

Values, Strategy, and America's Competitive Posture

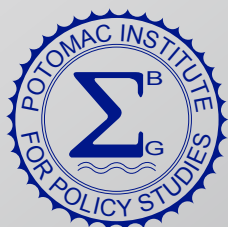
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**STEPS: SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY,
ENGINEERING, AND POLICY STUDIES**

ISSUE 8, 2023

STEPS (Print) ISSN 2158-3854
STEPS (Online) ISSN 2153-3679

Alan R. Shaffer; Moriah Locklear; and Tim Welter. "Values, Strategy, and America's Competitive Posture" *STEPS* 8 (2023): 8-17.



POTOMAC INSTITUTE PRESS

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STEPS: Science, Technology, Engineering, and Policy Studies
is published by Potomac Institute Press of the
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A close-up, vertical view of the American flag, showing the red and white stripes and the blue field with white stars. The flag is slightly wrinkled and appears to be hanging or draped.

Values, Strategy, and America's Competitive Posture

*The Honorable Alan R. Shaffer;
Moriah Locklear, PhD;
and Tim Welter, PhD*

"The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting.... When you surround an army, leave an outlet free. Do not press a desperate foe too hard."

—Sun Tzu
The Art of War



"One has to understand the Chinese intellectual game, which is what we call 'Go' [and] they call 'weiqi'. ...it's a game of strategic encirclement... our intellectual game is chess. Chess is about victory or defeat. Somebody wins."

—Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger
CNN, 2010

Across the 2021-2022 academic year, the Potomac Institute conducted the Global Competition Project (GCP) as a foundation to identify, elevate, and examine some of the most consequential aspects of the globally competitive environment in the modern era. Among transitions that the US strategic community faces, maintaining a competitive advantage among peer rivals is arguably the most influential. While shifting from a focus on counterterrorism, which remains a vital concern, the US confronts a societal-level competition that challenges US dominance in military, economic, and political spheres.

The project's study makes clear the interdependency of these spheres and the complex nature of the competition. For example, a flourishing economy is essential for government funding of a strong national defense, which in turn is needed to deter attacks that could impact other important national interests.¹ Competition to lead in the development and employment of technology impacts businesses and thus the health of the nation's economy. Especially for the United States, technology is historically consequential to the fielding of military might that renders required deterrent effects and operational capabilities to keep the nation safe and prosperous. More broadly, a continuous supply of scientists and engineers is the critical enabler for technology leadership, which is driving the development of a more competitive environment across STEM education.² Competition in certain sectors, such as food, microelectronics, metals and minerals, pharmaceuticals, and petrochemicals, can have profound impacts when global supply chains are interrupted. Each area requires a strategy for the US to remain competitive, so that the US can remain dominant in the interlocking vectors of national power.



GLOBAL COMPETITION PROJECT

However, we pose the question: Is there a grand strategy to preserve the competitive posture of America in the "international order"? What are the goals and purposes of the strategies addressing individual competitive domains? What is a universal strategy on which the multi-dimensional competitions can unite in a common effective position?

We posit that to ensure a secure and prosperous future as a world leader, the US needs to adopt a grand strategy based on a contemporary conception of our shared American values. Such a strategy should be tied to the fundamental ideals that Americans have sought throughout US history; a continuous journey toward "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" for all, as in the Declaration of Independence. Or, as codified in the preamble to the US Constitution, the ideals of the foundation of the nation still apply as doctrine that Americans can support: "To form a more perfect union, establish justice, ensure domestic tranquility, provide for the

common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our posterity.”

The current global and domestic environments challenge our ability to realize a strategy based on shared values. Somewhere over the past several decades, the United States has seemingly lost its unity of purpose: the shared vision of what the country is and its role in the world. In the 1990s, the concept of “illiberal democracies” was discerned,³ with concern that democracies worldwide might willingly abandon the fundamentals of liberalism (not in the sense of liberal politics, but rather the norms of individual rights and freedoms and rule by laws and constitution). In September 2018, *The Economist* decried that champions of the liberal democratic ethos have turned their backs on the very tenets of liberalism they espoused (see excerpt). Those tenets (liberal democracies, not left or right political ideologies) had helped deliver immeasurably positive outcomes for the quality of life of an entire era of humanity.⁴ The forewarned potential for illiberal democracies to abandon those tenets seems to be an accelerating trend.⁵

The world, it seems, is turning away from liberal democratic values—the basis for the greatest improvement in quality of life in the history of humanity, experienced by billions across the globe. This adverse trend has been most notably embodied in the rise of populist political movements and increasingly autocratic governments. Less controversially, there is a global erosion of international norms and institutions that America helped establish in the post–World War II era—those norms and institutions that led to unbridled growth and prosperity, not to mention America's posture as a global leader, in ensuing decades.

Excerpt from *The Economist*, “A manifesto for renewing liberalism,” Sept 13, 2018.

“LIBERALISM made the modern world, but the modern world is turning against it. Europe and America are in the throes of a popular rebellion against liberal elites, who are seen as self-serving and unable, or unwilling, to solve the problems of ordinary people. Elsewhere a 25-year shift towards freedom and open markets has gone into reverse, even as China, soon to be the world's largest economy, shows that dictatorships can thrive.”

American Exceptionalism

A review of the origins of American exceptionalism might elucidate the kind of shared values on which a contemporary strategy for ensuring our enduring security and prosperity should be rooted.

Immediately following victory in World War II, the US emerged as a beacon for liberal democracy. The United States guided the post–World War II international order by promoting free enterprise and democracy while adopting a strategy of containment to deal with the Soviet Union; ultimately providing a competitive edge that drove an arguably peaceful and prosperous era. American values were generally admired and often emulated during the Cold War when compared with those who empathized with the primary ideological rival of Western democratic values—communist dictatorships, as exemplified by Stalin's Soviet Union.

The notion that the principles guiding American society were “unique” among the world's nations dates back to 1835 when Alexis de Tocqueville wrote about America's “exceptional” nature. Tocqueville defined American exceptionalism as “based on liberty, equality before the law, individual responsibility, republicanism, and laissez-faire economics.”⁶ Over the years, some have interpreted American exceptionalism to mean American superiority. This was never the intent. Rather, America was an exception to the general rule that nations throughout history were primarily established around things like shared ethnicity, religious beliefs, or natural geographic boundaries, and not on a set of principled ideals.

The revolutionary idea in the founding of the American democracy was that all should be viewed as equals under the law. The foundational ideals were unique and exceptional at their time, in prioritizing individual liberty and equality as the cornerstones for governance.

After the Great Depression and World War II, America was confident and optimistic, embracing an ethos of exceptionalism and liberal democratic values. The US was a hegemonic great power among the world's nations, unified in sharing a common enemy in the Soviet Union. In establishing a “Strategy of Containment,”⁷ the US posited that Soviet demise was inevitable if they continued to elevate the communist state over individual liberty, fraternity, and free enterprise, as practiced in the US and free Europe.

Containment meant that competition amounted to maintaining deterrence, for example through the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and the Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe and create a strong economy across Europe to resist the spread of communism.

When the USSR was dissolved in 1991, it was widely recognized that the Soviets simply did not have a grand strategy that could compete with the West, economically or otherwise. Top-down, state-driven Soviet economics could not compete with the flourishing free-market approach of the West. The latter provided the means to field and sustain a long-term military buildup while the Soviets could not compete financially to sustain their military capabilities. Perhaps more importantly, the US embraced an approach of investing in technology that subsequently enabled that military superiority (the "offset strategy"⁸) while also vastly benefiting the growth of commercial markets.⁹ The US focus on R&D resulted in the US leading the world in development of the semiconductor, the computer, imaging sensors, the information technology revolution, the mapping of the human genome, and the development of quantum science among other technology leaps. It was an approach that inherently reflected shared American values of the time and the weighty aspirations that influenced the nation's birth.

To the world, the United States exemplified freedom and possibilities. President Kennedy had proposed a set of challenges, including a lunar mission, that was a characterization of the nation's persona: "We choose to go to the Moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy but because they are hard."¹⁰ Despite the strife in the US of the sixties, doing the "hard" things were embraced by Americans and envied by other nations. They transcended the fray of short-sighted political whims. Across administrations, they unified the country on shared principles that helped maintain competitiveness on the global stage both economically and militarily. In turn, they helped secure an enduring means for Americans to flourish and lead for decades thereafter.

The Competitive Landscape Today

The competitive landscape has changed. Today, both Russia and China pose particular challenges to the US national wellbeing.

Russia has shown an ability to field sophisticated weapons, albeit a remarkable inability to dominantly utilize them in their Ukrainian conquest. However, Russia remains a challenge in their ability to divert supplies of oil and gas, meddling in and exploiting regional conflicts, and in manipulating information and emerging technologies for their exploits.

The US now perceives China as its greatest competitive challenge. Following in the footsteps of his immediate predecessors, President Xi of China has led a very focused effort to increase China's stature in specific areas that will advance their national interests, both domestically and abroad. China is using economic, military, and other levers of influence.¹¹ In rolling out China's 14th five-year plan covering 2021 to 2026, Xi cited the need for China to develop an independent means for innovation that drives economic growth and influence, with advanced technology at the center of the plan. A translation of a portion of Xi's remarks is in the accompanying box.¹²

Xi's observations present aspirations that could well have reflected continued US research goals. The Chinese plan further targets "New Generation AI, Quantum Information, Integrated Circuits, Brain Science and Brain-Inspired Research, Genetics and Biotechnology, Clinical Medicine and Health, and Deep Space, Deep Earth, Deep Sea, and Polar Exploration."¹³ It also pledges Chinese leadership to pursue basic research, talent development, and focused research for strengthened industrial output.

Previously, in 2018, President Xi had established a goal for China to become the dominant power in AI by 2030, documented in a speech to the Politburo: "*that China must develop, control and use artificial intelligence (AI) to secure the country's future in the next technological and industrial revolution.*"¹⁴ At the time, it was noted that China would invest more money in AI by 2030 than the value of the entire Australian economy.¹⁵ In 2014, China had established a goal to be the dominant producer of microelectronics by 2030. The goal was reiterated in 2016, when President Xi said "the fact that core technology is controlled by others

"New-generation information technologies, represented by artificial intelligence, quantum information science, mobile telecommunications, the Internet of Things, and blockchain are accelerating breakthrough applications. The realm of life sciences, represented by synthetic biology, gene editing, brain science, and regenerative medicine is giving birth to new changes. The new manufacturing technologies of integrated robotics, digitalization, and new materials are accelerating the manufacturing industry's shift toward intelligent systems, focusing on services, and eco-friendliness. The development of clean, high-efficiency, and sustainable energy technologies is accelerating and will usher in a global energy revolution. Space and maritime technologies are expanding the frontiers of where humans can live and work. In sum, creative breakthroughs in areas such as information technology, life sciences, manufacturing, energy, space, and maritime are supplying ever more well-springs of innovation for cutting-edge and disruptive technologies."

President Xi Jinping
Peoples Republic of China

is our greatest hidden danger."¹⁶ Vice Premier Ma Kai reinforced Xi at the 2018 National People's Congress by stating, "We cannot be reliant on foreign chips."¹⁷ Reflecting a competitive posture of technology development, the 14th five-year plan states that the People's Republic of China will "formulate an action agenda for becoming an S&T powerhouse...and successfully fight tough battles for key and core technologies." One hears echoes of Kennedy's "Moon in this decade" speech.

China has an established comprehensive vision for its future with tangible goals and strategies to achieve those goals. Portions of this plan are exemplified in the "Made in China 2025" document.¹⁸ While their success is not guaranteed, China has taken deliberate steps toward achieving those goals with measurable progress. In contrast, the United States pursues technologies ad hoc, driven by fads and competitive pressure, with little or no strategy. Some say that this is preferable, as it comports with the character

of an open, liberal democratic, free-market society. Others say that technologically, the US is essentially standing still, if not regressing.

Impediments to America Securing its Future

A secure and prosperous future will require America to rally behind a coherent, societal-level strategy that reflects our values and can address the challenges China and others present in a competitive global environment. The strategy must acknowledge impediments and provide a means to mitigate them while also capitalizing on our strengths across the most pertinent areas of the global competitive environment. Arguably, the recently released 2022 National Security Strategy opens a window to the complexities of that discussion.¹⁹

Drags on Economic Growth

The US can remain competitive by investing resources, human and capital, in productive assets that create value for the populace. The value of such investments should be guided by the aspirations of the aforementioned preamble to the Constitution: to “provide for the common defense, [and] promote the general Welfare.” This is distinctive from business, wherein the bottom line is literally the bottom line in an accounting spreadsheet.²⁰ For society, the bottom line is found in its shared values.

The problem with the national debt, which for the US exceeds \$30 trillion, is that the interest paid on the debt can end up being invested in unproductive or less desirable assets, as opposed to those reflective of shared values. Arguably, much of the roughly \$400 billion spent on interest on the national public debt,²¹ and some of the \$1.7 trillion currently spent per year by the US government on social safety net programs, fails to wholly answer societal expectations (and really, its needs). Moreover, the US government deficit has increased steadily over the past 20 years with a sharp uptick during the COVID-19 pandemic.²² The last time the US had a budget surplus was 2001.²³ Total national debt as a percent of GDP is the highest in US history,²⁴ and carries the implication that deficit spending is the norm rather than a tool reserved for deliberate strategic stimulus. A strategy that helps the US realize and maintain a viable competitive posture and a leadership role on the international stage includes getting the government’s financial house in order.

Individuals and consumers have a role to play in determining investments made for prosperity. Economic theory says that demand will drive efficient investments, but such is less the case as income inequality rises. Income inequality in America has skyrocketed over the past four decades. As of this article’s writing in 2022, only 0.1% of Americans wielded 18% of the nation’s wealth.²⁵ The US ranks 98th of 169 countries in income inequality, as measured by the Gini Index,²⁶ which is worse than most peer nations.

Income inequality is correlated with decreased social cohesion, increased polarization, and overall depressed economic growth.²⁷ Worse than simply promoting unproductive investments, a nation will find it hard to be competitive on the global stage if it is at war with itself.

Polarization

Numerous studies show that America has become increasingly polarized, which presages a scenario that can reduce the country’s competitiveness.^{28,29} In his 2004 book “The Paradox of Choice: Why Less is More,” Barry Schwartz lays out a compelling hypothesis, supported by data, that anxiety and polarization increase as the number of available choices increase.³⁰ Consider Schwartz’s hypothesis as it relates to the availability of news in the United States. In the 1970s, Walter Cronkite was hailed as “the most trusted man in America,” and people got their news primarily from one of three networks (CBS News, Cronkite; NBC, Huntley and Brinkley; ABC News, Peter Jennings) supplemented by the local newspaper. Each were trusted to report professionally and objectively. Today, there are many more news channels and pathways for information,³¹ and there is no universal “trusted agent.” Instead of a comfortable middle ground, America now has a thoroughly divided left and right. “News” channels (really “news commentators”) compete by finding niches that allow consumers to reinforce their views by self-selection to sources motivated to sell their product. Politicians and political profiteers often pour gasoline on the fire by hyperbolizing and caricaturing minor policy differences for political and monetary gain. Elected leaders who compromise are all too frequently endangered.

Polarization ultimately detracts from the ability to define a common set of contemporary American values upon which to base a strategy to compete effectively on the global stage.

Appreciation of US Civics

Yet another impediment to coalescing on shared values is a decline in knowledge of, and respect and appreciation for, US civics. A robust civics education helps motivate citizens to engage productively on the issues of the day, it broadens the base of those involved (and therefore invested) beyond the interests of a small political elite. Civics classes elucidate how government works while providing the opportunity to debate, understand, and work through all sides of challenging issues with civility and respect for the process.³² However, in 2016, only 26% of Americans could name the three branches of government.³³ Flatly, Americans no longer understand how government works, let alone feel an obligation or sense of duty to participate in traditional civic responsibilities. In the absence of a common external villain (e.g., the USSR), political debate and policy prescriptions are increasingly based on opinions of others who tend to reinforce personal views, as opposed to the collective wisdom of an educated society.

Devising the Next Grand Strategy—Where Should We Go Now?

It is not a stretch to say that “inherent American values”—individual rights, an open democratic society, and free enterprise—made the nation and the world a stronger place. People have enjoyed major improvements in living standards, growth in personal wealth, the ability to explore and communicate with the rest of the world more easily, and, in spite of internal squabbling, greater individual freedoms. Said another way, the principles of “American exceptionalism” remain a noble goal for the betterment of humanity. This is true for America, and for all who embrace liberal democratic ideals.



Despite daunting challenges, America can regain and enhance its competitive posture and rally around a strategy that unifies our engagement with the rest of the world by acting along three directions, presented here as recommendations.

RECOMMENDATION 1

Regain wide appreciation for government's purpose and active civil discourse that strengthens our institutions and society.

A well-functioning government requires the active participation of citizens compromising and holding each other accountable via civil debate and tough deliberation on the formulation of policy. Mindless partisan brinkmanship is wholly destructive for all involved. Americans should be able to name the three branches of government, understand models of governance, and appreciate the value of checks and balances.

The federal government could start by providing incentives and policies to expand civics instruction at the local level. Objective curricula could be promulgated through trusted channels, possibly stood up for the purpose. Reinvigorating an understanding for how government works and establishing an appreciation of civic duties, is a first step in securing America's competitive posture for the future.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Establish and enforce standards of accountability that ensure efficacy of information used in media and policy deliberations without abridging the freedom of speech and of the press.

The nation needs access to news based on authoritative, factual data. The Society of Professional Journalists have an agreed on a code of ethics, which begins:

“... public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. Ethical journalism strives to ensure the free exchange of information that is accurate, fair and thorough. An ethical journalist acts with integrity.”

These are sound principles. “News” networks need to be transparent about who has (or, has not) adopted such standards.

As an analogy, the American Meteorological Society certifies weathercasters who meet similar professional standards. Most professions require lifelong learning with tests to hold them accountable. This is true of lawyers, doctors, professional engineers, accountants, and many others. Identification of who is and is not a professional journalist would be a step toward rooting out malfeasance. Radical views should not be suppressed, but viewers should have the right to know if the on-air person is a true journalist or an entertainer.

A further step would be to have a federally funded apolitical organization, an ombudsman, to conduct fact checking and provenance discovery, using authoritative sources, to illuminate those “news bits” that are really just conspiracy theory or memes not based on facts. Once again, the idea is not to suppress speech, but to illuminate truth from falsehood using verifiable data and contextual explanation. The US government collects mounds of data on countless issues and has done so since its earliest days. Leveraging that data as a foundation for accountability would help reinvigorate an appreciation for the value of our institutions while also distinguishing truth from entertainment. Revitalizing an allegiance to data in policymaking will be a significant step in developing a coherent strategy for competition on the global stage.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Assess and divulge America’s contemporary values, and formally commit to them as a basis for a strategy to compete with near peers on military, economic, and political levels.

America’s competitive posture for the future requires us to identify a coherent set of values from which to develop a strategy. Too often, Americans get bogged down in the minutia of daily life or caught up in the passion of a politically charged debate. In doing so, they lose sight of the uniquely exceptional values Tocqueville first wrote about and are still accepted by most Americans. A joint panel, made of Executive and Legislative Branch members of varying age, race, experience, and regional origin should be appointed with that express mission. Once agreed upon, the panel should incorporate their findings into the basis of a draft strategy document.

It would be difficult to argue against continued dedication to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness and the ideals of the US Constitution. Modern economic analysis could justify capitalism and a market economy over a Stalinist command economy.

Such a panel was constituted in 1996 and listed American national interests of that day.³⁴ An update is needed and would have to be ratified as a representative statement of American values. While not written in stone, it would serve as the foundation of common contemporary principles and ideals in addressing the global competitive environment.

To Sum Up

To assure a secure and prosperous future wherein America thrives as a world leader, the US must adopt a grand strategy based on a contemporary conception of our shared American values. Such a strategy should connect current day global and domestic challenges to the base ideals Americans have pursued since the dawn of our nation. To do so, Americans must act to regain a wide appreciation for government’s purpose and a dedication to active civil discourse that strengthens our societal institutions. We must also seek to develop and adopt the means to hold accountable efficacy in information used in media and policy deliberations while holding true to First Amendment principles. Finally, we should commission a diverse panel to assess and divulge America’s contemporary values, and formally commit to them as basis for a strategy to address the challenges of the globally competitive environment.

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