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“How much evil we must do in order to do good,” the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote in 1946. “This, I think, is a very succinct statement of the human situation.” Niebuhr was writing after one global war had forced the victors to do great evil to prevent the incalculably greater evil of a world ruled by its most aggressive regimes. He was witnessing the onset of another global conflict in which the United States would periodically transgress its own values in order to defend them. But the fundamental question Niebuhr raised—how liberal states can reconcile worthy ends with the unsavory means needed to attain them—is timeless. It is among the most vexing dilemmas facing the United States today.

U.S. President Joe Biden took office pledging to wage a fateful contest between democracy and autocracy. After Russia invaded Ukraine, he

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summoned like-minded nations to a struggle “between liberty and repression, between a rules-based order and one governed by brute force.” Biden’s team has indeed made big moves in its contest with China and Russia, strengthening solidarity among advanced democracies that want to protect freedom by keeping powerful tyrannies in check. But even before the war between Hamas and Israel presented its own thicket of problems, an administration that has emphasized the ideological nature of great-power rivalry was finding itself ensnared by a morally ambiguous world.

In Asia, Biden has bent over backward to woo a backsliding India, a communist Vietnam, and other not so liberal states. In Europe, war-time exigencies have muted concerns about creeping authoritarianism on NATO’s eastern and southern fronts. In the Middle East, Biden has concluded that Arab dictators are not pariahs but vital partners. Defending a threatened order involves reviving the free-world community. It also, apparently, entails buttressing an arc of imperfect democracies and outright autocracies across much of the globe.

Biden’s conflicted strategy reflects the realities of contemporary coalition building: when it comes to countering China and Russia, democratic alliances go only so far. Biden’s approach also reflects a deeper, more enduring tension. American interests are inextricably tied to American values: the United States typically enters into great-power competition because it fears mighty autocracies will otherwise make the world unsafe for democracy. But an age of conflict invariably becomes, to some degree, an age of amorality because the only way to protect a world fit for freedom is to court impure partners and engage in impure acts.

Expect more of this. If the stakes of today’s rivalries are as high as Biden claims, Washington will engage in some breathtakingly cynical behavior to keep its foes contained. Yet an ethos of pure expediency is fraught with dangers, from domestic disillusion to the loss of the moral asymmetry that has long amplified U.S. influence in global affairs. Strategy, for a liberal superpower, is the art of balancing power without subverting democratic purpose. The United States is about to rediscover just how hard that can be.

A DIRTY GAME

Biden has consistently been right about one thing: clashes between great powers are clashes of ideas and interests alike. In the seventeenth century, the Thirty Years’ War was fueled by doctrinal differences no less than by the struggle for European primacy. In the late eighteenth century, the politics of revolutionary France upheaved the geopolitics of the entire continent.

World War II was a collision of rival political traditions—democracy and totalitarianism—as well as rival alliances. “This was no accidental war,” German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop declared in 1940, “but a question of the determination of one system to destroy the other.” When great powers fight, they do so not just over land and glory. They fight over which ideas, which values, will chart humanity’s course.

In this sense, U.S. competition with China and Russia is the latest round in a long struggle over whether the world will be shaped by liberal democracies or their autocratic enemies. In World War I, World War II, and the Cold War, autocracies in Eurasia sought global primacy by achieving preeminence within that central landmass. Three times, the United States intervened, not just to ensure its security but also to preserve a balance of power that permitted the survival and expansion of liberalism—to “make the world safe for democracy,” in U.S. President Woodrow Wilson’s words. President Franklin Roosevelt made a similar point in 1939, saying, “There comes a time in the affairs of men when they must prepare to defend, not their homes alone, but the tenets of faith and humanity on which their churches, their governments, and their very civilization are founded.” Yet as Roosevelt understood, balancing power is a dirty game.

Western democracies prevailed in World War II only by helping an awful tyrant, Joseph Stalin, crush an even more awful foe, Adolf Hitler. They used tactics, such as fire-bombing and atomic-bombing enemy cities, that would have been abhorrent in less desperate times. The United States then waged the Cold War out of conviction, as President Harry Truman declared, that it was a conflict “between alternative ways of life”; the closest U.S. allies were fellow democracies that made up the Western world. Yet holding the line in a high-stakes struggle also involved some deeply questionable, even undemocratic, acts.

In a Third World convulsed by instability, the United States employed right-wing tyrants as proxies; it suppressed communist influence through coups, covert and overt interventions, and counterinsurgencies with staggering death tolls. To deter aggression along a global perimeter, the Pentagon relied on the threat of using nuclear weapons so destructive that their actual employment could serve no constructive end. To close the ring around the Soviet Union, Washington eventually partnered with another homicidal communist, the Chinese leader Mao Zedong. And to

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ease the politics of containment, U.S. officials sometimes exaggerated the Soviet threat or simply deceived the American people about policies carried out in their name.

Strategy involves setting priorities, and U.S. officials believed that lesser evils were needed to avoid greater ones, such as communism running riot in vital regions or democracies failing to find their strength and purpose before it was too late. The eventual payoff from the U.S. victory in the Cold War—a world safer from autocratic predation, and safer for human freedom, than ever before—suggests that they were, on balance, correct. Along the way, the fact that Washington was pursuing such a worthy objective, against such an unworthy opponent, provided a certain comfort with the conflict's ethical ambiguities. As NSC-68, the influential strategy document Truman approved in 1950, put it (quoting Alexander Hamilton), "The means to be employed must be proportioned to the extent of the mischief." When the West was facing a totalitarian enemy determined to remake humanity in its image, some pretty ugly means could, apparently, be justified.

That comfort wasn't infinite, however, and the Cold War saw fierce fights over whether the United States was getting its priorities right. In the 1950s, hawks took Washington to task for not doing enough to roll back communism in Eastern Europe, with the Republican Party platform of 1952 deriding containment as "negative, futile, and immoral." In the 1960s and 1970s, an avalanche of amorality—a bloody and misbegotten war in Vietnam, support for a coterie of nasty dictators, revelations of CIA assassination plots—convinced many liberal critics that the United States was betraying the values it claimed to defend. Meanwhile, the pursuit of *détente* with the Soviet Union, a strategy that deemphasized ideological confrontation in search of diplomatic stability, led some conservatives to allege that Washington was abandoning the moral high ground. Throughout the 1970s and after, these debates whipsawed U.S. policy. Even in this most Manichean of contests, relating strategy to morality was a continual challenge.

In fact, Cold War misdeeds gave rise to a complex of legal and administrative constraints—from prohibitions on political assassination to requirements to notify congressional committees about covert action—that mostly remain in place today. Since the Cold War, these restrictions have been complemented by curbs on aid to coup makers who topple elected governments and to military units that engage in gross violations of human rights. Americans clearly regretted some

measures they had used to win the Cold War. The question is whether they can do without them as global rivalry heats up again.

IDEAS MATTER

Threats from autocratic enemies heighten ideological impulses in U.S. policy by underscoring the clash of ideas that often drives global tensions. Since taking office, Biden has defined the threat from U.S. rivals, particularly China, in starkly ideological terms.

The world has reached an “inflection point,” Biden has repeatedly declared. In March 2021, he suggested that future historians would be studying “the issue of who succeeded: autocracy or democracy.” At root, Biden has argued, U.S.-Chinese competition is a test of which model can better meet the demands of the modern era. And if China becomes the world’s preeminent power, U.S. officials fear, it will entrench autocracy in friendly countries while coercing democratic governments in hostile ones. Just witness how Beijing has used economic leverage to punish criticism of its policies by democratic societies from Australia to Norway. In making the system safe for illiberalism, a dominant China would make it unsafe for liberalism in places near and far.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine reinforced Biden’s thesis. It offered a case study in autocratic aggression and atrocity and a warning that a world led by illiberal states would be lethally violent, not least for vulnerable democracies nearby. Coming weeks after Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin had sealed a “no limits” strategic partnership, the Ukraine invasion also raised the specter of a coordinated autocratic assault on the liberal international order. Ukraine, Biden explained, was the central front in a “larger fight for . . . essential democratic principles.” So the United States would rally the free world against “democracy’s mortal foes.”

The shock of the Ukraine war, combined with the steadying hand of U.S. leadership, produced an expanded transatlantic union of democracies. Sweden and Finland sought membership in NATO; the West supported Ukraine and inflicted heavy costs on Russia. The Biden administration also sought to confine China by weaving a web of democratic ties around the country. It has upgraded bilateral alliances with the likes of Japan and Australia. It has improved the Quad (the security and diplomatic dialogue with Australia, India, and Japan) and established AUKUS (a military partnership with Australia and the United Kingdom). And it has repurposed existing multilateral bodies, such as the G-7, to meet the peril from Beijing. There are even whispers of a “three plus one” coalition—

Australia, Japan, the United States, plus Taiwan—that would cooperate to defend that frontline democracy from Chinese assault.

These ties transcend regional boundaries. Ukraine is getting aid from Asian democracies, such as South Korea, that understand that their security will suffer if the liberal order is fractured. Democracies from multiple continents have come together to confront China's economic coercion, counter its military buildup, and constrict its access to high-end semiconductors. The principal problem for the United States is a loose alliance of revisionist powers pushing outward from the core of Eurasia. Biden's answer is a cohering global coalition of democracies, pushing back from around the margins.

Today, those advanced democracies are more unified than at any time in decades. In this respect, Biden has aligned the essential goal of U.S. strategy, defending an imperiled liberal order, with the methods and partners used to pursue it. Yet across Eurasia's three key regions, the messier realities of rivalry are raising Niebuhr's question anew.

CONTROVERSIAL FRIENDS

Consider the situation in Europe. NATO is mostly an alliance of democracies. But holding that pact together during the Ukraine war has required Biden to downplay the illiberal tendencies of a Polish government that—until its electoral defeat in October—was systematically eroding checks and balances. Securing its northern flank, by welcoming Finland and Sweden, has involved diplomatic horse-trading with Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who, in addition to frequently undercutting U.S. interests, has been steering his country toward autocratic rule.

In Asia, the administration spent much of 2021 and 2022 carefully preserving U.S. ties to the Philippines, at the time led by Rodrigo Duterte, a man whose drug war had killed thousands. Biden has assiduously courted India as a bulwark against China, even though the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has curbed speech, harassed opposition leaders, fanned religious grievances, and allegedly killed dissidents abroad. And after visiting New Delhi in September 2023, Biden traveled to Hanoi to sign a “comprehensive strategic partnership” with Vietnam's one-party regime. Once again, the United States is using some communists to contain others.

Then there is the Middle East, where Biden's “free world” coalition is quite the motley crew. In 2020, Biden threatened to make Saudi Arabia a “pariah” over the murder of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

By 2023, his administration—panicked by Chinese inroads and rising gas prices—was trying to make that country Washington’s newest treaty ally instead. That initiative, moreover, was part of a concept, inherited from the Trump administration, in which regional stability would rest on rapprochement between Arab autocracies and an Israeli government with its own illiberal tendencies, while Palestinian aspirations were mostly pushed to the side. Not surprisingly, then, human rights and political freedoms receded in relations with countries from Egypt to the United Arab Emirates. Biden also did little to halt the strangulation of democracy in Tunisia—just as he had decided, effectively, to abandon Afghanistan’s endangered democracy in 2021.

Indeed, if 2022 was a year of soaring rhetoric, 2023 was a year of awkward accommodation. References to the “battle between democracy and autocracy” became scarcer in Biden’s speeches, as the administration made big plays that defied that description of the world. Key human rights-related positions at the White House and the State Department sat vacant. The administration rolled back sanctions on Venezuela—an initiative described publicly as a bid to secure freer and fairer elections, but one that was mostly an effort to get an oppressive regime to stop exporting refugees and start exporting more oil. And when a junta toppled the elected government of Niger, U.S. officials waited for more than two months to call the coup a coup, for fear of triggering the cutoff of U.S. aid and thereby pushing the new regime into Moscow’s arms. Such compromises have always been part of foreign policy. But today, they testify to key dynamics U.S. officials must confront.

THE DECISIVE DECADE

First is the cruel math of Eurasian geopolitics. Advanced democracies possess a preponderance of power globally, but in every critical region, holding the frontline requires a more eclectic ensemble.

Poland has had its domestic problems; it is also the logistical linchpin of the coalition backing Ukraine. Turkey is politically illiberal and, often, unhelpful; nonetheless, it holds the intersection of two continents and two seas. In South and Southeast Asia, the primary barrier to Chinese hegemony is a line of less-than-ideal partners running from India to Indonesia. In the Middle East, a picky superpower will be a lonely superpower. Democratic solidarity is great, but geography is stubborn. Across Eurasia, Washington needs illiberal friends to confine its illiberal foes.

The ideological battlefield has also shifted in adverse ways. During the Cold War, anticommunism served as ideological glue between a democratic superpower and its autocratic allies, because the latter knew they were finished if the Soviet Union ever triumphed. Now, however, U.S. enemies feature a form of autocracy less existentially threatening to other nondemocracies: strongmen in the Persian Gulf, or in Hungary and Turkey, arguably have more in common with Xi and Putin than they do with Biden. The gap between “good” and “bad” authoritarians

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is narrower than it once was—which makes the United States work harder, and pay more, to keep illiberal partners imperfectly onside.

Desperate times also call for morally dexterous measures. When Washington faced no serious strategic challengers after the Cold War, it paid a smaller penalty for foregrounding its values. As the margin of safety shrinks, the tradeoffs between power and principle grow. Right now, war—or the threat of it—menaces East Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. Biden

says the 2020s will be the “decisive decade” for the world. As Winston Churchill quipped in 1941, “If Hitler invaded Hell, I would at least make a favorable reference to the Devil in the House of Commons.” When threats are dire, democracies will do what it takes to rally coalitions and keep the enemy from breaking through. Thus, a central irony of Washington’s approach to competition is that the same challenges that activate its ideological energy make it harder to keep U.S. diplomacy pure.

So far, the moral compromises of U.S. policy today are modest compared with those of World War II or the Cold War, in part because the constraints on unsavory methods are stronger than they were when Hitler and Stalin stalked the earth. But rules and norms can change as a country’s circumstances do. So Biden and his successors may soon face a daunting reality: high-stakes rivalries carry countries, and leaders, to places they never sought to go.

When the Cold War started, few officials imagined that Washington would conduct covert interventions from Afghanistan to Angola. Just three years ago, hardly anyone predicted that the United States would soon fight a proxy war meant to bleed Putin’s army to death in Ukraine. As the present competitions intensify, the tactics used to wage them could become more extreme.

Washington could find itself covertly trying to tip the balance in elections in some crucial swing state if the alternative is seeing that country shift hard toward Moscow or Beijing. It could use coercion to keep Latin America's military facilities and other critical infrastructure out of Chinese hands. And if the United States is already ambivalent about acknowledging coups in out-of-the-way countries, perhaps it would excuse far greater atrocities committed by a more important partner in a more important place.

Those who doubt that Washington will resort to dirty tricks have short memories and limited imaginations. If today's competitions will truly shape the fate of humanity, why wouldn't a vigilant superpower do almost anything to come out on top?

DON'T LOSE YOURSELF

There's no reason to be unduly embarrassed about this. A country that lacks the self-confidence to defend its interests will lack the power to achieve any great purpose in global affairs. Put differently, the damage the United States does to its values by engaging dubious allies, and engaging in dubious behavior, is surely less than the damage that would be done if a hyperaggressive Russia or neototalitarian China spread its influence across Eurasia and beyond. As during the Cold War, the United States can eventually repay the moral debts it incurs in a lengthy struggle—if it successfully sustains a system in which democracy thrives because its fiercest enemies are suppressed.

It would be dangerous to adopt a pure end-justifies-the-means mentality, however, because there is always a point at which foul means corrupt fair ends. Even short of that, serial amorality will prove politically corrosive: a country whose population has rallied to defend its values as well as its interests will not forever support a strategy that seems to cast those values aside. And ultimately, the greatest flaw of such a strategy is that it forfeits a potent U.S. advantage.

During World War II, as the historian Richard Overy has argued, the Allied cause was widely seen to be more just and humane than the Axis cause, which is one reason the former alliance attracted so many more countries than the latter. In the Cold War, the sense that the United States stood, however imperfectly, for fundamental rights and liberties the Kremlin suppressed helped Washington appeal to other democratic societies—and even to dissidents within the Soviet bloc. The tactics of great-power competition must not obscure the central

issue of that competition. If the world comes to see today's rivalries as slugfests devoid of larger moral meaning, the United States will lose the asymmetry of legitimacy that has served it well.

This is not some hypothetical dilemma. Since October 2023, Biden has rightly framed the Israel-Hamas war as a struggle between a flawed democracy and a tyrannical enemy seeking its destruction. There is strong justification, moral and strategic, for backing a U.S. ally against a vicious proxy of a U.S. enemy, Iran. Moreover, there is no serious ethical comparison between a terrorist group that rapes, tortures, kidnaps, and kills civilians and a country that mostly tries, within the limits war imposes, to protect them.

Yet rightly or wrongly, large swaths of the global South view the war as a testament to American double standards: opposing occupation and appropriation of foreign territory by Russia but not by Israel, valuing the lives and liberties of some victims more than those of others. Russian and Chinese propagandists are amplifying these messages to drive a wedge between Washington and the developing world. This is why the Biden administration has tried, and sometimes struggled, to balance support for Israel with efforts to mitigate the harm the conflict brings—and why the war may presage renewed U.S. focus on the peace process with the Palestinians, as unpromising as that currently seems. The lesson here is that the merits of an issue may be disputed, but for a superpower that wears its values on its sleeve, the costs of perceived hypocrisy are very real.

RULES FOR RIVALRY

Succeeding in this round of rivalry will thus require calibrating the moral compromises inherent in foreign policy by finding an ethos that is sufficiently ruthless and realistic at the same time. Although there is no precise formula for this—the appropriateness of any action depends on its context—some guiding principles can help.

First, morality is a compass, not a straitjacket. For political sustainability and strategic self-interest, American statecraft should point toward a world consistent with its values. But the United States cannot paralyze itself by trying to fully embody those values in every tactical decision. Nor—even at a moment when its own democracy faces internal threats—should it insist on purifying itself at home before exerting constructive influence abroad. If it does so, the system will be shaped by regimes that are more ruthless—and less shackled by their own imperfections.

The United States should also avoid the fallacy of the false alternative. It must evaluate choices, and partners, against the plausible possibilities, not against the utopian ideal. The realistic alternative to maintaining ties to a military regime in Africa may be watching as murderous Russian mercenaries fill the void. The realistic alternative to engaging Modi's India may be seeing South Asia fall further under the shadow of a China that assiduously exports illiberalism. Similarly, proximity to a Saudi regime that carves up its critics is deeply uncomfortable. But the realistic alternative to Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is probably a regime that remains quite repressive—and is far less committed to empowering women, curbing religious zealots, and otherwise making the country a more open, tolerant place. In a world of lousy options, the crucial question is often: Lousy compared with what?

Another guiding principle: good things don't all come at once. Cold War policymakers sometimes justified coup making and support for repressive regimes on grounds that preventing Third World countries from going communist then preserved the possibility that they might go democratic later. That logic was suspiciously convenient—and, in many cases, correct. Countries in Latin America and other developing regions did eventually experience political openings as they reached higher levels of development, and democratic values radiated outward from the West.

Today, unseemly bargains can sometimes lead to better outcomes. By not breaking the U.S.-Philippine alliance during Duterte's drug war, Washington sustained the relationship until a more cooperative, less draconian government emerged. By staying close to a Polish government with some worrying tendencies, the United States bought time until, late last year, that country's voters elected a coalition promising to strengthen its democratic institutions. The same argument could be made for staying engaged with other democracies where autocratic tendencies are pronounced but electoral mechanisms remain intact—Hungary, India, and Turkey, to name a few. More broadly, liberalism is most likely to flourish in a system led by a democracy. So simply forestalling the ascent of powerful autocracies may eventually help democratic values spread into once inhospitable places.

Similarly, the United States should remember that taking the broad view is as vital as taking the long view. Support for democracy and human rights is not an all-or-nothing proposition. As Biden's statecraft has shown, transactional deals with dictators can complement a strategy that stresses democratic cooperation at its core. Honoring

American values, moreover, is more than a matter of hectoring repressive regimes. A foreign policy that raises international living standards through trade, addresses global problems such as food insecurity, and holds the line against great-power war serves the cause of human dignity very well. A strategy that emphasizes such efforts may actually be more appealing to countries, including developing democracies from Brazil to Indonesia, that resist democracy-versus-autocracy framing because they don't want any part of a Manichean fight.

Morality is a compass, not a straitjacket.

Of course, these principles can seem like a recipe for rationalization—a way of excusing the grossest behavior by claiming it serves a greater cause. Another important principle, then, revives Hamilton's dictum that the means must be proportioned to the mischief.

The greater the compromise, the greater the payoff it provides—or the damage it avoids—must be.

By this standard, the case for cooperation with an India or a Poland is clear-cut. These countries are troubled but mostly admirable democracies that play critical roles in raging competitions. Until the world contains only liberal democracies, Washington can hardly avoid seeking blemished friends.

The United States should, however, be more cautious about courting countries that regularly engage in the very practices it deems most corrosive to the liberal order: systematic torture or murder of their people, coercion of their neighbors, or export of repression across borders, to name a few. A Saudi Arabia, for instance, that periodically engages in some of these practices is a troublesome partner. A Saudi Arabia that flagrantly and consistently commits such acts risks destroying the moral and diplomatic basis of its relationship with the United States. American officials should be more hesitant still to distort or destabilize the politics of other countries, especially other democracies, for strategic gain. If Washington is going to get back into the coup business in Latin America or Southeast Asia, the bad outcomes to be prevented must be truly severe—a major, potentially lasting shift in a key regional balance of power, perhaps—to justify policies so manifestly in tension with the causes the United States claims to defend.

Mitigating the harm to those causes means heeding a further principle: marginal improvement matters. Washington will not convince leaders in Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, or Vietnam to commit political suicide by abandoning their domestic model. But leverage works both

ways in these relationships. Countries on the firing line need a superpower patron just as much as it needs them. U.S. officials can use that leverage to discourage extraterritorial repression, seek the release of political prisoners, make elections a bit freer and fairer, or otherwise obtain modest but meaningful changes. Doing so may be the price of keeping these relationships intact, by convincing proponents of human rights and democracy in Congress that the White House has not forgotten such issues altogether.

This relates to an additional principle: the United States must be scrupulously honest with itself. American officials need to recognize that illiberal allies will be selective or unreliable allies because their domestic models put them at odds with important norms of the liberal order—and because they tend to generate resentment that may eventually cause an explosion. In the same vein, the problem with laws that mandate aid cutoffs to coup plotters is that they encourage self-deception. In cases in which Washington fears the strategic fallout from a break in relations, U.S. officials are motivated to pretend that a coup has not occurred. The better approach, in line with reforms approved by Congress in December 2022, is a framework that allows presidents to waive such cutoffs on national security grounds—but forces them to acknowledge and justify that choice. The work of making moral tradeoffs in foreign policy begins with admitting those tradeoffs exist.

Some of these principles are in tension with others, which means their application in specific cases must always be a matter of judgment. But the issue of reconciling opposites relates to a final principle: soaring idealism and brutal realism can coexist. During the 1970s, moral debates ruptured the Cold War consensus. During the 1980s, U.S. President Ronald Reagan adequately repaired—but never fully restored—that consensus by combining flexibility of tactics with clarity of purpose.

Reagan supported awful dictators, murderous militaries, and thugish “freedom fighters” in the Third World, sometimes through ploys—such as the Iran-contra scandal—that were dodgy or simply illegal. Yet he also backed democratic movements from Chile to South Korea; he paired rhetorical condemnations of the Kremlin with ringing affirmations of Western ideals. The takeaway is that rough measures may be more tolerable if they are part of a larger package that emphasizes, in word and deed, the values that must anchor the United States’ approach to the world. Some will see this as heightening the hypocrisy. In reality, it is the best way to preserve the balance—political, moral, and strategic—that a democratic superpower requires. 🌐