There is a considerable chance that the Democrats will win the presidential election in November and whether one approves of this outcome or not, it is worth thinking about what a new administration’s foreign policy would look like. Although in politics nothing is certain, as the sole remaining Democratic candidate Joe Biden is very likely to be the nominee and I will use the male pronoun when referring to the new president. He probably will bring with him many officials who had previously served him and President Barack Obama, and while the knowledge and experience of this cohort will be a major asset, the counterpart hazard is the impulse to urge policies that mimic or vindicate Obama’s. It is not necessary to deny the considerable achievements of that administration to note that the world now presents the country with new dangers and new opportunities.

If there is one thing Donald Trump’s critics and supporters can agree on, it is that his foreign policy has been unusual. This is not to say that it has been consistent: not only does the President himself sing the praises of unpredictability, he has been notoriously unable to discipline both his ever-changing foreign policy advisers and the civil servants who do so much to carry out foreign policy. Nevertheless, Trump has significantly...
altered America's place in the world, and his successor will have to deal with this legacy. What I sketch here for the new administration is quite conventional and unimaginative. But I think that policies that break more sharply with the past are improbable.

**PITFALLS TO BE AVOIDED**

Although foreign policy is not likely to be one of the major issues in the campaign, the new president is sure to have argued that Trump's policies failed. This points to the first pitfall the new administration should avoid, which is the “Anything but Trump” syndrome. It is common for a new administration to believe that everything its predecessor did was wrong. The political and personal temptations here are very strong. They should be resisted, however, because even a bad administration may have been onto some good ideas. In fact, Trump's odd combination of bullying and bellicosity married to a hesitancy to use force gives his successor opportunities that should not be wasted in the understandable desire to be the anti-Trump. As I will discuss, the pressure that Trump's policies have exerted on Iran and North Korea may bring into reach deals that Obama could not have struck.

A related pitfall is seeking to go back to the world of 21 January 2017. That world is simply gone. Among other things, Trump has taught the world the main lesson of International Politics 101, which is that states cannot bind themselves for the future. Everyone now knows that Trumpism, or something even worse, could return, and this means that it is not sufficient for friends and foes alike to trust the new administration. Things that many people believed were unquestionable before Trump's presidency have been questioned and cannot be unasked. There are real limits to how much any new administration can restore others' trust in the United States.

Furthermore, and linked to the two previous points, at least some of Trump's critique of traditional American liberal internationalism is valid, and more of it struck a responsive chord with large segments of the American public. To be sustainable, a new foreign policy must recognize and address this and gain the acquiescence, if not the support, of a coalition in Washington and broad sectors of public opinion in the country at large. In some cases, of course, an initially unpopular policy may prove its worth and then receive public backing, but a new president would be taking great chances in ignoring the discontent that led to Trump's rise (and Trump is not likely to be silent after he leaves office). Anger in large sections of the country, even if not generated primarily by foreign policy, can derail it if careful attention is not paid.
Trump’s affection for authoritarians and scorn for democracies might tempt the new administration to see democracy promotion as central to a new foreign policy. But to go too far in this direction would be a mistake. The American ability to affect others’ domestic regimes is limited, and democracy is not a cure-all. The opposite extreme also has dangerous appeal. No one wants a repeat of the Iraq adventure, but this should not lead to the conclusion that democracies cannot be established where they have been absent before, let alone that Arab countries have determinative authoritarian political cultures. In the justified reaction against American heavy-handed interventions, including, of course, military ones, it is important not to neglect the value of continuing American presence, including military presence.

A final pitfall is the presidential campaign itself. In the absence of an international crisis, foreign policy is not likely to figure prominently, with the possible exception of immigration, an issue that is enough entwined with domestic policy that I will put it aside here. This probably is just as well, because from the standpoint of what the president will have to do when he takes office, positions staked out in the campaign are more likely to be a hindrance than a help. Would President Obama have ordered the surge of troops into Afghanistan had he not called Afghanistan the “good war” during the campaign to differentiate himself from President George W. Bush and his opponent John McCain? John F. Kennedy’s campaign rhetoric about the missile gap and the need to be tougher against Fidel Castro came back to haunt him when he took office and discovered that the former was a myth and that his predecessor had bequeathed him a feckless plan for an émigré invasion. For the 2020 candidate, while attacking Trump on any number of points is both good politics and intellectually justified, staking out many positive positions, although appealing to academics and pundits, would likely prove a hindrance once in office.

Unfortunately, complete silence about foreign policy is not likely to be possible. Even if the public is not focused on foreign policy, position papers and press conferences are impossible to avoid. In dealing with countries that Trump has demonized—most obviously, Venezuela and Iran—the problem is how to articulate a position that urges the primacy of diplomacy and negotiation without seeming to simply back off the pressures that Trump has created.

WHAT SHOULD THE NEW POLICIES BE?
The current academic debate on “grand strategies” poses “deep engagement” against “restraint,” but actual policies are much more granular,
and it is not clear whether the new administration’s thinking would be
furthered or retarded by first engaging on these broad issues. Obama said
he did not need a Kennan—will the new president need (or want) one?
President George H.W. Bush was derided for admitting that he lacked
“the vision thing,” but in the turbulent times he faced, he may have been
well served by not going beyond the need to work with others and to
manage rather than master unfolding events. Despite the intellectual
appeal it would have to many scholars and the political support it could
garner from significant segments of the population, including many
Trump supporters, to adopt a crisper position involving a withdrawal
from major American commitments would be risky in a world with a
resurgent Russia and China and where much of the political elite (and
many in the general public as well) are ready to pounce on unpleasant
outcomes as showing the folly of inadequate American leadership.

On the other hand, while there has been much discussion of Trump’s
rejection of the “liberal rules-based order,” it is not clear that the new
administration’s policy can or should be based on returning to such
arrangements. The phrase disguises the heterogeneity of the institutions
and patterns of behavior that prevailed, many of which were neither
rules-based nor particularly liberal. Policy also is much more specific than
can be captured in these broad strokes. This is not to deny that Trump’s
disregard for the standards of behavior and treatment of allies that have
characterized much of American foreign policy since 1945 shows that this
concept is not completely empty. The rhetoric and transactional
approach of this administration show that whatever the faults and hy-
pocrisies of previous administrations, they valued the maintenance of
long-run relationships and often refrained from using many coercive
tools of leverage.

This indicates that, at least in some areas, previous rules should be
reinstated. The deployment of tariffs to gain political concessions, as
Trump has threatened with Mexico over immigration and the use of
national security rationales for economically motivated tariffs would have
been beyond the pale previously. This is even more true for threats to
break the Article 5 commitment to NATO allies who do not reach the 2
percent goal for defense spending, which previously would have been
seen as not only destructive but as illegitimate.

In parallel, although the United States always worked with dictators
when doing so served important foreign policy interests, only Trump has
lauded them. Here I think a new administration will have to recognize
the limits and failures of the hope developed in the wake of the Cold War
that liberal democracies would spread around the globe. For the
foreseeable future, the world will be heterogeneous in being composed of regimes of very different types. While the new administration should return to the traditional American stance of encouraging and supporting democracies, it should realize that overthrowing dictatorships is both difficult, as Trump has discovered with Venezuela, and often ends badly, as President George W. Bush learned in Iraq. Although President Kennedy's policy toward Latin America summarized in the Alliance for Progress was less than a complete success, his basic stance of a warm embrace for democracies and a cold handshake for dictatorships is not a bad place to start.

Trump cared little for human rights abroad, except when Christians were being persecuted. When the press pointed out that countries such as Saudi Arabia and Russia, with whom he had or sought close relationships, engaged in heinous acts such as killing journalists and political opponents, his response was to note that the United States did not behave so well either. Here the temptation to be “Anything but Trump” is likely to be very strong, and while Trump's dismissive attitude is to be deplored, it would be a mistake to veer in the opposite direction. There often are difficult trade-offs between human rights and other foreign policy values, and deals with repugnant regimes can yield many benefits. Because of the difficult balancing act and the uncertainty about whether pressing others to improve their human rights records will produce the desired effects, most administrations have been less than entirely consistent, and even Trump has on occasion criticized right-wing authoritarians for their transgressions. The new administration will undoubtedly have to chart a shifting if not meandering course.

It would also be a mistake for a new president to neglect the kernel of truth in what Trump said, which embodied a remarkable similarity to Obama's views: the American self-image as uniquely moral and altruistic is neither accurate nor a guide to effective policy. It is better for American presidents—and the American people—to grasp the fundamental truth of foreign policy realists from Thucydides to Reinhold Niebuhr, that evil is best limited by realizing that all human beings have the capacity to commit evil acts and that foreign policy often requires a sacrifice of some moral values in order to preserve others. This is a difficult message to deliver, however, as Obama learned. It is ironic that Trump could point to—and exaggerate—the ways in which American behavior was neither moral nor exceptional in a way that would call down massive criticism on any Democratic president. It would also be a mistake to try to instill in the American people the idea that ethics—and, even more, regard for others’ welfare and a decent regard for mankind—has not played a
significant role in past American foreign policy and should be neglected in the future. Although even the best of speeches cannot substitute for good policies, here they can contribute to educating the public to see both that the United States must heed external constraints in ways that are often discomforting and that American history, society, and power lead it to play a unique role in the world.

Trumpism is founded on the belief that the United States is enormously powerful and yet has let itself be exploited by allies and adversaries alike. If it only exerts itself more fully and carefully, it can set things aright. The new administration will surely disagree, believing that even if dictating to others sometimes works in the short run, to operate successfully over multiple issues and sustained periods, unilateral assertions will rarely do. The United States remains the strongest and most influential nation in the world, but only in unusual circumstances is it able to set the rules for others.

NARROWER PRINCIPLES
Turning to more specific guidelines, one guiding principle for the new administration should be that relations with others are rarely zero-sum, and they never are so with allies. The United States should seek economic and political arrangements that make all concerned better off, not those that advantage one of us over the others. A related principle to be followed is that in many areas, multilateral arrangements and agreements are better than bilateral ones. They can establish and be based on goals and standards that are widely shared, and they strengthen the idea that we have extensive common interests with most countries in seeing that rules are widely applicable.

Another way of getting at some of these issues is to say that the new administration should not seek short-run gains at the expense of weakening the structures that have been so important in generating a high degree of peace and prosperity. American power is so great that it can often coerce others into granting concessions that do not fit with general norms and principles that serve America well over the long run. Utilizing power in this way is a temptation to be avoided—not because the United States is naive or altruistic, but because wielding it will harm the United States over the long term.

One reason for this stance is that most major problems require the cooperation of allies. This is true most obviously for dealing with Iran, Russia, China, and climate change, central topics that can only be touched on briefly here. The most salient point is that while the United States is the most powerful country in the world, it is not all-powerful.
Ignoring or bullying allies sacrifices crucial leverage and the ability to ameliorate if not solve problems. Acting alone, the United States can weaken, if not destroy, international norms, institutions, and even countries. But building requires coalitions, often large ones.

On the other hand, the new administration should realize that Trump’s belligerent stance has not been without its gains. It has led allies to make some concessions to the United States, most obviously in greater (but still limited) contributions to NATO, and has put pressure on adversaries that should not be thrown away. The obvious example here is Iran. Although I would join Biden and all the other former Democratic candidates in decrying Trump’s withdrawal from the nuclear deal (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action or JCPOA) and his use of secondary economic sanctions to cut Iran’s economic ties to the rest of the world, I must also admit that these measures have gained more acquiescence from others than I expected and so have inflicted greater harm on Iran’s economy than I foresaw. But while they have contributed to domestic unrest within Iran, they have not changed the regime’s behavior. They almost surely have made Iran more willing to make concessions, however. The challenge of a new administration will be to use the leverage Trump has created to craft a deal that is better than the JCPOA, most obviously by extending the timeline for limitations on enriching uranium, bolstering the inspections regime, and perhaps gaining additional limits on the missile program and (although this may be beyond reach) its regional activities. It will be tricky to simultaneously maintain the pressure Trump has built (allies are sure to demand relaxation) and indicate to Iran (and American allies) that there is a new deal to be had. Here and with North Korea, the devil is in the details, and success cannot be guaranteed. But the main point is that from the standpoint of both domestic and international politics, it would be a mistake to refuse to acknowledge that Trump’s tactics have yielded some benefits that we need to preserve.

Three complicating ironies need to be faced squarely. First, the “America First” President has given priority to the threat that we believe Iran poses not to us directly, but to its neighbors. A Democratic president, however, will be more committed to working with allies (even if he or she is not as unconditionally pro-Israeli as Trump) and so will not be able to turn this fact to much advantage. Second, and related, it would have been easier for Trump than for the new administration to make a bargain with Iran. Just as only Richard Nixon could go to China, a Democrat will suffer attacks for any conceivable agreement on the grounds that if he had only stayed the course the Iranian regime would
have made more concessions, if not collapsed. Third, we cannot neglect how Trump’s policies have influenced Iran’s stance toward his successor. On the one hand, the Iranians may not understand the difficult position the new president will be in and may expect that he will want to show the contrast with Trump by quickly coming to terms. If they expect the new president to be anxious to make his or her mark by concluding an agreement, they will think that they have a real bargaining advantage, which will make the negotiations even more difficult. On the other hand, Trump’s policy has weakened President Hassan Rouhani and Iranian moderates and led the more hard-line faction to rig the Majles election. Iranians who argue that the best if not only path to regime security is to get nuclear weapons are now in a stronger position, and even those who disagree will be hard pressed to rebut the argument that any agreement could be overturned after the next American election.

More generally, Trump’s withdrawal from numerous agreements has created a major challenge for the new administration in the form of how to make American promises credible. Leaders (and scholars) generally pay much more attention to the problem of making threats credible than they do to the necessity for making promises credible, although logically the latter must accompany the former. In a world with better American domestic politics, one answer would be to enshrine the agreements in formal treaties (although these usually have withdrawal clauses, as the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty did, and always can be broken at some cost). For the foreseeable future, however, this is not likely to be possible, and adversaries will always worry about the rise of a new Trump, just as Kim Jong-un has to worry that while Trump is willing to disregard his tyrannical rule and massive human rights violations, his successor might well revert to the traditional American outlook. The problem is easier to discern than are solutions, but at minimum the new administration will have to take account of it.

China may be in a category of its own for its importance to the future of world politics. The issues also are numerous and difficult, and so it is not surprising that Democrats of goodwill differ on the preferred policies. But I think there is at least some common ground. First, Trump’s obsession with the trade balance is badly misplaced for a whole slew of reasons, including the fact that it is partly the result of arbitrary accounting rules. Although the concern with jobs lost is not misplaced, and trade policy should be as sensitive to its distributional effect as to its consequences for efficiency and overall economic growth, the new administration should shift attention away from imbalances. Second, the impact of trade on American national security (for example, by allowing
China to penetrate sensitive U.S. communication and infrastructure systems should not be confused with the desire to increase American exports. Concessions that endanger national security should not be exchanged for Chinese willingness to buy more American agricultural products. Third, Trump has shied away from what experts believe is the most important economic challenge, which is the Chinese mercantilist policies. Even with allied support, the United States will not be able to completely reform the Chinese economy—and, ironically, if it succeeded would make China a more robust economic competitor—but without a common front of many of China’s economic partners very little can be done.

Trump’s trade deal with China of mid-January 2020, far from being a great success, leaves multiple pitfalls for the new administration. First, even had the Covid-19 pandemic not intervened, China probably would not have increased its imports from the United States as much as it has promised, and the new administration will be left with the unsatisfactory ways of dealing with the shortfall. If it accepts the situation, it will be seen as weak and selling out American farmers; if it presses China hard, it is likely to fail and to call up domestic demands for increasing tariffs or other countermeasures. Second, to the extent that China increases agricultural purchases from the United States, this will largely be at the expense of American allies, who will justifiably complain that the United States is reneging on its general commitment to rules-based trade. Third, the agreement reinforces the role of the Chinese state in directing the economy, which contradicts the long-standing American policy of liberalizing it. In a perfect world, the new administration would renegotiate or renonce the deal, but this not being possible, it will have to construct a new policy on very faulty foundations.

The central question, of course, is whether, how, and to what extent the increase in Chinese power is a threat to American security, allies, and values. With its preoccupation with trade, the Trump administration has paid surprisingly little attention to this issue, which is epitomized by the American stance toward Chinese assertions of sovereignty and control in the East and South China Sea. The obvious opening statement for the new administration would be that the United States will seek good relations with the People’s Republic of China and respect its legitimate interests, but the rights and interests of the United States and its allies will be defended if China encroaches on them. Going beyond this is necessary but difficult and contentious. There are a number of excellent efforts to outline possible arrangements that would protect American vital interest while taking account of what China is most concerned about
and thereby avoiding unnecessary conflict, but, of course, these are only hypotheses and subject to debate. Perhaps the only settled point is a more general one: here, as in other areas, the new administration should take advantage of the pressure that Trump has brought to bear on the People’s Republic but should direct it toward a more coherent and focused policy.

The legacy of the Trump administration’s “policy” toward Russia is particularly troublesome. I use quotation marks because what the United States has done here is particularly confused and contradictory, in part because of congressional pressure and in part because of Trump’s short attention span. Starting with his presidential campaign, Trump has been consistent in wanting to improve relations with Russia—he could have referred to a “reset” had the term not been tarnished by its association with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Many international relations realists would agree with him, but their hopes were thwarted by the combination of domestic political barriers and the administration’s incompetence. On the one hand, the administration, pushed by Congress, has agreed to strengthen sanctions and to provide military aid to Ukraine. Trump has also pushed NATO allies to increase their defense budgets, with Russia being the only possible target (of course this might only be in service of reducing the American defense budget, although Trump constantly brags about having increased it). On the other hand, he has refused to criticize Vladimir Putin and, because his ego will not permit any doubts about his electoral victory, skated over Putin’s interference in the 2016 election, and he has rejected the pleas to safeguard the integrity of the upcoming presidential election.

The new administration should try for the best rather than the worst of these policies. Greater efforts are needed to deter Russian electoral interference, combined with building stronger defenses against such operations. Although a Russian attack on any of the Baltic republics is unlikely, any new administration should continue efforts, jointly with allies, to show Russia that any such move would incur costs and risks out of proportion to the possible gains. (Among the gains that Russia might foresee would be the weakening, if not the destruction, of NATO, and so maintaining good relations with allies is particularly important so that Putin would not imagine the alliance crumbling.) On the other hand, sanctions against Russia for its aggression in Ukraine should not be thought of as permanent, but rather as a tool to both indicate that such actions will be costly and to serve as a lever to broker new arrangements with Ukraine. These will require concessions on the part of Ukraine as well as Russia, and it would be foolish for the new administration to react to Trump’s behavior that led to his impeachment by giving Ukraine unconditional support.
Whether or not such efforts succeed, the United States needs a coherent Russia policy, one based on a balanced perception that Russia does not wish us well but has only limited power to do us ill. Contingency planning for Russian incursions in Ukraine and the Baltic republics should, of course, continue, but in a way that minimizes the obstacles to putting relations on a somewhat better footing. As long as Putin is in power, there are real limits to what can be accomplished here. But the fact that Trump called for better relations should not lead a new administration to believe that this is ill-advised or out of the question. A new strategic arms control agreement should be a very high priority, as should arrangements to limit the friction caused by the U.S. withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces treaty.

The Trump administration’s policy toward Israel and the Palestinians is at least coherent, but, again, presents problems for the new administration. The complete dismissal of the Palestinians’ interests on the apparent grounds that they are so weak as to have no choice but to acquiesce has led Trump to recognize Israeli sovereignty over the Golan, move the embassy to Jerusalem, and announce “the Deal of the Century,” which precludes the establishment of a real Palestinian state. Whether wise or not, these measures are fait accompli and must be contended with. Although previous presidents followed policies that differed somewhat from each other, all accepted United Nations Security Council Resolution 242 as the starting point and therefore pushed for agreements that involved quite sharp changes from the status quo. By contrast, Trump’s map essentially ratifies the status quo and therefore is, in one sense, less ambitious. Even if the new administration does not give priority to the Israel-Palestinian dispute, it will be in a difficult place, with the likelihood that the Palestinians will expect it to be more solicitous of their views than will in fact be the case and the difficulty of avoiding a sharp choice as to whether to take Resolution 242 or the facts on the ground as the starting point. One alternative was sketched by Trump during the 2016 campaign: the United States stands ready to support any agreement that the Israelis and Palestinians might reach. This would involve stepping back from a major role in shaping the agreement.

Although it might seem that the most pressing issue would involve the warzones of Syria and Afghanistan, the numbers of casualties may be low enough to sap urgency. Although changes that are underway mean that it is not clear what a new administration will inherit, the simplest projection is that the agreement with the Taliban holds at least tenuously and that Syria continues with an uneasy standoff. If these situations remain stable, there will be little public pressure for
significant change. If either country deteriorates, however, the administration will be faced with the unpleasant choice of sending more troops or withdrawing. The response may depend in part on the details of the unfolding events, but, for better or for worse, the latter course of action is likely to appear more attractive—or rather, less unattractive. Even in the best of circumstances, it will be up to the new administration to decide whether to carry out the final stages of the agreement with the Taliban and remove remaining American troops. To refuse to do would be to re-open the conflict; to comply would be to run the risk that al Qaeda or ISIS would regain a presence in the country, menacing American security (and the administration’s political standing).

Human rights and democratization are areas in which it should be easiest to reverse Trump’s policies without veering to the opposite extreme. Embracing authoritarian regimes when this is not absolutely necessary is clearly a bad idea, and even if the possibilities for and advantages of the American model and leadership have sometimes been exaggerated, they are nevertheless significant. In some areas, most obviously a possible nuclear deal with North Korea, human rights considerations can complicate American diplomacy, but accepting massive violations on the grounds that all countries are fully sovereign and that we can and should ignore others’ internal arrangements is neither moral nor domestically acceptable.

Climate change is perhaps the greatest threat to the well-being of the United States and the entire world, and this is where the new administration can and should completely break with Trump’s irresponsible policy, which not only rolled back American efforts but encouraged others to do likewise. Rejoining the Paris Agreement is only the first step, and whatever follows is sure to be difficult and contentious. Whatever is done, however, will require both pressures on and coordination with others, with a carbon tax and joint efforts at technological innovations to reduce and then end carbon emissions being obvious policies.

As I put the finishing touches on this article in April 2020 the United States and the world is in the grip of the greatest public health disaster in 100 years. The ramifications remain at least partly hidden, but clearly dealing with them will dominate the new administration’s agenda in much the same way that the financial crisis was Obama’s first order of business. This will predominately involve domestic policy, but the foreign aspects cannot be ignored. Indeed one obvious danger is that the pressing nature of the domestic crisis will leave little attention for anything else. But being a pandemic, the crisis by definition has major international elements, and the new administration’s choices will set the tone for much
of its foreign policy. Trump’s response has been to shun allies, single out China for its disastrous initial concealing of the disease, blame the international institutions, especially the World Health Organization for being ineffective, and seal our borders. This narrow nationalist approach has significant appeal, and the new administration will need to both follow more effective policies and develop a countervailing narrative that seeks to persuade the American people that problems that span borders can be surmounted only by working across them. Cooperation does not mean sacrificing American interests but harnessing the global efforts that are required. If we are war with the virus, we need as many allies as we can get. The need to hold China accountable for its costly deceptions must be balanced against or combined with advantageous joint efforts going forward. Specific policies of greater cooperation to develop and produce equipment and medicines are perhaps the easiest prescription for the new administration, but strengthening international institutions and habits that will reduce future dangers will be harder. Many of the measures themselves will be ad hoc, but building the necessary international architecture and domestic support will require the presentation of a coherent picture of America’s role in the world.

I do not envy those who will be in charge of charting a new course.