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Why an Internationalist Foreign Policy Needs a Stronger Domestic Foundation

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U.S. President Joe Biden has declared that under his leadership, “America is back” and once again “ready to lead the world.” Biden wants to return the country to its traditional role of catalyzing international cooperation and staunchly defending liberal values abroad. His challenge, however, is primarily one of politics, not policy. Despite Biden’s victory in last year’s presidential election, his internationalist vision faces a deeply skeptical American public. The political foundations of U.S. internationalism have collapsed. The domestic consensus that long supported U.S. engagement abroad has come apart in the face of mounting partisan discord and a deepening rift between urban and rural Americans.

An inward turn has accompanied these growing divides. President Donald Trump’s unilateralism, neo-isolationism, protectionism, and nativism were anathema to most of the U.S. foreign policy establishment. But Trump’s approach to statecraft tapped into public misgivings about American overreach, contributing to his victory in 2016 and helping him win the backing of 74 million voters in 2020. An “America first” approach to the world sells well when many Americans experience economic insecurity and feel that they have been on the losing end of globalization. A recent survey by the Pew Research Center revealed that roughly half the U.S. public believes that the country should pay less attention to problems overseas and concentrate more on fixing problems at home.

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Redressing the hardships facing many working Americans is essential to inoculating the country against “America first” and Trump’s illiberal politics of grievance. That task begins with economic renewal. Restoring popular support for the country’s internationalist calling will entail sustained investment in pandemic recovery, health care, infrastructure, green technology and jobs, and other domestic programs. Those steps will require structural political reforms to ease gridlock and ensure that U.S. foreign policy serves the interests of working Americans.

What Biden needs is an “inside out” approach that will link imperatives at home to objectives abroad. Much will depend on his willingness and ability to take bold action to rebuild broad popular support for internationalism from the ground up. Success would significantly reduce the chances that the president who follows Biden, even if he or she is a Republican, would return to Trump’s self-defeating foreign policy. Such future-proofing is critical to restoring international confidence in the United States. In light of the dysfunction and polarization plaguing U.S. politics, leaders and people around the world are justifiably questioning whether Biden represents a new normal or just a fleeting reprieve from “America first.”

WILL IT PLAY IN PEORIA?

U.S. presidents who have overlooked the challenge of mobilizing and maintaining domestic support for their efforts to redefine the country’s international ambitions have often paid a price for their political malpractice: their foreign policies ran aground at home. Having won the election of 1844 in part by embracing an expansionist platform, President James Polk, a Democrat from Tennessee and a protégé of President Andrew Jackson, took a divided country to war against Mexico in 1846. The United States handily won the war, and the deal to end it extended the border of Texas southward and led to the U.S. acquisition of a major swath of Mexican territory. But this expansion fueled the intensifying sectional rivalry over slavery between the North and the South, contributing to the defeat of the Democrats in 1848 and pushing the country toward civil war. Manifest Destiny overran its domestic foundations.

President Woodrow Wilson’s foreign policy ambitions met a similar fate. Wilson’s turn to internationalism began smoothly enough, with Congress overwhelmingly backing his decision in 1917 to abandon neutrality and enter World War I in response to a number of German provocations. But the story ended badly despite Germany’s defeat:

Wilson failed to secure Senate approval of U.S. participation in the League of Nations. Wilson believed that entering a pact for peace would afford the United States the “infinite privilege of fulfilling her destiny and saving the world.” His lofty internationalism, however, represented a radical departure for the country, far outstripping what domestic politics would allow. Wilson’s idealistic vision of a new U.S. role in the world collapsed in a paroxysm of partisanship. The Senate on three separate occasions rejected the league, and the Democrats were then pummeled in the election of 1920.

Expansionist and internationalist presidents are not alone in having stumbled over domestic obstacles. Trump’s “America first” slogan initially sounded good to many voters, but it failed to sustain its appeal, particularly among political moderates. Trump imposed slapdash tariffs, broke international commitments, ignored human rights, and shunned allies. His hardcore supporters stood by him, but many Americans turned against him—and it is easy to see why. Trump’s trade policies ended up doing more harm than good for American workers. He blamed China for the COVID-19 pandemic but largely idled as the disease ravaged the United States. He left the United States estranged from its allies and made a hash of his top strategic priorities, such as reining in nuclear programs in Iran and North Korea. These failures contributed to his defeat last year.

In contrast, Franklin Roosevelt provides perhaps the best example of a president who deftly navigated the domestic politics of foreign policy. He overturned the isolationist consensus that had handcuffed U.S. foreign policy during the interwar period and built a broad bipartisan coalition behind his wartime response to the threats posed by Nazi Germany and imperial Japan—and, later, behind his plans for the postwar world. The success of the New Deal and the wartime boom helped him convince Americans that U.S. engagement abroad and an open world economy would enhance the country’s security and yield postwar prosperity. Roosevelt’s foreign policy emphasized American values as well as interests. It appealed to idealists and realists alike and paid dividends for Americans from every region of the country and all walks of life (despite Roosevelt’s less-than-stellar record on civil rights). More than any other president, Roosevelt helped cement liberal internationalism as the guiding ethos of U.S. statecraft in the twentieth century.

Biden has made clear that he wants to model his presidency on Roosevelt’s and has even hung a portrait of Roosevelt in the Oval Office.



Come fly with me: Biden boarding Air Force One, February 2021

But Biden faces a political moment even more challenging than the one his hero confronted. When Roosevelt took office in 1933, the Democrats enjoyed a 196-seat majority in the House of Representatives and a 23-seat majority in the Senate, whereas Biden has thin Democratic margins in both chambers. By the time Roosevelt set out to sell internationalism to the electorate after the outbreak of World War II, he had delivered on much of the New Deal; the effects of Biden's ambitious domestic agenda mostly remain to be seen. The United States is today more politically divided, economically unequal, and demographically diverse than it was during Roosevelt's era. Indeed, the political hurdles to governing in Washington have become so high that it is now nearly impossible for the majority party to win the minority party's support for even hugely popular legislation, such as the COVID-19 relief bill approved in March. If Biden hopes to build a new internationalism, he must transform the American political ecosystem.

TRADER JOE?

Biden can start reconnecting what the United States does abroad to the economic and social needs of working-class voters at home by opening up the making of foreign policy to new voices. For far too long, Democratic as well as Republican administrations have pursued policies that have fueled popular mistrust by serving the interests of

the few at the expense of the many. The process of making foreign policy, although open to big corporations, largely ignores the interests of American workers. Normally, the concerns of ordinary Americans, if they figure in at all, come into play only after a foreign policy is set—especially when it comes to trade. By the time Congress gets involved in a trade deal, it is too late to build in a workers' rights or jobs agenda.

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A case in point is President Barack Obama's approach to the negotiations that led to the massive trade agreement known as the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Prior to striking the deal, the Obama administration did not adequately address elements of the pact that disadvantaged blue-collar workers, such as a dispute-

resolution system that favored corporate interests and loopholes that made it possible for China to enjoy duty-free exports of parts and components to the U.S. market via other TPP members. During the 2016 presidential campaign, Trump slammed the accord for benefiting special interests at the expense of workers. His opponent, Hillary Clinton, had helped negotiate the TPP while serving as Obama's first secretary of state, but she distanced herself from the deal during the campaign, as did many down-ballot Democratic candidates. The TPP was already on life support by the time Trump pulled the plug on it days after taking office.

To put the interests of working families at the table, Biden should make the U.S. secretary of labor a permanent member of the National Security Council, like the secretary of the treasury. Doing so would give factory workers, farm hands, and service workers a stronger voice in White House deliberations over foreign policy. Biden should also create senior deputy positions on the NSC and in the Department of State, the Department of Defense, the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, and other foreign policy agencies to ensure that the needs of American workers are considered early and often in the policymaking process. The Biden administration should also deepen the institutional links among the NSC and the offices dealing with the home front, such as the National Economic Council and the Domestic Policy Council. The administration could establish a weekly meeting of an interagency policy committee on economic security, co-chaired by the NSC, the NEC, and the DPC.

Washington also needs a new approach to trade adjustment—that is, the steps the government takes to mitigate the negative effects (reduced wages, lost jobs) that trade deals inevitably have on many workers. Currently, Washington offers displaced workers counseling, retraining, tuition, and other forms of support through a program known as Trade Adjustment Assistance. The program is too reactive, however, since it helps workers only after companies have shuttered factories or laid off employees. Moreover, TAA fails to address labor-market disruptions caused not by trade or globalization but rather by technological change. By training workers in new skill sets and making public investments in health care, education, and government services, Biden can create more jobs that are less susceptible to displacement through automation or trade. The administration also needs to redress the community-level effects of job loss, which include economic stagnation, population decline, substance abuse, and increased crime and violence. One possible model is the Pentagon’s Defense Economic Adjustment Program, which supports economic diversification in communities adversely affected by military base closures or defense program cancellations.

These reforms would pay off for years to come, making it more likely that Washington would aggressively enforce U.S. domestic trade laws, use existing international forums such as the World Trade Organization to ensure fairer trade, and pursue policies on taxes, procurement, the environment, infrastructure, and worker development that would make American businesses and workers more resilient and competitive. Implementing these improvements now, early in the administration, would increase the chances that Biden’s successor would keep them in place, regardless of which party holds the White House. In an age of populism, the next president will see little political advantage in rolling back reforms that promote the interests of American workers.

FIX THE SENATE

Biden can further shore up the domestic foundations of U.S. statecraft by bringing strategic priorities back into alignment with political means. The Biden administration should reduce U.S. commitments in the Middle East by continuing to downsize the American military footprint in the region; the “forever wars” in Afghanistan and Iraq have produced little good. In the meantime, Biden should return to the time-tested touchstone of U.S. statecraft: working with allies to

defend democracy and promote stability in Asia and Europe. To that traditional agenda, Biden should add a new focus on combating and adjusting to climate change, promoting global health, and maintaining the U.S. edge in technological innovation.

This strategic realignment is not only good policy—it is also good politics. Roughly three-quarters of American voters want U.S. troops to leave Afghanistan and Iraq. In contrast, staying put in Asia and Europe alongside democratic allies enjoys strong public support. NATO wins solid backing from voters of both major U.S. political parties. Democrats and Republicans also agree on the need to take a firm line toward China, and the Biden administration is on solid political footing in strengthening ties to partners in the Indo-Pacific, affirming the U.S. commitment to Taiwan's security, and encouraging the world's democracies to “decouple” from China when it comes to sensitive technologies. The American public also prioritizes addressing climate change and global health.

Biden can build further support for a new internationalist consensus by making significant investments in the domestic economy that raise living standards, reduce inequality, and restore the social contract. In taking on that task, Biden cannot afford to wait for bipartisan agreement in Congress, which is unlikely to emerge in an intensely polarized Washington. Biden's agenda will require ambitious and expensive legislation the likes of which the United States has not seen since the New Deal. To get it through, Biden and his allies in Congress will need to overhaul the archaic filibuster rules in the U.S. Senate. Many observers claim that the filibuster promotes consensus by forcing the two parties to find common ground. In truth, however, the filibuster rarely has that effect: often, it simply serves to kill legislation passed by the House. By forcing the majority party to assemble a supermajority of 60 votes to pass most laws, the filibuster allows the minority to block bills, including those that enjoy broad popular support. To liberate policy from the grips of this manufactured gridlock, Biden should urge Senate Democrats to ditch the filibuster outright or significantly reform it so that Congress can get back to the business of passing needed laws.

Republicans will cry foul. But they scrapped the filibuster in 2017 when it came to pushing through the confirmation of Supreme Court nominees. If doing away with the filibuster makes sense when it comes to the justice system, surely it also makes sense for rebuilding the economy and guaranteeing the nation's security. Moreover, scrapping the current supermajority requirement might actually increase bipar-

tisanship in the long run. By advancing policies that are popular with the broader electorate, presidents would, over time, be able to once again garner support from the minority party. Consider, for example, Roosevelt's success in securing bipartisan backing. He was able to win over numerous Republican members of Congress because they hailed from states that found much to like in the New Deal and the economic benefits of liberal internationalism.

Following Roosevelt's lead, Biden can reawaken bipartisanship through strategic public investment, using the \$2 trillion "Build Back Better" infrastructure proposal he campaigned on to bridge the urban-rural divide that reinforces political paralysis and widens partisan divisions. Extending broadband networks to rural areas would promote more equitable economic growth and wider civic engagement. Repairing the nation's ailing bridges, roads, and mass transit systems would spur growth in metropolitan areas. Transitioning from fossil fuels to renewable energy would create millions of new jobs and boost U.S. competitiveness in lagging sectors. By targeting infrastructure and climate investments, Biden can spark private-sector engagement in the right places and help reduce economic inequality. Strategic investments at home will also yield payoffs abroad by spurring high-tech innovation as geopolitical competition plays out over climate change, cybersecurity, and artificial intelligence.

WALK THE WALK

Another way to shore up support for internationalism is to repair the American brand by standing up for democracy and human rights around the world. Partners abroad join most Americans in welcoming Biden's efforts to put the United States back on the right side of history. But to make good on that goal, the United States must exhibit at home the values it seeks to promote abroad.

During the 1950s, segregation and racial discrimination eroded U.S. credibility abroad, especially in the developing world. The passage of the watershed 1964 Civil Rights Act did not silence the United States' most vocal foreign critics, but it did make it easier for Washington to promote social justice beyond its borders. The Trump era, in contrast, seriously compromised American moral authority. Trump's nativistic appeals exacerbated racial tensions, and his refusal to accept the outcome of the 2020 election constituted an assault on the institutions and norms of American democracy. By the time hun-

dreds of Trump's supporters launched a violent attack on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, the country's image among foreign partners had already sunk to historic lows.

In the aftermath of these events, Biden will have to couple his defense of democracy abroad with political reform at home if he is to avoid charges of hypocrisy. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's proposal to establish a bipartisan, independent commission to probe the attack on the

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Capitol is a strong step in the right direction and one that Biden has sensibly endorsed. The commission's charge should include getting to the bottom of what led to the insurrection and why security provisions at the Capitol were so inadequate. In addition, it should ad-

dress how to prevent bogus challenges to the certification of future elections and propose wide-ranging reforms to strengthen the country's electoral procedures, including the management of the transfer of power.

The United States should also begin repairing its increasingly unrepresentative electoral system. Passing the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act would reverse years of federal and state efforts to restrict access to voting for minority, elderly, and disabled citizens. That bill should move forward alongside the omnibus legislation known as the For the People Act, which has passed the House and would make it harder for lawmakers to gerrymander voting districts in ways that reduce the representation of growing nonwhite populations. In the near term, the passage of those bills would clearly favor Democrats. Over the longer term, however, such legislation would strengthen U.S. democracy by incentivizing both parties to compete for the votes of all Americans.

Finally, Biden should encourage state-level initiatives to reform the way voters elect their representatives. Currently, most states hold separate, party-only primary elections. Amid today's intense polarization, this system punishes moderates; to secure nomination, candidates cater to their ideological flanks instead of the political center. Alaska, following the lead of many established democracies around the world, is demonstrating how to reverse this dynamic. It has eliminated party primaries in favor of a single, open primary. The four candidates who receive the most votes will then move on to a general election in which voters will use a ranked-choice system to list the candidates from all parties, from most preferred to least preferred. If no candidate wins 50 percent of the

first-choice votes, the candidate with the fewest first-place votes is eliminated, and the second choices of voters for that candidate are then awarded those votes. The process is repeated until one candidate wins a majority. Ranked-choice voting is not a magic bullet. But because it incentivizes candidates to reach out to the largest possible number of voters, it could help detoxify the country's political ecosystem.

THE ROOSEVELT MODEL

Senator Arthur Vandenberg of Michigan, the leading Republican voice on foreign policy during the Roosevelt and Truman presidencies, is perhaps best remembered for claiming that “politics stops at the water’s edge.” Politicians from both parties have invoked Vandenberg’s line ever since. Yet the phrase, if catchy, is misleading. When it comes to the conduct of foreign policy, the most successful presidents are those who master not just the art of statecraft but also the politics of the moment.

Roosevelt may have been particularly adept at diplomacy and wielding U.S. power abroad, correctly reading the geopolitical landscape as he distinguished vital from peripheral interests, friend from foe, and capabilities from intentions. But what made Roosevelt a truly great statesman was his ability to read the domestic political terrain: to know where the redlines were, how to speak to people’s needs and aspirations, and how to build lasting political support for an internationalist agenda during a time of crisis.

Biden can learn from Roosevelt’s experience to overcome the domestic obstacles that contribute to today’s crises: a policymaking process that does not adequately represent the interests of ordinary Americans, dysfunctional political practices that block bipartisanship and exacerbate divisions, and an electoral system that seems more dedicated to disenfranchising voters than ensuring that their voices are heard. Biden’s challenge is not just to bring the United States back to the global stage through tactical and temporary adjustments—he must also reimagine what is politically possible. By reforming and strengthening the country’s institutions and making its domestic and foreign policies more economically inclusive, Biden can build back better in a way that outlasts his presidency and restores the country’s commitment to a steady and purposeful brand of American internationalism. 🌐