



Testing Assumptions to Craft More Effective Policies for the New Administration

JANUARY 27, 2021

MATHEW BURROWS AND
CHRISTOPHER PREBLE

INTRODUCTION

The Atlantic Council established the New American Engagement Initiative (NAEI) within the Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security to challenge conventional assumptions governing the conduct of US foreign policy. By forcing the foreign policy establishment to defend its thinking and policies, NAEI aims to open a new seam in the policy debate and generate a more lively, fruitful, and effective strategic dialogue—one that is capable of producing a sustainable, nonpartisan national security strategy for the United States.

As the Joe Biden administration populates the various national security departments and agencies and begins the process of drafting a new national security strategy, it should pause to consider the assumptions that guide its work. Many of these assumptions are grounded in decades of practice and habit. Some are so deeply held that they are accepted as true without a second thought, as natural as the air people breathe or the gravity that binds them to Earth.

But policymakers must always be alert to strategic surprise, wary of a failure of imagination, and attentive to how changing domestic and global trends may affect their ability to execute effective policies that keep the country safe, advance US prosperity, and preserve US political autonomy.

Methods well suited to the past may not work in the future. After all, the world that the Biden team confronts is unlike that which Harry Truman faced after the end of World War II. Similarly, the George H.W. Bush administration's effort to build a "new world order" after the end of the Cold War hinged on the United States' unchallenged economic, military, and diplomatic power. Unipolar moments are rare, and fleeting. The international landscape in 2021 is populated by a plethora of actors—state and non-state, large and small, status quo and revisionists. The United States should commit itself to constant adaptation, identifying new forms of US engagement that leverage its strengths and avoid costly errors.

The **Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security** works to develop sustainable, nonpartisan strategies to address the most important security challenges facing the United States and the world. The Center honors General Brent Scowcroft's legacy of service and embodies his ethos of nonpartisan commitment to the cause of security, support for US leadership in cooperation with allies and partners, and dedication to the mentorship of the next generation of leaders.

The **New American Engagement Initiative** challenges prevailing assumptions governing US foreign policy and helps policymakers manage risks, set priorities, and allocate resources wisely and efficiently. The United States confronts a range of national security challenges, but the marketplace of ideas defines these too expansively, fails to prioritize them effectively, and limits the range of options for addressing them. Unconventional thinking is needed to help Americans put dangers into perspective, and encourage them to embrace global engagement through diplomacy, trade, and mutually beneficial cultural exchange.

This paper summarizes the key assumptions that NAEI scholars have discussed in a series of meetings and dialogues between September and December 2020, including with current and former US government officials. In 2021, NAEI will publish a series of papers, each of which tests a major assumption, or related series of sub-assumptions, that underlies US foreign policy. (For more on NAEI's innovative workflow, see the inset box on page 2). The authors hope that this work generates new, innovative approaches to US global engagement that are less reliant on the use of force, actively facilitate global trade and cultural exchange, and constantly identify avenues for broader cooperation to address common challenges.

PREVIEW OF UPCOMING ASSUMPTIONS PAPERS

Assumption #1: Revisionist States are the Cause of Great-Power Competition.

This assumption, NAEI Senior Fellow Emma Ashford argues, hinges on the belief that states are inherently revisionist and will take aggressive actions to advance their position over others'. With the United States in relative decline, the thinking goes, the world is likely to see more instability as power becomes more diffuse and states like China and Russia establish their spheres of influence.

Ashford acknowledges that components of this assumption are true, starting with the reality that the United States *is* in relative decline. Additionally, some states do exhibit revisionist behavior and, because of imbalances of power, there is greater potential for conflict than in unipolar or bipolar scenarios. However, Ashford cautions that these facts do not make multipolarity inherently dangerous, in part because not all states are revisionist, and rising states can be accommodated in the international system.

Policy Implications: There is a danger of misperception leading to cycles of escalation if the United States attempts to block rising states from achieving what may be limited aims. US foreign policy circles generally disdain the idea that rising powers be allowed to establish spheres of influence, but Ashford recommends that this is a policy worth considering. US officials should clearly communicate red lines, and rely less on a forward US military presence in key regions. Such a policy shift, she concludes, may reduce the likelihood of conflict, and avoid the perception that rising states represent inherent and irreconcilable threats. *(Anticipated publication early February 2021)*

Assumption #2: Coercion, or strategies based on maximum pressure, can work to shape the behavior of actors in the international system.

Underlying this assumption is the belief that coercion—which can take several forms, including both military and economic—can achieve more than diplomacy, deterrence, or denial. In other words, policymakers assume that other states tend to capitulate rather than resist when confronted with a credible threat of punishment. As Senior Fellow Erica Borghard explains, one assumption about the effectiveness of coercion is that it derives from an imbalance of power. But, this focus ignores other aspects that contribute to the outcomes of coercive strategies. An implication of this argument is that, for the United States to successfully achieve its objectives, it should both maintain military and economic primacy on the global stage and *apply* its coercive military or economic power to advance its own national security strategy.

However, Borghard posits that the belief in the effectiveness of coercion tends to downplay the risks of blowback, security dilemmas, and inadvertent escalation, or simply ignores that coercion has a limited track record of success (for example, vis-à-

The New American Engagement Initiative workflow contains the following essential elements:

- 1** A systematic identification and examination of the core assumptions that have guided US foreign and security policy for decades.
- 2** Assessing the conditions that have materially changed since those assumptions were adopted.
- 3** Determining how those new conditions may affect, or even negate, those long-standing assumptions.
- 4** Proposing and testing alternate assumptions that account for these changed conditions.
- 5** Developing policies informed by these new assumptions.
- 6** Communicating those policy ideas to senior officials and opinion leaders.

vis Cuba, Iran, and North Korea). Beyond failing to achieve desired objectives, the record of US attempts at coercion is littered with unintended negative consequences that may ultimately have more deleterious effects than the initial issue at hand.

Policy Implications: US military dominance may drive other states to seek asymmetric means of countering and undermining the US position where it is more vulnerable. Moreover, as the balance of economic and military power shifts, other states may prefer to hedge against, rather than capitulate to, the exercise of US power. Rising powers such as China may offer new models of partnerships to those states. The United States should not assume it will be able to conduct economic statecraft or military coercion in the same way as in the past. (*Anticipated publication late February/early March 2021*)

Assumption #3: US leadership is indispensable to the health of the global order.

NAEI Co-director Christopher Preble explores this assumption in two parts. The first of these holds that the international system requires a single power to enforce the rules (per what political scientists refer to as hegemonic stability theory). The hegemon's preponderant power deters conflict between states, producing stability. Peace would also be conducive to trade and diplomacy, and, thus, all flow naturally within an international order dominated by a single state.

The second critical part of this assumption is that the United States is ideally suited to be the global hegemon. Its liberal values and geographic position as the *distant power* render it inherently unthreatening to others. A benevolent liberal power that demonstrates both compassion and competence will be rewarded for its magnanimity, with other states accepting the hegemon's role, rather than fighting against it. The United States possesses an additional advantage as the world's dominant economic actor, and it employs this power to stabilize currencies and facilitate global trade. If the United States relinquishes its historical role in the international system, the thinking goes, the system will collapse.

Pointing to the mismatch between the theoretical behavior of a benevolent hegemon that puts the interests of others above itself, and the United States' self-serving actions when it possessed predominant power, Preble shows that the United States has not consistently prevented conflicts, and has often fueled them. It also has not always adhered to the rules and norms that it expects others to follow, and its supposedly central role as an economic power is also increasingly dubious. The United States has not proven essential to the proper functioning of global markets—and has occasionally contributed to global economic disruptions. And, while the financial crisis of 2007–

2008 may be an exception, a diversified global economic order has witnessed far fewer shocks than in the mid- to late-twentieth century, suggesting that the international economy is more resilient than many believe.

Policy Implications: A more modest US approach would allow for a smaller, and less active, US military. Recognizing that the United States is a key player—but not the only player—would encourage US policymakers to take account of other states' legitimate interests. Also, a more realistic assessment of the United States' relative power and importance could better inform how it wields its influence globally. The United States can anticipate that it will have a seat at the table, but not always at the head of the table. (*Anticipated publication March–April 2021*)

Assumption #4: A permanent, forward-deployed US military presence is necessary to protect the flow of oil and gas, which is vital to the global economy.

For many decades, policymakers have assumed that American prosperity is dependent on reliable access to affordable sources of fossil fuel energy. More recently, the imperative of combating climate change has meant that accelerating a transition to non-carbon-emitting sources of energy by 2035 is necessary and possible. A paper jointly authored by Emma Ashford and NAEI Non-Resident Senior Fellow Robert Manning scrutinizes these distinct but related assumptions.

American attitudes toward energy date back to President Franklin D. Roosevelt's meeting with Saudi King Abdul Aziz during World War II. The two leaders concluded that the US military was needed to secure a properly functioning global energy market, and they struck a tacit energy-for-security bargain. That core assumption has sustained a military posture in the Greater Middle East ever since. But it's the 2020s -- not the 1940s or the 1970s. The Shale Revolution has resulted in the United States becoming the world's largest producer of oil and gas, and the global energy market's center of gravity has shifted to the Western Hemisphere. War-related disruptions from Libya, Iraq, and Iran have had minimal impact on either global oil flows or prices. Suppliers and consumers have a compelling vested interest in the undisrupted flow of energy to markets, and those markets have proved remarkably resilient and adaptable. In the near future, the energy market is likely to undergo yet another revolution, as consumers transition away from fossil fuels to renewables and nuclear power.

Policy Implications: The predominant US military posture in the Middle East has had little stabilizing effect on numerous regional conflicts -- from the devastating Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s, to the smaller but more geographically dispersed disruptions of the 2010s, including conflict and state collapse

in Libya, a protracted internationalized civil war in Syria, and the Saudi-Iran proxy war in Yemen. Instead of continuing to spend on a permanent military presence in the Persian Gulf aimed at facilitating the flow of oil and gas, the urgency of fighting human-caused climate change requires policies that can and will reduce carbon emissions sufficient to limit warming to 1.5 percent a year by 2035. The world is in the early stages of a transition to a post-petroleum economy, with the ascendancy of competitive renewable solar and wind energy as well as nuclear, hydro and other forms of renewable energy. *(Anticipated publication April–May 2021)*

Assumption #5: *New and emerging technologies privilege offensive strategies.*

Erica Borghard and Christopher Preble consider the claim that a combination of factors privileges offensive strategies of warfare over defensive ones. Many security experts believe, for example, that new and emerging technologies are reducing the relevance of geographic boundaries and borders as defenses, making the offensive nature of these technologies more salient for strategists. States that possess an edge in these capabilities will have a military advantage over their rivals. From the perspective of many in the United States, this is welcome news. New technology, they argue, will enable the United States to maintain global dominance at relatively low cost, and without having to mobilize public support for considerably larger military expenditures. Decades of ingenuity and effort provide the US defense industrial base with an incomparable advantage over rivals. Continued strong investment in a range of leap-ahead technologies will ensure continued US supremacy in all domains.

Other sub-assumptions about technology as it relates to prioritizing offensive over defensive strategies flow from the above beliefs. For example, many call on the United States to adopt offensive strategies because, in an offense-dominant world, defensive strategies are likely to be both less efficient and less likely to succeed. Failure to maintain a capability to credibly wage offensive military operations, possibly in multiple theaters and domains simultaneously, will undermine the effectiveness of US extended deterrence, and increase the risk of war.

Policy Implications: The opposite of these several assumptions is closer to the truth: attempting to maintain an offensive strategy will prove ruinously expensive, and is likely to fail even

if well resourced. New technology may, in fact, privilege the *defense* over the offense in some cases and, more importantly, the offensive or defensive implications of new technologies are more likely to be shaped by how they are incorporated into doctrine and organization. Moreover, strategic success or failure does not occur in a vacuum—the adversary gets a vote. Whether offensive or defensive approaches to new technologies work is also shaped by the interaction with other states’ strategies. Therefore, US doctrine should adapt to new realities. US treaty allies have access to capabilities that would significantly complicate revisionist states’ designs, and may be able to execute a deterrence-by-denial strategy that does not depend upon the United States. *(Anticipated publication May–June 2021)*

Assumption #6: *Democracy promotion will bring about a peaceful and prosperous world.*

Some research has shown that democracy is conducive to peace and prosperity, and many US policymakers assume, therefore, that a more democratic world advances core US interests. Driven by this belief, as lead author NAEI Co-Director Mathew Burrows shows, the current decline of democracy makes action today even more imperative in many policymakers’ minds. Furthermore, the assumption that the United States cannot be safe and prosperous in a world that includes dictatorships, and that peaceful coexistence with authoritarians is impossible, leads policymakers to regard the Chinese model as on par with the Soviet ideological threat to the West during the Cold War. US officials tend to denigrate or ignore diplomatic approaches that relate to other states as they are, and increasingly adopt maximalist and coercive strategies that seek to change foreign nations into how the United States wishes them to be.

Policy Implications: Such arguments, however, ignore spectacular US democracy-promotion failures in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and elsewhere. Democracy activists believe that they can affect change externally, even though most scholarship points to the importance of domestic conditions in fostering democratic principles. These factors cannot be easily influenced, and might be undermined, by foreign interference. With increasing numbers of young Americans and Europeans no longer believing in democracy, restoring the Western model from within may be the best way to lead a rebirth of global democracy and reduce the appeal of authoritarianism. *(Anticipated publication Summer 2021)*

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Mathew Burrows serves as the director of the Atlantic Council's Foresight, Strategy, and Risks Initiative in the Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security and is the Co-Director of the New America Engagement Initiative. He was appointed counselor to the National Intelligence Council (NIC) in 2007 and director of the Analysis and Production Staff (APS) in 2010. From 1998 to 1999 he was the first holder of the intelligence community fellowship and served at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York. Other previous positions included assignments as special assistant to the US UN Ambassador Richard Holbrooke (1999-2001) and Deputy National Security Advisor to US Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill (2001-02). He is a member of the DI's Senior Analyst Service. Burrows graduated from Wesleyan University in 1976 and received a PhD in European history from Cambridge University, England in 1983.

Christopher Preble serves as co-director of the New American Engagement Initiative in the Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security. In addition to his work at the Atlantic Council, Preble co-hosts the "Net Assessment" podcast in the War on the Rocks network, and he teaches the US Foreign Policy elective at the University of California, Washington Center. He is a life member of the Council on Foreign Relations. Before joining the Atlantic Council, Preble was vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute from 2011 to 2020, and director of foreign policy studies from 2003 to 2011. Preble was a commissioned officer in the US Navy, and served aboard the USS Ticonderoga (CG-47) from 1990 to 1993. He is the author of four books, and his work has also appeared in major publications including the New York Times, the Washington Post, Survival, Foreign Policy, and National Review. He earned a BA in history from George Washington University in 1989 and a PhD in history from Temple University in 2002.

The New American Engagement Initiative welcomes feedback. Its success or failure hinges on the willingness of leading experts to scrutinize prior assumptions, consider alternative explanations, and be open to new approaches that collectively rethink, reshape, and reinvigorate US global engagement.

Atlantic Council Board of Directors

CHAIRMAN

*John F.W. Rogers

EXECUTIVE CHAIRMAN EMERITUS

*James L. Jones

PRESIDENT AND CEO

*Frederick Kempe

EXECUTIVE VICE CHAIRS

*Adrienne Arsht

*Stephen J. Hadley

VICE CHAIRS

*Robert J. Abernethy

*Richard W. Edelman

*C. Boyden Gray

*Alexander V. Mirtchev

*John J. Studzinski

TREASURER

*George Lund

DIRECTORS

Stéphane Abrial

Todd Achilles

*Peter Ackerman

Timothy D. Adams

*Michael Andersson

David D. Aufhauser

Colleen Bell

*Rafic A. Bizri

*Linden P. Blue

Philip M. Breedlove

Myron Brilliant

*Esther Brimmer

R. Nicholas Burns

*Richard R. Burt

Michael Calvey

Teresa Carlson

James E. Cartwright

John E. Chapoton

Ahmed Charai

Melanie Chen

Michael Chertoff

*George Chopivsky

Wesley K. Clark

*Helima Croft

Ralph D. Crosby, Jr.

*Ankit N. Desai

Dario Deste

*Paula J. Dobriansky

Joseph F. Dunford, Jr.

Thomas J. Egan, Jr.

Stuart E. Eizenstat

Thomas R. Eldridge

*Alan H. Fleischmann

Jendayi E. Frazer

Courtney Geduldig

Robert S. Gelbard

Thomas H. Glocer

John B. Goodman

*Sherri W. Goodman

Murathan Günal

Amir A. Handjani

Katie Harbath

Frank Haun

Michael V. Hayden

Amos Hochstein

*Karl V. Hopkins

Andrew Hove

Mary L. Howell

Ian Ihnatowycz

Wolfgang F. Ischinger

Deborah Lee James

Joia M. Johnson

*Maria Pica Karp

Andre Kelleners

Astri Kimball Van Dyke

Henry A. Kissinger

*C. Jeffrey Knittel

Franklin D. Kramer

Laura Lane

Jan M. Lodal

Douglas Lute

Jane Holl Lute

William J. Lynn

Mark Machin

Mian M. Mansha

Marco Margheri

Chris Marlin

William Marron

Neil Masterson

Gerardo Mato

Timothy McBride

Erin McGrain

John M. McHugh

H.R. McMaster

Eric D.K. Melby

*Judith A. Miller

Dariusz Mioduski

*Michael J. Morell

*Richard Morningstar

Virginia A. Mulberger

Mary Claire Murphy

Edward J. Newberry

Thomas R. Nides

Franco Nuschese

Joseph S. Nye

Ahmet M. Ören

Sally A. Painter

Ana I. Palacio

*Kostas Pantazopoulos

Alan Pellegrini

David H. Petraeus

W. DeVier Pierson

Lisa Pollina

Daniel B. Poneman

*Dina H. Powell McCormick

Robert Rangel

Thomas J. Ridge

Lawrence Di Rita

Michael J. Rogers

Charles O. Rossotti

Harry Sachinis

C. Michael Scaparrotti

Rajiv Shah

Wendy Sherman

Kris Singh

Walter Slocombe

Christopher Smith

James G. Stavridis

Michael S. Steele

Richard J.A. Steele

Mary Streett

*Frances M. Townsend

Clyde C. Tuggle

Melanne Verveer

Charles F. Wald

Michael F. Walsh

Gine Wang-Reese

Ronald Weiser

Olin Wethington

Maciej Witucki

Neal S. Wolin

*Jenny Wood

Guang Yang

Mary C. Yates

Dov S. Zakheim

HONORARY DIRECTORS

James A. Baker, III

Ashton B. Carter

Robert M. Gates

James N. Mattis

Michael G. Mullen

Leon E. Panetta

William J. Perry

Colin L. Powell

Condoleezza Rice

George P. Shultz

Horst Teltschik

John W. Warner

William H. Webster

*Executive Committee
Members

List as of December 15, 2020



The Atlantic Council is a nonpartisan organization that promotes constructive US leadership and engagement in international affairs based on the central role of the Atlantic community in meeting today's global challenges.

© 2021 The Atlantic Council of the United States. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without permission in writing from the Atlantic Council, except in the case of brief quotations in news articles, critical articles, or reviews. Please direct inquiries to:

Atlantic Council

1030 15th Street, NW, 12th Floor,
Washington, DC 20005

(202) 463-7226, www.AtlanticCouncil.org