

Is America's Foreign Policy Incoherent?

By

Michael Fincher

American history is imbued with a long-standing skepticism of intervention and long-term commitments that began with George Washington's farewell address. While there is wisdom in this view, it is even worse to have an inconsistent and dysfunctional relationship with other nations. It is unfortunate but true that the United States has abandoned allies over the years—after they staked their survival on fighting alongside American troops. The world has not turned a blind eye to this fact.

After World War II, the nation abandoned the independent Poland cause, despite so many Poles fighting alongside the allies against the Nazis. Two decades later, the United States did not intervene in the Czech uprising (1968) when there was a cry for freedom from behind the Iron Curtain. The United States left allies in South Vietnam (Hmong), Lebanon (Maronites), and, most recently, Afghanistan. Other nations who fought with the United States were abandoned for political expediency. Once-allied regimes became undesirable and were left to their fate at the hands of revolutionary communists. The new revolutionary regimes often turned out not only worse than their predecessors but were devoted enemies of the United States.

American foreign policy is rightly called schizophrenic because it is rarely consistent. Built into the American system of government was mutual agreement between the executive and legislative branches of government. It took two-thirds of the Senate to ratify a treaty and an act of Congress to declare war. Early presidents were loathe to act without the endorsement of Congress in real and tangible ways.

Until World War I, American foreign policy was largely stable regardless of the political party in power. Whether democratic or autocratic in their form of government, allies of the United States could trust in agreements they made with the Americans. Unfortunately, that has changed as American foreign policy vacillated widely in the post-World War II period. This is a problem not only for allies but also for the United States.

The moment allies doubt American commitment, they are no longer incentivized to work with the United States. This matters because the US is losing standing amongst allies and adversaries. For example, over the past two years the United States imposed every possible sanction against Russia. Yet the Russian economy grew faster than the American economy in the first quarter of 2024. Two years ago, the newly elected president of South Korea discussed the need for a South Korean nuclear arsenal because the United States was seen as an unreliable ally.

China is regularly expanding its navy and coast guard and using them to prevent the transit of international waters by its own neighbors. [This week, the Chinese attacked](#) a Philippine ship in Philippine waters. [China also brokers deals](#) with the Saudis to reestablish relations with Iran.

[The US Navy claims](#) it ensures freedom of navigation for all nations as a principle but is clearly challenged to follow through on that promise. The US is unable to provide effective escort of ships through the Red Sea because the US Navy is the smallest it has been in over eight decades. The lack of American commitment to sea power is but one example of inconsistency in foreign policy. Some argue that the Houthi terror campaign in the Red Sea is succeeding, and the United States is failing.

The Budapest Memorandum (1994) offered security assurances to Ukraine if it returned Soviet nuclear weapons to Russia, yet when Russia violated that agreement in 2014 with its invasion of Crimea, the American response was muted. When Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, the United States provided indirect support for Ukraine that is prolonging the war but is insufficient to ensure [Ukrainian victory](#). Whether one agrees or disagrees with the American approach to Ukraine, the simple fact is that the past 30 years of American action offer a bewilderingly inconsistent view to Vladimir Putin as he seeks to advance Russian interests.

Despite the fact that 32 Americans were murdered and at least 10 taken hostage on October 7, 2023, President Joe Biden failed to actively join Israel in defeating Hamas. Instead, he chose to spend more time [criticizing Israel](#) for waging war on a regime that employs terror tactics. Israel, a long-time ally, can no longer count on American support because domestic radicals in the United States are a large voting block for the president.

Israel is not the only ally President Biden insulted. He [insulted Japan](#) as well and has demanded they fundamentally change Japanese culture and society. The US State Department is also engaging in bizarre practices of ridiculing and insulting strategic allies by pressuring them to adopt [cultural practices](#) that are patently offensive to them. This behavior is a result of government's capture by progressives. It is a recipe for American foreign policy disaster and inconsistent with long-time American tradition.

It would be incredibly difficult for the US to act in the Pacific without the use of air bases and ports in Japan. In the event of a territorial war in East Asia, both Japan and South Korea will be at significant risk of attack on their civilian population. Their navies and air forces are force multipliers for the United States. Again, the point is not whether the reader agrees with an individual decision by one presidential administration or another. The point is that the United States all too often vacillates in its positions and makes it difficult for allies and adversaries to predict the American position in the future.

Consistency, whether hands off or activist, is critical for the United States because stability and predictability in foreign policy is important to friend and foe. The Weinberger Doctrine of former Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger was an effort to offer a consistent framework for judging American action, but that effort largely fell on deaf ears. In the four decades since Weinberger offered his doctrine, American foreign policy has lunged from one failed military effort to the next.

The United States is no longer the global superpower it once was. It is more important than ever that the United States make wise decisions in its foreign policy. Allies are more important than ever, and they seek stability across administrations. A revanchist Russia and China are bad for the world. A consistent American foreign policy is the opposite. It is time the nation moved in that direction.

Michael Fincher is a Fellow of the National Institute for Deterrence Studies. The views expressed are his own.