of which political party was in power.

*U.S. and Chinese leaders must accept that neither country can dominate the other and that mutual recognition is essential if we are to avoid a disastrous, potentially nuclear war.*

This insight provides guidance for how to navigate current U.S.–China tensions. The United States and China will be on a collision course if U.S. policy is driven by a desire to sustain primacy in East Asia. U.S. and Chinese leaders must accept that neither country can dominate the other and that mutual recognition is essential if we are to avoid a disastrous, potentially nuclear war.



## About the Author

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