A vision and policy agenda for a safer world

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Executive summary

Visionary thinking about how to build a more stable and secure world flourished in the aftermath of the Cold War, but has largely stalled over the last dozen years in the United States. The shock of 9/11, Russia's revanchism, China's rise, and a deteriorating international security environment have made long-term thinking seem like a luxury. Populism in the United States and other countries adds further to the challenge. Yet this paper argues that today's transnational dangers are too great to let strategic imagination be crowded out by traditional great-power rivalries. It also contends that some of the immediate causes of those rivalries are, in principle, addressable, if policymakers engage them creatively and energetically.

To avoid becoming disconnected from current realities and policy constraints, this paper outlines a four-part policy agenda—developed in greater detail in a forthcoming book—to make this vision concrete:

1. Mitigate or resolve major territorial disputes in strategically significant regions, especially those among great powers. Restoring something close to the low likelihood of war that was seen in the 1990s is essential; without progress here, other parts of the policy agenda will be very difficult to achieve.

2. Reduce the risks posed by advanced technologies—artificial intelligence (AI), modern microbiology, and nuclear weapons—through arms control and other collaborative means.

3. Develop international mechanisms and increase resources to mitigate transnational threats such as climate change and pandemic disease.

4. Redouble efforts to reduce global poverty and improve governance. Framed as broadly promoting human dignity, these goals may attract broader international support than more culturally charged and Western-oriented appeals to "democracy" and "human rights."

Sketching out a grand vision is easy; making it actionable is harder. This paper therefore proposes several tangible steps: designing a security architecture for Eastern Europe that protects Ukraine while lowering tensions with Russia; encouraging Taiwan and China to explore a mutually acceptable formula for a common-wealth-style arrangement that permanently preserves Taiwanese autonomy; expanding strategic nuclear arms control to include China; and developing new international safety tools—such as societal verification—to monitor and regulate AI and microbiology technologies.

In pursuit of a safer world

The first decades of the 21st century have produced dramatic technological progress and geopolitical upheaval. How can we benefit from the promise of technology while minimizing the risks of catastrophe and creating a safer world?

This paper articulates a positive, cooperative vision for such a world, with an actionable policy agenda intended for the United States, during the Trump administration and after, as well as for other nations, multilateral organizations, and nonstate actors. While many of its specific proposals are not new, pursuing them in an integrated fashion—and rekindling conversation—could yield potential and unexpected benefits.[1]

The premise is that the present course of history is much more fraught than many recognize, for two main reasons. First, great-power rivalry has returned in recent years, alongside existing flash points that could plausibly escalate to all-out war. Second, advanced technologies, especially AI, microbiology, and nuclear systems, are more dangerous for human society than many believe. Even in an era of great-power rivalry, therefore, the international community should develop a cooperative agenda to address new and transnational threats, while trying to mitigate existing rivalries.

While optimism about AI technologies and advances in microbiology and genetic engineering may turn out to be justified, it is unwarranted to assume they will produce net benefits for humanity.[2] Humanity should have learned by now that techno-optimism is a shaky reed on which to base hope for the future. The heady early days of the internet and globalization in the late 20th century gave rise to a 21st century afflicted by terrorism and great-power rivalry. Nearly a century earlier, the heady early days of electricity, the automobile, the telephone, and the airplane were soon superseded by the world wars.[3] The best of times can also be the most dangerous of times, and progress, even when it occurs, is often fragile and reversible.[4]

Today's global strategic discourse is fixated on great-power rivalry and the possibility of interstate war. As a result, much of the American strategic debate focuses on potential challenges from China and Russia, in particular. Some of this is admittedly unavoidable: if hegemonic and nuclear war cannot be avoided in the short term, there may not be any longer term to protect. Given China's assertive behavior and Russia's highly aggressive behavior in recent years, the United States and its allies are not wrong to want to strengthen deterrence of great-power war.[5] But this focus on great-power conflict is obscuring other existential threats—most notably, the potential for AI and modern microbiology, separately or in tandem, to be weaponized by bad actors.

Likewise, China's and Russia's territorial disputes, such as over Taiwan or Ukraine, remain dangerous and could result in catastrophe. War that begins over seemingly limited stakes can quickly and dramatically escalate to the point where the stakes become existential, as demonstrated by World War I. World War III, perhaps fought with nuclear weapons, really could happen. It makes sense, therefore, to see if those relatively modest territorial and geographic disputes, or at least some of them, can be addressed in a way that significantly reduces the risks of great-power war.

Would American voters support such a forward-leaning vision when pocketbook and domestic issues dominate U.S. politics? Some elements of this policy agenda may be a hard sell, but the agenda's core pieces—stabilizing great-power relations and reducing the risks of war with Russia and China—may prove popular with voters in the United States and elsewhere, even in an age of nationalism and populism.

Progress, setbacks, and challenges

Despite the dangers, the world is better off today than in most periods of history. Great-power war has been generally averted since 1945. Democratic governance, though facing significant backsliding this century, is still much more prevalent than at any time except the end of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st.[6] Fully half of all living humans enjoy at least a middle-class standard of living, as Brookings economist Homi Kharas has calculated.[7] That had never been the case before recent times. Many of the early 20th century's Millennium Development Goals, which guided international efforts to reduce poverty and improve human well-being, were achieved in whole or in large part, with child and maternal mortality and extreme poverty rates falling by half or more. Primary education and primary health care have spread considerably around the world, as well. To be sure, much of the progress was due to economic growth in China, India, Indonesia, and elsewhere, rather than tailored development assistance programs. There is room for debate about which tools are best for promoting future progress, but it is clear that the broad policymaking toolkit for improving human well-being has many potent and effective instruments.[8]

All this progress comes with huge dangers, however. New technological advances in fields like microbiology and AI potentially offer enormous progress and risks. On balance, as Sam Altman has persuasively argued, they offer hope

for a wealthier and, therefore, a more peaceful world since, the world's more prosperous and democratic nations have generally learned how not to fight each other since 1945.[9] However, there is a countervailing possibility: that rising powers could turn their increasing wealth and resources into military strength, and then assertively employ that military muscle.[10] Wealth can create incentives for peace; it can also spark ambitions and provide greater resources to wage war.

Moreover, in the wrong hands, or in the wrong context, the new technologies could be very dangerous and hard to control. The combination of AI with advanced microbiology could threaten a new form of "mutually assured destruction," adding to the dangers that nuclear weapons brought to the world (even as they delivered benefits by deterring war). AI already introduces risks from disinformation, deep fakes, and advanced cyberattacks but it could be used by criminals and other nefarious actors to harm individuals; devise war strategies; create swarms of networked, autonomous offensive robotic devices; or destroy critical national infrastructure with cyberattacks.[11] Modern microbiology could be used to engineer diseases like COVID-19, or worse, a combination of highly contagious and highly lethal properties. AI might assist in the development of such diseases, bringing two signature 21st-century technologies into an unholy alliance.[12] Notably, one of the great "godfathers of AI," Yoshua Bengio, worries that a superintelligent yet badly regulated AI might even try to hoodwink a rogue human actor to produce and then unleash an unprecedently lethal virus.[13] The risks are many and growing.

The Trump administration's 2025 AI strategy recognizes these dangers, but primarily in the context of ensuring AI superiority over China. AI safety must not only be an afterthought or viewed entirely in zero-sum terms vis-à-vis China. All nations have an interest in preventing abuse of this century's transformative technologies, particularly since unrestrained competition over them could exacerbate the dangers.[14]

For all the progress, much remains to be done to improve human dignity and quality of life while also mitigating the grievances and violent ideologies that perpetuate war. Conflict remains rampant in the broader Middle East, the Sahel and Horn regions of Africa, Central Africa, Ukraine, and parts of South Asia, with recent years among the most lethal globally since the end of the Cold War.[15] Death rates from terrorism, though reduced from their mid-2010s peak, with total fatalities estimated at around 7,500, remain comparable to the latter 2000s when the Iraq and Afghanistan wars still raged.[16] The long history and continued prevalence of violent extremist movements in today's world mean that we should expect such threats to persist in the future.[17]

Large-scale war, too, has unexpectedly returned to Europe after a long peace. East Asia seems semi-stable but fraught.[18] The fact that the taboo against using nuclear weapons has survived 80 years since Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and that we have avoided extensive nuclear weapons proliferation in that time should hardly make us complacent that this will continue, as recent scares in Ukraine and South Asia serve to remind.[19] And the United States, which some had considered the bedrock of the modern global order, now suffers from deep internal stresses and political chasms that may call into question its willingness to play a strong, internationalist role—and not only in the President Donald Trump era, but beyond.[20]

Yet history shows that cooperation is possible, even in fraught times. After the Napoleonic wars, the so-called Concert of Europe largely kept great-power peace for some four decades. During the depths of the Cold War, the superpowers negotiated limits on nuclear testing, developed hotlines to manage tensions, agreed to respect each other's early warning systems and territorial red lines, and avoided open conflict over contested regions. In the modern era, concepts such as "cooperative security," the "responsibility to protect" (R2P), and "global zero" for nuclear arms gained traction,[21] while the European Union expanded, lowering travel

barriers and creating the Euro and a larger "zone of peace" in Europe.[22] Transnational, collaborative policy networks were strengthening in this time period beyond Europe and North America, as well.[23]

Alas, these efforts waned after the 9/11 attacks, the ensuing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the 2008 global financial crisis, and then the return of great-power rivalry after 2010.[24] Some visionary thinking continued, to be sure, with scholars like Joseph Nye and others proposing new ways to think about power in the modern, more multilateral world.[25] The election of Barack Obama, who spoke of eliminating nuclear weapons and repairing relations between the West and the broader Islamic world, also inspired hope among many that a new era was upon us.[26]

But those days were largely gone by 2014. By then, the world had witnessed the failure of much of the Arab Spring reform movements, the Syrian civil war, the rise of the Islamic State, the Russian seizure of Crimea, Chinese militarization of islands in the South China Sea, and the return of great-power rivalry.[27] The perception of an ongoing, gradual decline of the middle-class dream in the United States (and elsewhere) contributed further to a sense of malaise, as well as to the rise of populist politics and economic nationalism.

Yet this paper makes the argument that the pursuit of a structurally safer world is not something to defer until (relatively) halcyon days like those of the 1990s, when some spoke of an "end of history."[28] Risks are coalescing and snowballing too fast to afford ourselves that luxury.

The big idea

This paper's central argument, to be developed further in a book project in 2026, is that the international community needs a vision for how to build a much safer world, and it needs to pursue the vision as soon as possible. The strategy's foundational pillar would be a renewed emphasis on trying to resolve outstanding territorial and sovereignty disputes that could lead to great-power war. Doing so would not only reduce the risks of dangerous great-power war but also increase the chances of developing a collaborative internationalist approach to regulate dangerous technologies—while still making these technologies' benefits widely available across the globe.

The vision includes expanded efforts to address other transnational dangers, including climate change and pandemic disease, and renewed commitments to ending extreme poverty and promoting human dignity, which should be the central organizing principles for international politics. Apart from being ethically sound, a common commitment to such an agenda might help create a sense of shared purpose among the world's nations and great powers. Attempting to pursue such a vision could also help defuse tendencies for today's great powers to demonize each other and counteract self-fulfilling prophecies that the United States and China (or Russia) are destined to clash.

Credible voices in the United States have, for example, sometimes depicted modern China as part of a new axis of evil. Recent secretaries of state have accused it of genocide.[29] This kind of rhetoric is incendiary and wrongheaded. Take, for example, China's deplorable human rights violations against groups like the Uighurs and political dissidents in places like Hong Kong. These abuses should indeed be criticized by the United States, but always with a sense of perspective and an appreciation for modern China's accomplishments as well. A better strategy would try to keep the temperature down, seeking to steer

China back toward behavior consistent with the rules-based order, rather than somehow winning a competition against China or "defeating it," as many Americans now advocate.[30] Working together on a constructive vision for human dignity, good governance, better controls on dangerous new technologies, and more effective strategies for addressing transnational threats may help create a tenor of great-power relations more conducive to global stability. The concept of promoting dignity may also prove a useful framing because it goes beyond simple economics to encompass the importance of functional societies, trustworthy institutions, and the rights of both the individual and the community, without triggering contentious debate about the relative importance of individual rights versus collective rights or "Western values" versus "Eastern/Asian values."

Competition and rivalry will inevitably continue in international politics, and strong deterrence and economic policies remain essential, particularly in the Western Pacific. That said, the United States should not treat China as an inherent adversary or pursue regime change—even rhetorically, as such a goal is provocative and unrealistic. Despite Vladimir Putin's heinous and barbaric behavior in Ukraine—which should indeed be opposed resolutely by the West—even Russia should not be seen as an innate, permanent foe.

To promote such a transformed world, I propose four mutually supporting and overlapping pillars of policy emphasis and effort.

1. Resolve or major territorial disputes in strategically crucial regions.

2. Reduce technological dangers from AI, advanced microbiology, and nuclear weapons through arms control and other means.

3. Devote greater resources to addressing transnational dangers such as climate change and pandemic disease.

4. Reduce poverty, improve governance, and promote human dignity around the world.

Major vectors for transformative global change

1. Work to mitigate outstanding territorial disagreements among major powers.

Although interstate war and contests over territory are far less prevalent in today's world than in past centuries, serious territorial disputes—in places like the Levant, Kashmir, Taiwan, and Russia's near abroad—endure and pose highly dangerous risks. Today's great powers generally do not covet each other's main territories or seek major territorial expansion (except in very specific places for Russia and China), but these unresolved grievances can give rise to violent, nationalist ideologies and produce devastating wars. They also prevent the great powers from truly cooperating on matters such as AI safety, since they currently have incentives to use AI against each other in their military planning and modernization efforts.

Breaking the cycles of grievance and grief is key to building a more cooperative global order. It is notable that most of the world's aggressors, in today's world and in history, frame themselves as resisting injustice or occupation, empowering a disenfranchised people, or regaining territory believed to be rightfully theirs.[31] They justify the use of violence against civilians by citing purported or real injustices done to their peoples, even though the cycles of violence that ensue usually make people much worse off on all sides. This dynamic is evident in both Hamas' October 7, 2023, attack on Israel and Putin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

It is hard to break cycles of grievance and grief, but perfect harmony among states is not needed to address the most likely underlying catalysts to conflict.[32] Local actors may resist external mediation in resolving their long-standing disputes, and poorly timed interventions can make situations

worse. Nevertheless, coordinated international efforts to promote geostrategic stability in several key regions at once, led by whichever external actor—the United States, the European Union, the United Nations, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, or others—is most credible, may make mediation more feasible and could produce novel solutions.

For example, stabilizing long-term relations between Russia and the West, which includes NATO, the European Union, and the United States, might require some type of new security architecture that provides for Ukraine's defense without bringing Kyiv into NATO, even in the long term. In Asia, encouraging China and Taiwan to explore various concepts for future sovereignty, such as a federation, confederation, or common-wealth, could reduce the risk of conflict.[33] To say the least, each of these ideas requires elabora-tion, a task I will attempt in a forthcoming book. None will likely be achieved quickly or easily. But even the quest for success can bring a measure of common purpose to world politics.

2. Reduce dangers from AI, modern microbi-ology, and nuclear weapons.

Regulating AI and microbiology is far more diffi-cult than nuclear technologies or other traditional weaponry, given the lack of large, distinctive physical footprints associated with many biolog-ical laboratories and computers. Verification also presents a challenge, as exemplified by failed efforts to develop a verification regimen for the Biological Weapons Convention, for example.[34] Yet the venture is not hopeless. New ideas, such as screening access to advanced nucleic acid synthesis tools, "societal verification" of top-tier scientists' activities, and using AI itself to assist in detecting illicit activities, may offer promise.[35] Yet, as we adopt new technologies in pursuit of a new form of arms control, it will be of paramount importance to avoid Orwellian scenarios of "Big Brother" watching you—and watching all the scientists, microbiologists, and top coders—in a way that abuses their privacy and civil liber-ties.[36] Moreover, such an effort to deter or

detect illicit activity can only be successful if the world's major powers and institutions are united in common purpose, rather incentivized to use advanced technology against each other. Hence, the importance of the first policy pillar discussed above.

On the relatively "easier" matter of nuclear arms control, new concepts are needed for a world of three nuclear superpowers—two of which are friendly with each other and generally hostile to the United States. One set of measures could emphasize transparency and predictability, perhaps borrowing from the START and New START treaties, rather than those treaties' common quantitative ceilings on launchers and warheads. Defensive and offensive weapons should be brought into the framework as well to complicate the calculus over what constitutes strategic nuclear parity, which, if done right, may discourage three-way arms racing. Specific deals can be pursued with recently proliferating coun-tries such as North Korea to cap and otherwise constrain their capabilities.

3. Assertively tackle other transnational dangers.

These dangers feature, most prominently, climate change; resource depletion and pollution in oceans, forests, and farmland; dangers of mass catastrophe in megacities and slums; mass extinction of many species of life on Earth; and pandemic disease.

Climate change illustrates the challenge. Global warming is undoubtedly going to worsen given trends in global energy use, meaning that the impacts of climate change will need to be managed rather than solved or reversed. Geoengineering or climate engineering may ultimately be necessary, but only if the great powers can restore sufficient cooperation to reach a consensus on what to do and at what pace. Absent coordination, different countries or groups of countries could make their own determinations of how much cooling would be optimal—and possibly act accordingly, regardless of others' views or interests.[37]

Pandemic disease poses similar problems. Pandemics are inevitable in a world of huge human populations, proximate animal populations, and rapid global travel. Mitigation, not elimination, must therefore be the objective. This, too, will require cooperation on early warning, the development and production of vaccines and treatments, the sharing of protective equipment, and a general willingness to prioritize countermeasures where they can do the most good. Controlling pandemics also reinforces the case for promoting public health, and, therefore, alleviating poverty and enhancing human dignity around the world.

Civil conflict presents a distinct challenge. While most wars are within individual states or at least regions, with limited potential for global repercussions, localized wars can have regional or global consequences, as we saw on 9/11. Thus, conflict mitigation remains a key element of any strategy for building a safer world. United Nations peacekeeping is no silver bullet, of course, but its tools of mediation and peacekeeping deployments improve the odds of any conflict being ended— and they do so at modest risk and cost.[38] They should be reinvigorated.

4. Promote human dignity and well-being around the world.

Reducing poverty and promoting dignity are moral imperatives, but these objectives are also smart geopolitics. Reducing income inequality and poverty can, over time, reduce the risks of war. Prosperity does not automatically produce peace, but poverty certainly does not promote it, either. Even if there are indirect causal links between poverty and conflict, as well as poverty and terrorism, it is striking that the world's wealthier countries today generally do not fight each other, while low-income countries disproportionately suffer from civil conflict and transnational violence.[39] For example, by one estimate, Africa, the world's least prosperous continent, has suffered slightly more than half of all global war deaths since 1989 despite having less than 20% of the world's population. Today, it

suffers from a greater prevalence of conflict than any other continent.[40] Low-income countries, on average, have almost twice the murder rate of the world average and more than three times the per capita rate of upper-income countries.[41] Poverty and weak security institutions contribute to this tragic situation.[42]

How can we pursue greater human dignity through poverty alleviation and improvement in governance? Part of the agenda should include reversing recent declines in developmental assistance. Some types of development aid are still provided ineffectually, and can suffer from scattershot programming, excessive regulation and paperwork, inadvertent reinforcement of corrupt governments, and inadequate targeting on countries with solid fiscal policy frameworks.[43] Yet years of experiences have shown that aid works in health care, direct support for the poor, the alleviation of hunger, and agriculture.[44] From the Green Revolution, which saw the development and promulgation of new crop variants and improved yields around the world, to countries like South Korea and Taiwan, aid programs have proven records of success.[45] Today's success stories are generally less dramatic but still quite numerous, particularly when aid is aligned with good fiscal and economic frameworks, as statistical analyses confirm. Aid should be selective and targeted but should not be underestimated in its potential to help promote successful development.[46]

Direct cash transfers to individuals in developing countries have demonstrated remarkable promise in permanently reducing poverty. They are now technologically feasible even in countries where most citizens do not have smartphones. A combined assistance program in the neighborhood of $100 billion over several years could make significant progress toward eliminating extreme poverty globally, by some calculations, and help individuals and families build modest assets that support their ability to earn money themselves in the future. [47]

Aid also need not remain permanent. Local governments in many developing countries are increasingly willing and able to design their nations' developmental trajectories, attract private investment, and ultimately "graduate" from traditional assistance. Some already have done so.[48] This idea may ease political resistance to increasing development assistance in today's major donor nations. So might allowing some development assistance to count toward NATO's target of spending 5% of gross domestic product on security, broadly defined.

A sustainable development strategy also requires stemming the erosion of the global trading and investment order. Even developing countries care as much about building up their roles in global supply chains as mitigating extreme poverty. To be sure, some targeted industrial policy to support strategic industries in the United States and other Western nations is warranted in response to China's dominance of certain critical supply chains. Yet it would be regrettable to see a new wave of mercantilist and protectionist international economic policy damage growth prospects in Africa, South and Southeast Asia, and Latin America.[49]

Conclusion

The international community, consumed by immediate rivalries and problems, needs a greater collective sense of urgency in addressing the root causes of current and future conflict, as well as other dangers. Policymakers understand-ably fixated on the short term in today's turbulent world must nevertheless ensure that long-term risks have a place at the table.

A workable global agenda will feature several interconnected strands of effort, including arms control for old and new technologies; near-term conflict mitigation, including peacekeeping; the promotion of human dignity and well-being across the globe; and new strategies for facing 21st-century transnational threats. It must also have, as its foundation, a major effort to resolve those limited yet combustible issues—such as Ukraine and Taiwan—that could produce world war.

The United States might not play a major role in promoting such an agenda until the Trump administration is over. Then again, with Trump's interest in being seen as a global peacemaker, it is hard to be sure. In any case, progress will be uneven across different lines of effort and issues. But small steps can add up—and the world can benefit from uniting in a common overall cause even when it struggles with individual issues.

Such an agenda is ambitious but realistic. It is grounded in the acknowledgment that we cannot afford to wait to develop a vision for a safer world, and pursue it where possible, because the dangers of inaction are too great. It does not seek to achieve universal harmony or eliminate old rivalries, or even to resolve all security prob-lems, end global poverty, or permanently prevent all pandemics. It certainly does not attempt to definitively curtail global warming or call for unilateral cuts to military spending by the United States and its allies. Instead, the purpose is to identify, manage, and mitigate the worst of the dangers, while gradually building a more cooper-ative world order over time.

In the United States, as well as in other countries, like Russia and China, there has been no vigorous debate about a strategic vision for more than 15 years. It is time to get back to it.

Endnotes

1   Although I am a critic of President Donald Trump, perhaps most of all regarding his domestic policies and dismantlement of organizations like the U.S. Agency for International Development, I do not exclude the possibility that some of the agenda here might in theory resonate with even the Trump administration's worldviews and foreign policy priorities. Trump has, after all, sought to define himself largely as a global peacemaker, and that fact offers considerable possibilities for promoting the agenda I develop here. Admittedly, other elements of my proposed agenda, such as a reinvigoration of global economic coop-eration, including for developing countries, may have to await a future American president.

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13   Bousquette, "A 'Godfather of AI' Remains Concerned as Ever."

14   "Winning the Race: America's AI Action Plan," (Washington, DC: Executive Office of the President, July 2025), https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Americas-AI-Action-Plan.pdf.

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