

GLOBAL AND REGIONAL ORDER

THE 9/11 ERA IS NOW HISTORY

What Comes Next for U.S. Foreign Policy

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9/11 cast a long shadow over the United States. The events of 2020 have finally brought the 9/11 era to a close.



The 9/11 era is an era ultimately defined by defeat. America didn't win its wars; it withdrew and is still withdrawing from them.



America is now struggling with what comes next. Donald Trump's election was a reaction to the failings of the 9/11 era. But while Joe Biden's election looks like an act of restoration, his new administration will not be able to simply revert back to past practices.

Over the last decade, the 9/11 era has started to become history. The events of that day two decades ago have cast a long shadow on America, and especially American foreign policy. While the centrality of terrorism in America's political conscience and discourse has been waning for some time, the events of the past year in the United States have brought about a clear end to the era. The George Floyd protests¹ and America's attempts to wrestle with systemic racism; the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent economic crisis; and the crisis of democracy that is the Trump administration have all replaced fears of terrorist attacks as a priority for most Americans. During the 2020 election »terrorism«, »al Qaeda«, and »ISIS« are terms that have barely been uttered. That stands in stark contrast to every previous presidential election since 2000.

America just had a post 9/11 election because the 9/11 era is over. The question now is: what comes next?

Describing a time period as an »era« is a historical tool used to help make sense of the past. Historian Eric Hobsbawm famously described the 19th century as the »long century«² ending in 1914, and the twentieth century as a short century ending in 1989. Any definition of an era will always be subjective and somewhat imprecise. Describing the first two decades of the 21st century as the 9/11 era will strike some as off. After all, many other things happened, such as the rise of China³, the technological revolution embodied in the explosion of Internet 2.0 and mobile communications, and a major global financial crisis. Many of the political and economic currents of today – especially hyper partisanship in Washington and the dominance of neoliberal economics began well before 9/11. But for the United States, 9/11 was a defining moment. It was a clear pivot point marking the end of the immediate post-Cold War era, in which America felt it was the world's sole invulnerable superpower, and the beginning of a new period defined by the politics of fear and war.

America is now struggling with the aftermath of the 9/11 era because it is an era ultimately defined by defeat. America didn't win its wars; it withdrew and is still withdrawing from them. In Trump's defining slogan, there is a recognition of defeat. »Make America Great Again,« posits that right now, America isn't great. As German historian⁴ Peter Bergmann concluded⁵, »defeat« is the »history that hurts«, a history that leaves a lasting scar on the psyche of a nation.

THE CONTRADICTIONS OF THE 9/11 ERA

The 9/11 era was one defined by contradiction. It saw a tremendous expansion of state power including the military,

the police, and the state's intelligence capabilities. But it also saw a tremendous weakening, including a hollowing out of the government's ability to build infrastructure or support the wellbeing of its public. The Bush administration pursued a right-wing agenda that cut taxes and weakened the capacity of the state, as the catastrophic response to Hurricane Katrina demonstrated. At the same time that Americans unified behind the troops, the country became more polarized. The »fight for freedom« abroad also enabled an authoritarian streak, ever present in the American right, to emerge *en force*. This began with the use of state torture, indefinite detention and mass surveillance by the Bush administration and culminated in the Trump administration using the Department of Justice⁶, Intelligence Community, and Department of Homeland Security⁷ as political forces.

After 9/11, other foreign policy priorities took a back seat to combatting terrorism. It was the great generational struggle of the time. But unlike previous generational struggles, the American people as a whole weren't asked to make sacrifices. During World War II, America engaged in a whole-of-country response. Factories were repurposed, children planted victory gardens, and there were rations for all Americans placed on food, supplies, and common goods. During the Cold War, massive public investment into education, infrastructure, science and technology prompted efforts to land a man on the moon and invent the Internet.

The »war on terror,« unlike the Cold War, did not call for a concerted national effort. Instead, taxes were cut. Following 9/11, Americans were told to go shopping and keep the economy humming. There was no call for Americans to reduce their oil and gas consumption to break the country's dependence on foreign oil or a big green initiative to lead the world in a pivot to cleaner energy sources. Americans were asked to continue to live their lives as before. Meanwhile, the public believed that the government, in the form of a massively expanded national security apparatus, would be there to protect everyone.

The war on terror felt sustainable to Washington. The financial costs, while high, were manageable. And the human toll in lives lost, catastrophic injuries, and the unseen injuries like Traumatic Brain Injury and post-traumatic stress were borne not by the population as whole, like in Vietnam because of the draft, but by America's all-volunteer force, which was never designed to fight decades long conflicts. As the wars dragged on and the toll mounted, American politicians cheered their sacrifices, all the while America's underfunded veteran affairs hospitals weren't given the resources to cope.

While the burden of the 9/11 wars was borne by US troops and their families, all Americans paid in other ways, making massive sacrifices of certain civil liberties and freedoms, pav-

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/article/george-floyd-protests-timeline.html>

² <https://www.newyorker.com/books/under-review/eric-hobsbawm-the-communist-who-explained-history>

³ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinas-rise>

⁴ <https://history.ufl.edu/directory/emeritus-faculty/266-2/>

⁵ <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40108749?seq=1>

⁶ <https://www.americanoversight.org/investigation/trump-administrations-politicization-justice-department>

⁷ <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/whistleblower-details-alleged-politicization-intelligence-dhs/story?id=72904622>

ing the way for warrantless wiretapping and allowing horrible things to be done in their name, like waterboarding. And it meant that the people doing the protecting were beyond reproach.

As the COVID-19 pandemic struck earlier this year, the American state was nowhere to be found. This was not simply due to the incompetence and negligence of Donald Trump, but also due to a decade of austerity, which followed decades-long effort of the right to de-fund the American state. This left the American federal government unable to cope with the current crisis. The vaunted Center for Disease Control (CDC) bungled initial testing, unemployment offices had difficulty providing benefits, and all the while, lines at food banks grew. America's for-profit health care system, which prioritized profit and cost-efficiency, lacked stockpiles of critical supplies. Health care workers were outfitted in makeshift and homemade protective equipment⁸, harkening back to images of American forces in the early years of Iraq bolting makeshift metal armor onto their soft top Humvees. Main streets around the country are now littered with vacancies and ›For Lease‹ signs. Yet Wall Street has not skipped a beat. As George Packer wrote in *The Atlantic*,⁹ »we are living in a failed state«, arguably a byproduct of the 9/11 era.

RECKONING WITH RACISM AGAIN

America has moved on from the narrow national focus on terrorism that was the defining political and policy characteristic of the 9/11 era. Perhaps this shift is most clearly seen through the national response to the murder of George Floyd and the current attitudes towards policing and racial injustice in the country.

Prior to 9/11, policing and racial tension was a major national issue in the US. The end of the Cold War prompted a renewed reckoning in America over systemic racism. The caught-on-tape beating of Rodney King by Los Angeles police officers in 1991¹⁰ and the acquittal of the officers involved sparked riots in LA. The rise of musical artists like NWA and Ice-T highlighted police brutality in a new way and for new audiences, bringing the issue into pop cultural and not simply political attention. The sensation of the OJ Simpson trial brought issues of police and race relations fully into the cultural mainstream. And a series of brutal police shootings including Amadou Diallo¹¹, who was shot 41 times by police officers as he was reaching for his wallet whilst entering his home, forced America to question the power and weaponry provided to the police.

But after 9/11, this scrutiny evaporated. The police were »the first responders« who ran toward the fire. They were lionized, much like health care workers are today. George W. Bush wore an NYPD windbreaker while throwing out the first pitch at the World Series.¹² The Strokes removed a pre-911 song about Diallo from their breakthrough album because of the line »NYC cops, but they ain't that smart.« Bruce Springsteen's song »American Skin (41 Shots),« also about the police shooting of Diallo, quickly disappeared, and didn't appear on a studio album until 2014, when it re-emerged in the wake of Trayvon Martin's murder.

For years, the national conversation on police abuse took a back seat to the reification of law enforcement. There was a war to fight, and the police were on the frontlines in this »war on terror.« The belief was that they needed to be prepared for whatever violence came their way and were outfitted appropriately as money flowed and a pipeline of used military equipment from the wars became available. The military-style kit outfitting US police forces is a direct by-product of war. Absurdly, this happened everywhere, not just in the places that were terrorist targets but in small towns.

In 2020, public perception of the police shifted back to before 9/11. The murder of George Floyd by police led to what may be the largest sustained protests in American history, gaining broad-based support across the country. Police forces finally made use of all their 9/11 era military kit – not to stop a terrorist attack but to club peaceful American protesters.¹³ The absurdity was not lost on the country and addressing issues of systemic racism and enacting police reform are now mainstream, enjoying broad public support.

STRUGGLE WITH DEFEAT

The 9/11 era was consumed by the struggle to achieve victory in its ill-defined and unwinnable wars. It is an era where America struggled to come to terms with defeat.

While the Bush administration simply persisted on in Iraq, Obama acknowledged the fruitlessness of remaining in Iraq and withdrew US forces.¹⁴ But he surged forces into Afghanistan and refocused uses counter-terrorism efforts.¹⁵ Under Obama, drone strikes escalated, Guantanamo Bay remained open, and the national security apparatus took advantage of new cyber surveillance tools in the endless effort to combat terrorism. Afghanistan remained a slog.

Meanwhile, distracted by terrorism and the Middle East, US foreign policy failed to address other important develop-

⁸ <https://www.propublica.org/article/medical-workers-treating-coronavirus-are-resorting-to-homemade-masks>

⁹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/06/underlying-conditions/610261/>

¹⁰ <https://www.npr.org/2017/04/26/524744989/when-la-erupted-in-anger-a-look-back-at-the-rodney-king-riots>

¹¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/02/26/nyregion/diallo-verdict-overview-4-officers-diallo-shooting-are-acquitted-all-charges.html>

¹² <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/31/sports/world-series-president-warms-up-then-throws-strike.html>

¹³ <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html>

¹⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/oct/21/obama-us-troops-withdrawal-iraq>

¹⁵ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/09/25/the-afghan-surge-is-over/>

ments such as the rise of antidemocratic movements¹⁶ around the world, multiple migration crises, and Russia's use of malign political interference weapons¹⁷. US efforts at democracy promotion abroad, which had animated US foreign policy in the 1990s, was hijacked by neoconservatives during the Bush administration and became associated with regime change – an association that continues to plague pro-democracy efforts to this day. A progressive foreign policy came to be centered less on values than the very realist concept of »restraint.« Obama's foreign policy, meanwhile, emphasized its pragmatism and desire to »not do stupid shit,«¹⁸ but was critiqued by the left not for inaction to stop autocrats, but for too much involvement in those conflicts.

The killing of Osama Bin Laden in May 2011 removed the enemy, enabling the country to begin to put 9/11 in the past. Reforms and other measures reduced abuses and enhanced oversight. By the middle of the decade, there was the beginning of a shift. Obama's pivot to Asia¹⁹ and Russia's invasion of Ukraine²⁰ reawakened the Washington foreign policy community to »great power competition,« turning the page on the War on Terror. Despite the emergence of ISIS, which pulled America overtly back into the Middle East, Obama's efforts to shift focus away from the region was beginning to take shape.

Today, few Washington think tank panels discuss counterterrorism. DC has moved on to focus on populism, technology, and geopolitical competition with China. The wars, of course, have not ended – US forces remain engaged in Afghanistan and the Middle East. These wars are now described as »forever wars« because America's nearly twenty-year engagement could seemingly go on forever. The Generals in the Pentagon don't want to leave, and Congress has no trouble keeping the resources flowing and the Washington foreign policy establishment has largely forgotten about them.

But as Washington's foreign policy establishment turned the page on the 9/11 era and easily pivoted, much of the rest of the country has struggled with what comes next.

The toll of the wars was felt most acutely in America's small and mid-sized communities – not in the progressive cities that most opposed them. By 2016, the places once the strongest backers of the wars became the strongest proponents of Trump's »America First.« Trump's calls to pull troops out and turn away from the world resonated. After Trump's victory, these parts of the country became the focus of much intellectual attention. Numerous books and think

tank reports studied the role of systemic issues like racism, immigration, economic stagnation, globalization, and the opioid drug crisis in contributing to the rise of Trump and populism. But rarely mentioned in these analyses was the impact of defeat.

Two country songs bookend the era. Toby Keith's 2002, »Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue« was a full throated nationalist call to arms with the »statue of liberty shaking her fist,« and Justin Moore's 2019 »The Ones That Didn't Make it Back Home,« about the death of a 22 year old and the mourning of the entire small town. Cliches of fighting »over there« so we can enjoy freedom here are still sung but have lost resonance. A sense of »what was it all for« hangs in the air as Moore laments, »they sure left a hole down here.« The 9/11 induced wars on terror were not wars that brought victory, rather an exhausted stalemate. America may not have lost but it certainly didn't win. It's no wonder then that Trump's anti-politics, his anger, his attacks on the Washington establishment, and his calls to pull back resonated.

Meanwhile, the American progressive millennial – so culturally dominant today – came of age when US foreign policy was not known for liberating Europe but for Abu Ghraib and extraordinary rendition. America is no longer seen as exceptional by a generation²¹ slammed by multiple recessions, saddled with massive student loan debt, trapped in an insecure gig economy, locked out of expensive real estate markets, and now expected to have a lower standard of living than their parents. America is often perceived among this younger generation as both inept and immoral,²² whose false notions of exceptionalism led it to blunder. For some, it may be better to urge »restraint« and pull back than do further damage at home and abroad. In the Democratic primary, there was essentially unanimity on the need to end the »forever wars.«²³ The defense budget long untouchable after 9/11, is now eyed for cuts. The US military recently announced it was pivoting away from counterinsurgency - the doctrine that animated US military planning in Iraq and Afghanistan. The US military has no interest or intention of fighting those types of wars again.

Historians have pointed to the outsized impact of defeat on a nation's culture. Germany's defeat in WWI caused a reactionary backlash which combined with economic crises to give rise to fascism. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent economic chaos of the 90s led directly to Vladimir Putin's authoritarian oligarchy. While military defeat can contribute to a lack of faith in a nation's purpose, economic shock can create a sense of desperation and anger at a society that seems broken. Military defeat and economic crises indeed form a toxic brew.

¹⁶ <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/news/2018/11/02/460498/rise-far-right-populism-threatens-global-democracy-security/>

¹⁷ <https://www.congress.gov/116/meeting/house/109537/witnesses/HHRG-116-FA14-Wstate-CarpenterM-20190521.pdf>

¹⁸ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/06/04/obamas-dont-do-stupid-shit-foreign-policy/>

¹⁹ <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-american-pivot-to-asia/>

²⁰ <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-ukraine>

²¹ <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/essay/millennial-life-how-young-adulthood-today-compares-with-prior-generations/>

²² <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/news/2019/06/12/471024/american-foreign-policy-left-young-voters-behind/>

²³ <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2020/08/17/democratic-party-platform-calls-for-better-pay-for-troops-ending-forever-wars/>

The fear throughout 2020 was that the US election would cause a democratic rupture. With right wing paramilitary groups coming out of the shadows, a President intent on operating outside the bounds of the law and all norms, and progressives ready to take to America's streets, there was a growing sense that the country could careen toward a democracy-ending crisis. But while the election was closer than the polls suggested, the actual election proceeded smoothly. America's aged democratic institutions held, despite Trump's absurd cries of fraud. America chose, fairly decisively, the safe and familiar hands of former Vice President Biden, who pledged to restore the »soul of America.« While the Biden presidential victory may seem like restoration of the Obama-era, the situation in which they find themselves could not be more different.

WHAT DOES THE CURRENT ERA MEAN FOR US FOREIGN POLICY?

Following the 2020 election, what will this new chapter in American history mean for its role in the world?

This is, after all, a time of changing global dynamics. It has almost become cliché to point out that international politics have entered a renewed stage of great power competition between democracies, including the United States and Europe, and authoritarian states, primarily China and Russia. The question has been raised whether the United States finds itself in a »new cold war« vis a vis China. While the assessment that we are in a new great power competition has merit, there are many problems with the Cold War framing – not the least of which is that the very idea of the strategy of containment as laid out by George Kennan was premised on the prediction that the Soviet Union would soon collapse upon itself. There are no such illusions today about the end state of competition with China. The goal, as outlined by Jake Sullivan and Kurt Campbell²⁴ should be »a steady state of clear-eyed coexistence on terms favorable to U.S. interests and values.«

And yet, this is a competition between great powers taking place in the nuclear age. It is unlikely to escalate into armed conflict because both sides are aware of the devastating, lose-lose, costs. The situation we are left with is great powers competing with one another on most, if not all, of the tools of state short of war. This competition on the economic, political, and intelligence planes has its similarities with the rivalry between the US and the Soviet Union but is a markedly different strategy with different goals.

This focus on China will mean a renewed attention to a national revival. The response to 9/11 was divorced largely from domestic conditions and did not call for any broader national strategy. But competing with an alternative vision of government and how to organize society with a potential

peer rival like China could wake America up once more to a sense of national purpose.

The coronavirus, however, has also exposed the frailties of America's neoliberal economic system, including the failure of its healthcare system, its lack of social safety nets, and overcrowded/under-resourced schools. And in a considerable shift, the country's aversion to state intervention in the economy has also given way to a bipartisan effort to keep the economy afloat. The crisis has exposed, and further exacerbated, the deep inequalities endemic in American life, but also opened the door for an entire new approach. A clearer vision of American priorities in both domestic and foreign policy will be necessary in this new era.

This means, in part, that America's foreign policy will not, and cannot, be as centered on the Middle East as it has been for the last 20 years and certainly not at the high levels of military engagement. As Tamara Wittes and Mara Karlin – two former US government officials who have dedicated their careers to the Middle East – recently wrote, »although the Middle East still matters to the United States, it matters markedly less than it used to.«²⁵ New developments in the Middle East will certainly attract high level attention from a foreign policy cadre who have made their careers working on the region. But the grip that the Middle East had over Washington is over. The shift may not be as profound as the one that occurred at the end of the Cold War, when a town full of Kremlin watchers and Sovietologists were suddenly made redundant. But it will be real.

There are, of course, still important policy objectives to pursue and the Middle East often finds a way to demand Washington's attention. The US will engage in nuclear negotiations with Iran and may seek a significant thaw in relations between Iran and its Middle Eastern adversaries. Additionally, for the foreseeable future, the US will likely have to continue limited military operations against ISIS and its affiliates in the region. And the commitment to the safety and security of the state of Israel will not be receding anytime soon.

What it does mean is that the US will be less focused on the narrow goal of counterterrorism and security in the region. It means America will be less likely to be pulled back into a military adventure. This will likely create some frustration in Europe, particularly among the energetic French who reasonably see events in the region, particularly in Syria, Libya, and Lebanon, as critical to French and European security. While the US will be engaged in Syria, given the lingering American force presence and the Counter-ISIL effort, America has been, and likely will continue to remain, largely uninvolved in Libya.

Furthermore, while the Obama and Bush administrations cultivated the autocratic Gulf states and saw them as bedrock American partners during the 9/11 era, moving for-

²⁴ <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/competition-with-china-without-catastrophe>

²⁵ <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2018-12-11/americas-middle-east-purgatory>

ward, America will find the Gulf states to be problematic partners. After the brutal murder of Jamaal Khashoggi, the war in Yemen, and domestic human rights abuses, America will seek to create some distance. As the US gears up to engage in a great power competition with China, largely based on the competing visions of democracy against authoritarianism, Washington will be less willing to compromise its values when dealing with undemocratic countries in the Gulf. Relations will likely remain cordial and pragmatic, but the red-carpet White House treatment will be gone. The US will more forcefully press for domestic reforms, as well as some changes to Gulf states foreign policy, possibly toward Iran. There is simply not the appetite – morally or strategically – for the trade of values for cooperation on narrow security interests.

The diplomatic deals²⁶ between Israel and Muslim-majority countries brokered by the Trump administration are unlikely to lead to any new breakthrough in the peace process. Instead, US-Israeli relations will be rocky, particularly given Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's clear partisan preference for Republicans. Netanyahu's overt partisan forays into American politics and the clear tension with the Obama White House may continue into a Biden administration. Netanyahu's policy of settlement expansion and his resistance to peace, has turned a wide swath of the progressive base deeply skeptical of the US-Israel relationship.

All of the animating issues of the Middle East, which all would have consumed the 9/11 era with its laser focus on terrorism and its causes now seem like a distraction in an era defined by great power competition and rebuilding a country devastated by a pandemic and economic crisis.

The 2020 election gave America a choice of what path they wanted to chart for this new era. Voters rejected the darker and divisive path outlined by Trump and they chose a more hopeful decent path outlined by Biden, making this one of the most pivotal elections in American history. America in 2021 will need to chart a new course for a new era, both at home and abroad. There is no way to return to the way things were before Trump because the era before Trump is over. The 9/11 era officially came to a close in 2020. There is no going back.

²⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/13/us/politics/trump-israel-united-arab-emirates-uae.html>

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Over the last decade, the 9/11 era has started to become history. The events of that day two decades ago have cast a long shadow on America, and especially American foreign policy. While the centrality of terrorism in America's political conscience and discourse has been waning for some time, terrorism as a topic was largely absent in the 2020 election. Issues of systemic racism and police brutality, which were major topics prior to 9/11 burst back into national consciousness with the murder of George Floyd. COVID exposed the deep contradictions of the 9/11 era. While there was a massive expansion of state power through the military, the police, and the state's intelligence capabilities, the era saw a tremendous weakening of the government's ability to support the wellbeing of its public. The events of the past year in the United States have brought about a clear end to the era.



Often lost in analysis of the recent period in American politics is the impact of the 9/11 wars. America is struggling with the aftermath of the 9/11 era because it is an era ultimately defined by defeat. America didn't win its wars; it withdrew and is still withdrawing from them. In Trump's defining slogan, there is a recognition of defeat. »Make America Great Again,« posits that right now, America isn't great. Defeat is the history that hurts and can leave a lasting scar on the psyche of a nation. As Washington's foreign policy establishment turned the page on the 9/11 era and pivoted to a focus on great power competition, much of the rest of the country has struggled with what comes next.



America just had a post 9/11 election because the 9/11 era is over. There is no way for a new Biden administration to return to the way things were before Trump because the era before Trump is over. There is no going back. The question now is: what comes next? The Middle East will no longer drive American foreign policy the way it has for the last two decades. The focus on China and Russia will mean a renewed attention to a national revival. The response to 9/11 was divorced largely from domestic conditions and did not call for any broader national strategy. But competing with an alternative vision of government and how to organize society with a potential peer rival like China could wake America up once more to a sense of national purpose.

Further information on the topic can be found here:
<https://www.fesdc.org/>