

Perils of Polarization for U.S. Foreign Policy

Ever since the United States emerged from World War II as the preeminent global power, scholars and policymakers have been predicting its eventual decline. In the 1950s, the “loss of China,” the Korean War, and Sputnik all fed into fears about the United States’ ability to shape the postwar world.¹ In the early 1970s, the Vietnam War and nuclear parity with the Soviet Union led to a renewed wave of concern about the loss of leadership. In the 1980s, economic growth in Germany and Japan led to another round of hand-wringing, magnified in the public’s mind by the 1987 best-selling book *Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, which suggested the inevitability of relative decline.² And even though the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 left the United States as the lone superpower, rapid economic development in China soon led to projections that the United States would be overtaken as world’s largest economy in the first half of the twenty-first century.³

What all of these stories have in common was the assumption that the “post-American world” would be ushered in by the rise of other states: i.e., one or more challengers that would, through rapid economic growth and investments in military power, displace the United States as the world’s leading power.⁴ A massive literature in academic international relations on “power transitions” or “long cycles” has argued that such displacement was a recurrent feature of international politics and a moment of great danger and uncertainty.⁵

Recent developments, however, suggest that a more pressing threat to the United States’ standing in the world comes from within. In the near term, this threat comes from the presidency of Donald Trump, who came into office

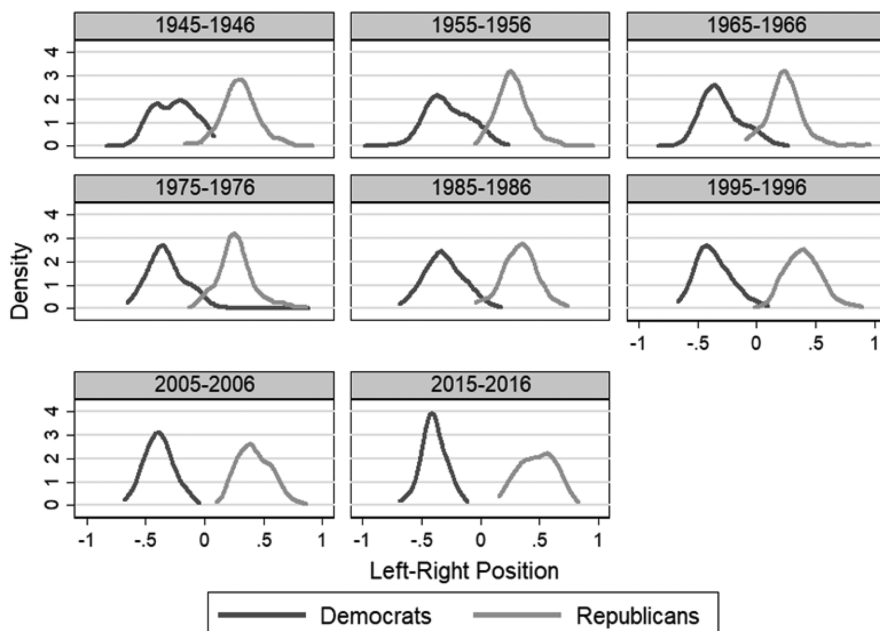
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promoting an “America First” foreign policy that departs in significant ways from the policies that have underpinned U.S. global leadership over the last 70 years. Though it remains to be seen how this agenda will play out in practice, Trump’s presidency has shaken important pillars of postwar foreign policy including the commitment to allies in Europe, the containment of Russian expansionism, and the embrace of open markets. But beyond his immediate impact, Trump is a symptom of a longer-term trend in U.S. politics that existed before him and is likely to persist afterward: partisan polarization.

As I use it here, the term polarization captures several interrelated phenomena. First and most prominent is the polarization in the ideological positions of political elites. This is most noticeable in studies of Congress that map legislators onto a liberal-conservative ideological space.⁶ Figure 1 shows the ideological distribution of House members over time using a conventional measure based on roll call voting behavior. The data show the increasing divergence of the parties and the disappearance of legislators in the center, leading to the elimination of any overlap between Republicans and Democrats.

Figure 1. The Distribution of Ideology in the House of Representatives, 1945–2016



Source: Jeff Lewis, Nolan McCarty, Keith Poole, and Howard Rosenthal, “Weekly Update of ‘Common Space’ DW-NOMINATE Scores,” December 12, 2016, http://k7moa.com/Weekly_Constant_Space_DW-NOMINATE_Scores.htm.

Second, and likely in response, has been the “sorting” of the mass public into more homogenous parties.⁷ Despite popular impressions, public attitudes have not polarized in the sense of people shifting to more extreme positions; however, ideological positions and party identifications are increasingly in line with one another, and people are less likely to have positions that are out of step with the party to which they identify. Liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats are a vanishing breed. As a result, there are fewer issues that crosscut the party divide.

The third aspect of polarization is an increase in what has been called “affective polarization” or “negative partisanship”: distrust and dislike of people from the other party.⁸ This phenomenon makes it harder for people to embrace policy proposals from the other side and makes it harder for elected officials to compromise across the aisle.

Finally, this process has happened alongside fragmentation of the media, particularly the proliferation of partisan news sources on cable television, radio, and the internet. As a result, it is increasingly easy for people to select news sources that conform to their preexisting beliefs.⁹ While data suggest that the percentage of people who consume news in a one-sided fashion is relatively small, these people tend to be more politically active and thus wield disproportionate influence.¹⁰

In this paper, I discuss four ways in which these developments have made it harder for the United States to conduct foreign policy and to wield its diplomatic and military power in the world.¹¹ Three of these challenges have been increasingly evident for some time:

1. It is more difficult to get bipartisan support for ambitious or risky undertakings, particularly the use of military force and the conclusion of treaties.
2. It is hard to agree across parties on the lessons of foreign policy failure, therefore complicating efforts to learn and adapt.
3. The risk of dramatic policy swings from one administration to another of the opposite party complicates our ability to make long-term commitments to allies and adversaries.

If dramatic swings become the norm, allies and adversaries will expect volatility.

The fourth and final peril of polarization is one that few, if any, people anticipated prior to 2016: the vulnerability to foreign intervention in our political system. Not only did Russian interference in the 2016 election show that a foreign state could play on internal political divisions and mistrust in order to sow general confusion in the democratic process and to bolster its preferred

candidate, but it did so in a way that has to date left the country divided over what happened and how to respond to an attack on its sovereignty.

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Since numerous obituaries for American hegemony have turned out to be premature, it would be a mistake to assume that these challenges necessarily portend the end of the country's global role. Moreover, key aspects of U.S. power—including its large economy, its sophisticated and well-trained military, and its nuclear arsenal—remain mostly untouched by these developments. Nevertheless, this article hopes to show how political polarization com-

plicates our ability to use that power to further long-term interests and to defend against further threats to U.S. sovereignty. Though I am pessimistic that there is any solution on the horizon, recognition of these problems may at least help mitigate their worst effects.

Bipartisan Support

The idea that “politics stops at the water’s edge” has always been more of an aspiration than a reality, but it is also true that there was considerable bipartisanship in U.S. foreign policy in the decades after World War II. Although there were partisan disputes, particularly over China and Korea, these were set against a background consensus over core principles: that the United States should play an active role in world affairs and that it should seek to contain the expansion of communism. This policy engaged all levers of American power: diplomatically through the construction of multilateral institutions and alliances in Europe, Asia, and the Americas; economically through development aid and openness to trade and financial flows; militarily through operations supporting friendly regimes under threat or targeting regimes that were seen as hostile. Major elements of this consensus survived the end of the Cold War. Both parties supported efforts to enlarge the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to help protect young democracies in Central Europe, and there were continued efforts to liberalize the international economy through a variety of free trade agreements and the creation of the World Trade Organization (WTO).

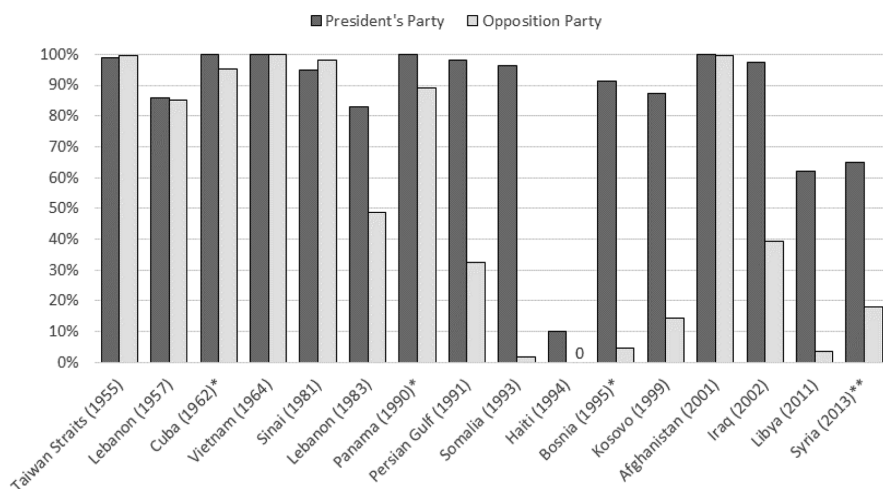
Nonetheless, the post-Cold War period also saw increasing divergence between the parties on core issues, particularly the purposes and desirability of using military force, and the importance of multilateral institutions like the United Nations and NATO. Debates took place during the 1990s over whether force should be used for humanitarian purposes, such as in the former Yugoslavia. In the 2000s, the unity

created in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks quickly gave way to stark partisan division over the Iraq War, as President George W. Bush backed a more robust assertion of U.S. power, even in the absence of international consensus. President Obama came into office looking to restore frayed relations with allies, to extricate the United States from Iraq, and to avoid further entanglements—which he achieved with only mixed success. President Trump, for his part, has expressed skepticism about the United Nations and NATO, and has escalated—albeit only rhetorically so far—threats against North Korea and Iran.

The underlying philosophical debates are not new, as disagreements over the use of force emerged during the Vietnam War.¹² What has changed is how sharply these disagreements now cut along party lines and hinder bipartisan cooperation. The disappearing center means that there are fewer conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans to broker deals across the aisle—roles that in the past were played by Senators Arthur Vandenburg (R-MI), Sam Nunn (D-GA), or Richard Lugar (R-IN). Polarization has also decreased presidents' willingness to appoint members of the other party to the foreign policy bureaucracy, a strategy for building bridges to the opposition and co-opting potential critics.¹³ At the same time, increasing distrust makes members of the opposition party less willing to share any "ownership" of the president's initiatives. In a period when there was greater agreement over the ends and means of foreign policy, there was considerable deference to the executive on matters of national security; deference is harder to find these days, replaced instead with an instinct to attack. Partisan warfare also incentivizes the opposition to deny the president any victories, even if they support the eventual goals.¹⁴ As a result, it is harder to generate bipartisan consensus behind significant policy initiatives, and the political risks of wielding military and diplomatic power have increased.

Without bipartisan consensus, the political risks of wielding power have increased.

Nowhere is this development more noticeable than in Congressional backing for the use of military force.¹⁵ Although declarations of war have become extinct since World War II, Congress has on a number of occasions voted to authorize the president to use force. Well-known authorizations include the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution (1964), which paved the way for U.S. escalation in Vietnam; the Authorization to Use Military Force (AUMF), passed in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and used to justify operations in the "global war on terror," especially in Afghanistan; and the Authorization to Use Military Force against Iraq (2002), which preceded the invasion of that country the following year. Authorizations have also been passed in the midst of crises that did not

Figure 2. Congressional Support for the Use of Force

Note: *Indicates vote was to endorse, rather than authorize, the indicated mission. **Indicates resolution never came to vote and numbers reflect stated positions. Source: Data on roll calls votes is from www.govtrack.us. Positions of House members on Syria is from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/special/politics/where-lawmakers-stand-on-syria/>.

escalate to war (e.g., the Taiwan Straits crisis of 1955) and for smaller operations, such the deployment of peacekeepers to Sinai in 1981.

Figure 2 reports the results of 15 roll call votes in the House showing the percentage of members from the president's party and the opposition, respectively, who voted for resolutions authorizing or otherwise supporting the president's use of military force. Most of these votes were to authorize force; in three instances, marked by a single asterisk (*), there was no vote to authorize in the House, and the roll calls reported are for resolutions endorsing the operation. The last item records the stated positions of House members on President Obama's request for authorization to strike Syria in 2013 after its use of chemical weapons (that resolution never came to a vote because a deal to remove Syria's chemical weapons defused the crisis). The fraction reported captures those saying they were in favor of the resolution or undecided, rather than leaning no or definitely against.

The breakdown in bipartisanship, as evidenced by the gap in the height of the bars, is quite striking. Particularly after 1990, only the 2001 AUMF, passed after the worst terrorist incident on American soil, won majority support from both parties. Moreover, in three of these cases—Bosnia, Kosovo, and Libya—the opposition party's resistance prevented Congress from authorizing the operation (all of which went on anyway), an outcome that would likely have been repeated in 2013

had the Syria resolution come to a vote.¹⁶ In a testament to the role of partisanship in these votes, a number of Republicans who came out against Obama's request in 2013 subsequently praised Trump in 2017 for carrying out strikes against Syria without any authorization.¹⁷

Of course, bipartisanship does not guarantee wise or successful foreign policy: see Vietnam. Moreover, inability to get bipartisan support does not necessarily prevent a policy from being enacted since the president has considerable unilateral powers deriving from his position as commander-in-chief. Presidents of both parties have used military force without Congressional authorization. But doing so amplifies the political risks in the event that things go badly. *Ex ante* support from members of Congress is associated with a lower likelihood of subsequent criticism and votes to cut off funding.¹⁸ By contrast, going into an operation without bipartisan cover puts the president further out on a limb.¹⁹ In addition, public attitudes on military operations are shaped by what they hear from political leaders who share their partisan identification. Thus, when opposition figures oppose a military operation, the resulting debate tends to polarize public attitudes, drawing down overall support.²⁰ Foreign adversaries may also be encouraged by domestic dissent to hold out against U.S. threats or coercive actions, rendering them less effective.²¹

From the perspective of the country's foreign policy, one danger is that presidents can respond to this political risk by shaping military operations in ways that make them less effective. A president who expects to meet opposition may decide not to use force in a case where doing so might further U.S. interests—e.g., plausibly, Syria in 2013—or to delay getting involved while a crisis deepens—e.g., Bosnia from 1992–95.²² Presidents may also tailor the military strategy to ensure that an operation incurs low costs in terms of American casualties, thereby preventing a political backlash.²³ For example, the (unauthorized) operations over Kosovo and Libya were designed to rely on air power only. Although several considerations contributed to those decisions—including the need to reassure worried allies and a skeptical Russia—they also dramatically lowered the risk to American service members. As a result, the domestic political salience and risk of these operations were minimized. The Obama administration even cited the limited nature of the Libya mission to argue that U.S. involvement did not rise to the level of “hostilities” for which Congressional authorization was needed.²⁴

While no one wants U.S. lives sacrificed needlessly, the downside of intervening in this way is that it reduces the United States' ability to shape events on the ground. Although both the Kosovo and Libya operations succeeded in their

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primary goals, the decision to rely entirely on air power came with costs. In the case of Kosovo, the lack of “boots on the ground” gave Serbia a free hand to engage in ethnic cleansing, creating a massive refugee flow. In Libya, the United States found itself with little leverage to shape the postwar settlement or prevent a relapse into civil conflict.

Polarization can also affect the U.S. ability to use diplomacy to create binding treaties with other countries. One rarely noticed casualty of the partisan divide has been the process of treaty ratification. Since it is extremely rare for one party to have the 67 votes needed to ratify a treaty in the Senate, at least some members of the opposition party have to give their consent for a treaty to be approved.

One rarely noticed casualty of the partisan divide has been treaty ratification.

In spite of this, presidents have generally been very successful in getting treaties ratified, and outright rejections are extremely rare: only four treaties have been rejected since 1945.²⁵

However, the Senate can also drag its feet on a treaty and delay a vote, perhaps indefinitely. A systematic study of such “treaty gridlock” showed that ideological polarization between the parties significantly increases the time to

ratification.²⁶ As the parties get further apart, the ideological distance can increase between the president and both the pivotal Senator whose vote is needed to ratify and the chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, whose assent is needed for the treaty to reach the floor.

Recent experience bears this out. The State Department lists 45 treaties submitted since 1945 that are still technically awaiting Senate action.²⁷ Of those, 22 were submitted by President Obama. This is in spite of the fact that Obama submitted significantly fewer treaties than previous presidents: only 38 over two terms, compared to 95 by George W. Bush and 189 by Bill Clinton over comparable spans. The long list of unratified treaties reflects the fact that Obama had a far lower treaty ratification rate than any of his recent predecessors. Only 44 percent of the treaties Obama submitted to the Senate were ratified within three years. By comparison, President Carter had the next lowest ratification rate at 76 percent, and Presidents Reagan, Bush-41, Clinton, and Bush-43 all had success rates in excess of 80 or 90 percent.²⁸ Obama’s record is a testament to the unwillingness of Republicans in the Senate to approve—or even hold votes on—agreements that he signed.²⁹

Even Obama’s one major success on this front—ratification of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) with Russia—demonstrates the difficulties of treaty making in a polarized era.³⁰ The Senate approved the treaty by a margin of 71–26, the lowest number of yes votes for any strategic arms limitation deal that came to the floor. To win support from skeptical Republicans, Obama

promised an additional \$85 billion toward modernization of the nuclear force. It is not uncommon for presidents to use “side payments” like this in order to grease the wheels for treaty ratification, but polarization is likely to increase the price that the opposition will demand for its consent.³¹ If that price gets too high, presidents may decide to go another route.

As with the use of force, presidents have unilateral powers that allow them to make international agreements without Congressional approval. Executive agreements serve many of the same functions as treaties, but do not require ratification. The use of executive agreements has exploded since World War II, and around 94 percent of international agreements take this form, rather than traditional treaties.³² There has been a debate over whether the rise of executive agreements reflects a desire by the president to evade the onerous ratification requirements or an efficient response to the large increase of international activity by the United States in this period. Most systematic studies lean in favor the latter interpretation, at least for explaining the overall trend.³³

That said, recent treaty gridlock appears to have pushed some agreements to take the executive form. The clearest example of this shift is the Paris climate accord, which was crafted as an executive agreement precisely to avoid the fate of the Kyoto Protocol, which Clinton signed as a treaty in 1999 but never submitted for ratification due to opposition in the Senate. The Iran nuclear deal and some components of Obama’s normalization of relations with Cuba were similarly concluded as executive agreements. It is harder to establish that those agreements would have been treaties under more favorable domestic political conditions, but when pressed on why the Iran deal did not take that form, Secretary of State John Kerry did not hesitate to admit that he had given up on treaties because “you can’t pass a treaty anymore.”³⁴ Indeed, Obama had the highest ratio of executive agreements to treaties of any modern president. To some extent this reflects his very low number of treaties, but a substitution from treaties to executive agreements during a time of high gridlock is not at all surprising.³⁵

An inability to get bipartisan support for treaties could make the United States a less reliable partner in international affairs. The supermajority requirement means that, in order to be ratified, treaties must have broad political support. This reassures partners that the terms are likely to be implemented and that the commitment is unlikely to be disrupted by a change in administrations.³⁶ By contrast, executive agreements do not signal the same level of support, particularly if they are used precisely to avoid a ratification fight. In addition, executive agreements can be more easily voided by a new president, making them vulnerable to swings in party control—a point to which I will return later.

With Republicans now in control of Congress and the presidency, it is possible that this trend will reverse in the near term. At the very least, Trump should have an easier time getting treaties out of committee and onto the Senate floor—if he

has any inclination to sign any. He will still need Democratic votes for ratification, however, and it remains to be seen whether those will be forthcoming.

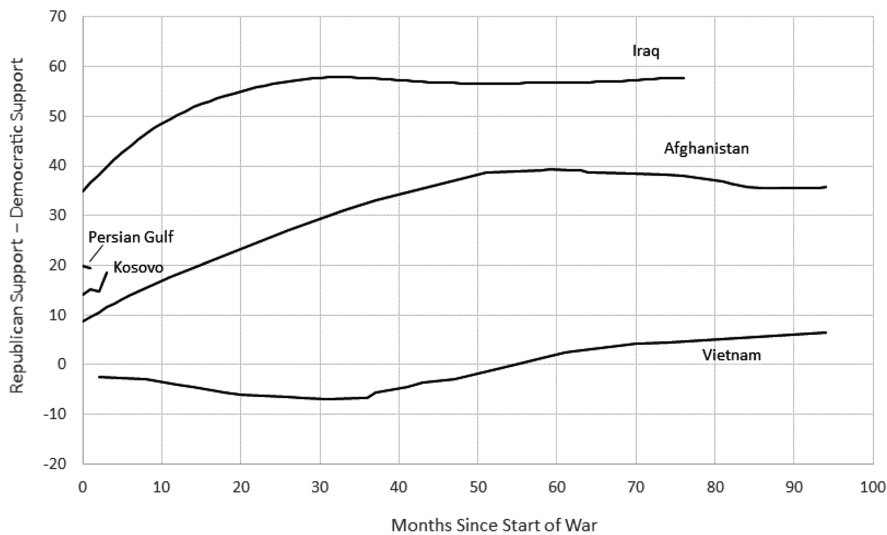
Learning

Political polarization can also impede the country's collective ability to learn and adapt from foreign policy failures. A large literature has shown that partisanship colors the way people experience reality. Democrats tend to overestimate inflation and unemployment during Republican administrations, while Republicans overstate the degree to which deficits grow under Democrats.³⁷ There is debate over how much differences in factual statements reflect true biases in perception rather than simply partisan "cheerleading": i.e., answering a survey question in a way that makes the other party look bad.³⁸ Nevertheless, there is good reason to think that partisanship influences both the exposure to factual information and, more importantly, the way people interpret and use that information when evaluating candidates and policies.³⁹

No event in recent U.S. history has been the subject of more partisan controversy than the Iraq War. In principle, this event offered a number of lessons about the desirability and efficacy of military force in pursuit of disarmament and regime change. The difficulty of building international support for preventive action, the challenges of rebuilding a state in the aftermath of regime overthrow, the malign role that outsiders can play in undermining postwar stabilization, and the potential spillover effects to other states in the region—all were on full display both during the war and in its aftermath. Nevertheless, Americans viewed the war through partisan lenses, making it hard to agree on the implications of what happened.

Indeed, the Iraq War divided Americans along partisan lines more than any other war in modern U.S. history. This might seem like an odd claim given how divisive the Vietnam War was, but while Vietnam led to more social unrest and political conflict, those did not cut as strongly along party lines. Figure 3 shows the partisan gap in support for five major military operations from Vietnam to Iraq. The vertical axis measures the percentage of Republicans expressing support for each war minus the percentage of Democrats expressing support. The horizontal axis measures time in months since the start of the war. Since individual polls can bounce around, the curves display the overall trends.

Clearly, the absolute partisan gap was much higher in operations since Vietnam, and the divide over Iraq towers above them all.⁴⁰ One factor that accounts for the relatively small partisan gap over Vietnam is that the war was started by a Democratic president, Lyndon Johnson, with significant bipartisan support. This fact likely muted opposition from Democrats who might otherwise have been skeptical of the use of force. Democrats were, on average, more

Figure 3. Partisan Gaps in Support for War

Source: Data on Vietnam are from John E. Mueller, *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion* (New York: Wiley, 1973), 271. Data on other wars are from Gary C. Jacobson, *A Divider, Not a Uniter: George W. Bush and the American People*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Longman, 2011).

supportive of the war than Republicans—until President Nixon took over, at which point the relative positions flip.⁴¹

By contrast, the Iraq War was more clearly “Bush’s war” from the start, and even though it received support from some Democrats in Congress, any bipartisan veneer wore off very quickly. As noted earlier, parties are also much more homogeneous today than they were in the 1960s and 70s. Liberal Republicans who were opposed to Vietnam would probably be Democrats today; conservative, often Southern, Democrats who supported the war are now likely to be Republicans. One interesting side effect of this sorting is that there is actually more partisan division over Vietnam now than at the time. A 2013 Gallup poll found a 22 percentage point gap between Republicans and Democrats over whether the Vietnam War had been a mistake—larger than any gap recorded during the war.⁴²

Research on public opinion during the Iraq War shows how partisan lenses affected the way people evaluated the conflict. One study found that strong Republicans were more likely than strong Democrats to underestimate the number of U.S. casualties. Giving respondents correct information, however, had no measurable effect on their support for the war.⁴³ Other research has documented how Republicans clung to incorrect beliefs about whether Iraq had weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and had been providing support to the al

Qaeda terrorist organization—even after those claims were shown to be untrue.⁴⁴ For their part, Democrats were relatively resistant to information about the success of the 2007 “surge” in bringing down violence in Iraq.⁴⁵ Evidence suggests that the disconnect between partisans was less a result of different access to information about, say, casualty levels or whether weapons were found, but rather in their interpretation of those facts. Democrats were more likely to regard a given level of casualties as “high,” while Republicans were more likely to believe that Iraq hid or destroyed the WMD it had.⁴⁶

Democrats and Republicans also came to very different conclusions about whether the Iraq war helped or harmed America’s security. Responses to questions about whether the war contributed to the country’s long-term security and the fight against terrorism show that Democrats and Republicans very quickly staked out different views, with around 75 percent of Republicans saying the war was beneficial compared to only 30 percent of Democrats. These views remained remarkably stable throughout the conflict. Although the question has not been asked regularly since the end of 2007, a poll in September 2011 showed almost identical splits.⁴⁷

Divergent views about the war have contributed to two different partisan narratives about what happened afterwards, particularly the emergence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and its stunning invasion into Iraq in 2014. In one view, Iraq was won in 2007–2008 as a result of Bush’s “surge,” and Obama frittered away the fruits of victory by withdrawing all forces from the country in 2011. In the alternative view, the invasion of Iraq and ensuing sectarian conflict created the fundamental instability, which the reduction in violence associated with the surge masked but did not resolve. Thus, partisans can choose whether to blame the rise of ISIS on Obama or Bush.

This is not just an idle historical debate, as beliefs about what happened in Iraq could inform how people weigh the desirability of war against the two remaining members of the “axis of evil”: North Korea and Iran. The use of force against these countries has been justified using similar arguments to those heard in the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq—i.e., that a long-term solution to the threat they pose can only be resolved by regime change. Any effort to forcibly change the regimes in these countries will face many of the same obstacles encountered in Iraq. Nevertheless, that experience has done nothing to cause views across parties to converge. In a Gallup poll from January 2003, right before the invasion of Iraq, 59 percent of Republicans and 41 percent of Democrats said they would favor military action against North Korea if economic and diplomatic efforts failed. In response to the same question in September 2017, support among Republicans jumped to 82 percent, while support from Democrats fell slightly to 37 percent.⁴⁸ Clearly, Republicans and Democrats drew different conclusions from the lessons purchased at the cost of over 4,000 U.S. lives in Iraq.

Consistency

A third potential cost of political polarization is a reduced ability to make long-term commitments that friends and foes regard as credible. A high degree of policy consistency is essential for a country that has allies around the world and is active in managing threats to international stability. Allies have to believe that the United States will come to their defense and not entrap them in risky ventures that do not contribute to their security. Adversaries have to believe that they cannot wait out the threats of one president in the hopes of getting a more malleable successor, and that any deals the United States strikes with them will persist beyond the current administration. As the parties become more ideologically distinct, there is a danger of greater swings from one administration to the next if the party in power changes. And as Congress loses its bipartisan center, it becomes less of a stabilizing force to keep swings in check.

Some degree of policy change is to be expected when one party replaces another in the White House. Certainly the shift from Carter to Reagan brought with it significant changes in U.S. foreign policy, particularly in arms control and human rights. The main danger is if dramatic swings become the norm, so that other countries come to expect that promises and threats are only good for the near term. Under those conditions, allies will be less willing to make long-run plans around U.S. defense commitments, and adversaries will understand that the mix of carrots and sticks currently on offer may change with a new administration.

Already, we have seen international agreements fall victim to partisan turnover. On coming into office, George W. Bush pulled out of the Kyoto Protocol as well as the International Criminal Court, and announced he would no longer seek ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. When Trump entered the White House, he withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and started the process of withdrawing the United States from the Paris climate accord. He has also threatened to withdraw from or renegotiate a number of other international agreements including the North American Free Trade Agreement, the US-Korea Free Trade Agreement, and the Iran nuclear deal. And while many presidents have called on partners in NATO to increase their defense spending, Trump has stood out in his explicit threat to make the U.S. defense guarantee contingent on those efforts. Although Congress may be able to prevent withdrawal from trade deals that it has ratified or implemented through legislation, an executive agreement, like the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran, has no such protections.

For allies, the volatility has been disquieting. The last two Republican presidencies have thrown NATO into crisis—first over the Iraq War and then over Trump's reluctance to reaffirm Article V, the North Atlantic Treaty's collective defense clause. And while Obama's presidency reassured longstanding NATO

allies, he caused discomfort in Poland and the Czech Republic by canceling Bush's plans to install anti-missile systems there. The long-run effect of this volatility could be that U.S. allies decide to diminish their dependence on the United States. German Chancellor Angela Merkel suggested as much in a speech in May 2017, when she said that "The times in which we could completely depend on others are on the way out ... We Europeans have to take our destiny into our own hands."⁴⁹ If the only response is an increase in allies' defense capacity, then this development could, ironically, yield some benefits. More worrying is the possibility that the long-run credibility of our alliances will erode, leading these states to develop more independent foreign policies and/or become more accommodating to U.S. rivals like Russia and China. And, of course, questions about the credibility of our alliances would undermine their deterrent effect, with potentially disastrous results.

Volatility in U.S. foreign policy can also affect our ability to manage relations with hostile states. Over the last three decades, U.S. foreign policy has prioritized preventing the proliferation of WMD to so-called "rogue states" like North Korea, Iran, Iraq, and Libya. Persuading such countries to stop or dismantle nuclear programs requires a subtle mix of coercion and reassurance. When we demand disarmament, we ask an adversary to make itself weaker. Convincing an adversary to disarm thus requires a credible commitment by the United States not to take advantage of this act by pressing for further concessions. Thus, nuclear deals with North Korea, Libya, and Iran have included economic aid and/or lifting economic sanctions that had been designed to destabilize the regime. In the case of Libya, the deal that Moammar Gadhafi agreed to in 2003 also included assurances that disarmament would lead to normalization of relations rather than a renewed push for regime change.⁵⁰

All three cases suggest how instability across administrations can undermine the United States' ability to carry out its end of these bargains. The 1994 Agreed Framework with North Korea came under attack immediately from Republicans in Congress, who dragged their feet on funding the heavy fuel oil deliveries and light-water reactors that had been promised as part of the deal. When President Bush came into office, he and many of his advisers were skeptical of the deal and looking for a way out.⁵¹ In January 2002, Bush listed North Korea among the "axis of evil" and made no secret of his dislike for the regime. Leaked details from the Nuclear Posture Review indicated that North Korea was among the states that might be targeted with nuclear weapons, despite wording in the Agreed Framework providing assurances to the contrary.⁵² When the CIA obtained evidence in 2002 that North Korea was secretly enriching uranium, the Bush administration seized on this news to end the delivery of fuel oil, triggering the collapse of the deal and North Korea's entry into the nuclear club three years later. In the case of Libya, the process of lifting sanctions and normalizing

relations started under Bush. But eight years later, responding to the civil war that broke out during the “Arab Spring,” Obama intervened in support of Libyan rebels. Gadhafi was ousted from power, captured, and killed.

In both of these cases, it is hard to say with certainty what would have happened absent a change in U.S. party control. A President Gore might have similarly abandoned the Agreed Framework, though former Clinton administration officials have suggested otherwise.⁵³ It is also plausible that a President McCain would have taken the same opportunity to oust Gadhafi. The assurances given to Libya in exchange for disarmament were not a blank check to commit crimes against humanity. Still, both cases underscore the fact that agreements with adversaries are likely to face challenges over time. Subsequent administrations have to decide whether to respond to these challenges by managing them within the context of their predecessor’s commitments or abandoning those commitments. As the parties’ foreign policy priorities diverge, the latter becomes more likely.

The Iran deal seems likely to meet a similar fate. As the deal was being finalized in 2015, Republican Senators, led by Tom Cotton (R-AR), released an open letter warning Iran that “The next president could revoke [an agreement] with the stroke of a pen and future Congresses could modify the terms of the agreement at any time.”⁵⁴ The letter itself was a rare attempt to openly undermine a president’s diplomacy and indicative of how far norms of deference to the executive have eroded. With the election of President Trump, Cotton’s prediction stands a good chance of coming true. In October 2017, Trump announced that he would no longer certify the deal as being in America’s national interest, even as his administration has conceded that Iran is complying with its terms. In doing so, he left it up to Congress to decide whether and under what conditions to reimpose sanctions that were lifted as part of the bargain. In the short run, this maneuver may prolong the life of the agreement by taking its immediate fate out of the hands of the White House. However, it is unclear what, if anything, Congress will be able to agree on. And in any event, the long-run goal of the maneuver is to renegotiate the deal to deepen restrictions on Iranian nuclear activities and to cover its ballistic missile program and regional activities. However this case plays out, it will likely feed the perception that agreements with the United States are vulnerable to swings in party control.

Foreign Intervention

While all of the foregoing challenges have become apparent over the last few decades, the final concern about polarization only became clear in the last year, with revelations that Russia had intervened in the 2016 election. Although the full extent of Russian actions remain unclear—and their effect on the outcome, if any, is unknowable—Russia appears to have engaged in a disinformation

campaign designed to stoke partisan divisions, depress support for Hillary Clinton, and increase the chances of a Trump victory. At a minimum, they sought to sow discord and undermine the legitimacy of the American political system; at most, they hoped to elect a president whose foreign policy platform was more amenable to their interests. By any standard, these actions represent an attack on U.S. sovereignty. And yet, the partisan nature of the attack complicates the response.

When terrorists struck the United States on 9/11, virtually every American thought “We were attacked,” even if they were nowhere near New York and Washington and did not know anyone affected. Everyone felt the loss. The magic of nationalism is that an attack on a New York skyscraper, or a naval base in Hawaii, prompts all U.S. citizens to feel as if they were targeted, even if they were in fact safe and miles away. And even if the national unity created by the attack later gave way to partisan division, the ensuing debate was over the appropriate means of fighting terrorism, not whether the threat was worth fighting.

The insidiousness of the Russian intervention is that it created partisan winners and losers. By intervening in a manner that benefited the Republican presidential

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candidate, Russia put its thumb on the scales of our partisan divide. Any sense that “we” were attacked is weakened by the fact that some of “us” benefited. When living under the rule of the other party seems intolerable, foreign support can seem a small price to pay for electoral victory. Indeed, Russian email releases and social media advertisements played into themes that Republicans were already emphasizing, meaning that Republican politicians

and voters would have welcomed the content of the messages, even if they were uncomfortable with or unaware of the source. Democrats no doubt would have faced the same tension had the roles been reversed.

The partisan nature of the attack means that Republicans have a political interest in downplaying the severity of the threat and the degree to which Russian actions contributed to Trump’s election. Unless and until more details come out, they can take comfort in uncertainty over what exactly happened and doubt that it was decisive. Democrats, for their part, have a political interest in emphasizing the threat in hopes of undermining Trump’s legitimacy and hamstringing his administration. Not surprisingly, among the public, Republicans and Democrats draw different conclusions from what we know so far. In a recent Gallup poll, 69 percent of Republicans said that Trump had done nothing wrong with regard to Russian actions in 2016; only 4 percent of Democrats shared that

view, with most saying that Trump's actions were illegal (43 percent) or unethical (49 percent).⁵⁵

Most worrisome is that the asymmetric effect of the threat will make it hard to respond—a danger magnified by the fact that the side that benefited is in the strongest position to determine that response. Prior to the election, Senator Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) reportedly prevented Obama from calling out Russian efforts to help Trump, threatening to discredit any such charge as partisan politics.⁵⁶ And Trump himself has denied the conclusion of the intelligence agencies about Russian actions, and it is unclear if his administration is giving much priority to the defense of election systems or countering Russian propaganda efforts.⁵⁷ After Obama imposed sanctions in retaliation, people in Trump's incoming administration reportedly sought to blunt their effects by promising to have them lifted.⁵⁸

Not everyone will act on their short-term partisan interests, of course, and it is heartening to see some members of both parties work together to uncover what happened and prevent further attacks. Republicans also voted overwhelmingly to enshrine sanctions against Russia into law, so that Trump cannot easily make good on the promise to weaken them. They deserve credit for putting country ahead of party in this case.

Leading from Within

Trump campaigned on an unabashedly nationalist platform of “America First,” promising to restore national greatness. Yet, his election underscored how much national identity has weakened in the face of heightened partisan identity. Although much of America's hard power remains intact, partisan polarization hampers the country's ability to use that power effectively, making it harder to forge agreements domestically and internationally, to learn from foreign policy failures, and to resist foreign interference. America's soft power—the attraction of its political system and values—is at risk of eroding as well.

There are, of course, no shortage of proposals designed to reverse the underlying processes of polarization, including reforms to the primary system and elimination of partisan gerrymandering. Evaluating the likely effect of such reforms is a task for others. In any event, we face a particularly insidious challenge because, by its very nature, polarization makes agreement on solutions elusive.

Polarization can impede the country's collective ability to learn from foreign policy failures.

A more modest hope is that the costs associated with these pathologies will motivate people to work against them. The United States has enjoyed significant benefits from being at the center of the international order it helped to foster after World War II. The prospect of losing those benefits should spur political leaders to seek ways to moderate the effects of America's growing divide.⁵⁹ Otherwise, managing the international system while managing internal divisions is likely to prove a heavy burden. It is hard to see how a country so at odds with itself can lead a fractious world.

Endnotes

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13. Michael E. Flynn, "The International and Domestic Sources of Bipartisanship in U.S. Foreign Policy," *Political Research Quarterly* 67 (June 2014): 398–412. For an argument about the importance of bringing opposition elites into the "inner circle," see Elizabeth N. Saunders, "War and the Inner Circle: Democratic Elites and the Politics of Using Force," *Security Studies* 24 (July 2015): 466–501.
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27. The U.S. Department of State, “Treaties Pending in the Senate,” Updated May 8, 2017, Accessed September 19, 2017, <https://www.state.gov/s/l/treaty/pending/>.
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