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Toward a New Paradigm in U.S. Foreign Policy

Harnessing the Power of American Society in Pursuit of U.S. National Security Objectives

It is time to develop a new paradigm for U.S. foreign policy—a “whole of America” approach anchored in a shared understanding that our nation’s governments, businesses, civil society, and academic institutions all have unique roles to play in defending our core principles of democracy and freedom.

Around the world, authoritarianism is on the rise. Economic and technological progress has created opportunity for many but has left others behind, amplifying the reach and potency of malign actors. More than 1.2 billion people live in isolation, conflict, and poverty—and environmental catastrophe promises to intensify human misery in the decades to come.

These global threats are becoming increasingly existential. Democracies face serious challenges, both internally and externally, and the international rules-based order that the United States has espoused over decades—and, at great cost, enabled—is eroding.

We as a nation have failed to communicate a strategy appropriate to these 21st-century threats. In the four decades following World War II—having fought that war to defend our core principles of democracy and freedom against fascism—our

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nation leveraged the ingenuity of our scientists and engineers, the compassion of our people, the vitality of our economy, the bravery of our military, and the strength of our principles to free the globe from the grip of international communism. No comparable approach exists today.

In September 2022, the University of Notre Dame and the RAND Corporation convened more than 50 analysts and practitioners for a two-day conference in South Bend, Indiana, to discuss the challenges that we face today and the approaches that our nation might take to address them. The participants—academics, business leaders, diplomats, strategists, and military professionals—hailed from many of the communities that will need to be part of this new proposed paradigm. At this conference, several core themes emerged that can provide a guiding star for the principled discussions that our nation requires for our future security and prosperity.

Going on Offense: Influence Rather Than Control

A new paradigm in foreign policy will require the United States to lead with values and ideas that shape and influence rather than force or control. We must refocus on the goals and values that we as a people hold most dear—and, in doing so, we must work to promote a more peaceful, prosperous, and democratic future for people around the globe.

This new paradigm bolsters efforts to fight systems of oppression and to counter military aggression while finding ways to engage countries whose interests and values do not always align with ours. We cannot encourage open society while alienating citizens of nations we oppose. Instead, we can encourage diplomacy, invite foreign nationals to study at our universities, and work to encourage pro-democratic civil society organizations from within the populations of authoritarian countries.

America's Expeditionary Character Provides the Motivating Spirit

Whether in their capacity as doctors, development experts, civic leaders, business leaders, or professors, Americans have always ventured beyond their national borders in pursuit of inquiry, discovery, and exchange of values. Our expeditionary dynamism is a valuable national asset. However, it is an asset that the government cannot direct but must instead nurture and harness.

This expeditionary nature must be leveraged to pivot toward long-term investments of time and resources. While academia, business, and civil society think and plan in terms of decades, government-led approaches are inher-

ently short term and reactive. We need to imagine and articulate the world that we want to inhabit in 25 years and then collectively move toward realizing that world.

Convening and Cooperating: Whole of America

At the heart of this paradigm is an understanding that solutions discovered together will prove the most substantial and impactful. In many places where our military cannot make long-term deployments, business provides the persistent presence and influence that are typically complementary to our diplomatic efforts. U.S. academia and civil society are the guarantors of our values overseas, fighting oppression, corruption, and authoritarianism.

To move assertively toward peace—rather than defending against conflict—we must create a common vocabulary to foster collaboration across wide sectors of society; that is, we must harness the strength of our military and diplomatic capabilities while firmly emphasizing the innovation of our private sector, the curiosity of our academic institutions, and the collective insight and experience of our civil society.

About the Authors

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About This Perspective

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