

The old consensus on U.S. foreign policy is dead

Last weekend, President Biden revealed something striking about his reason for wanting to run again in 2024. During his interview for my show on CNN, I put it to him that even some of his most ardent supporters — those who think he has turned the economy around and restored relations with the rest of the world — believe he should “step aside and let another generation of Democrats take the baton.” I asked: “Why are they wrong?”

Biden responded by speaking solely about foreign policy. He argued that the world is facing dramatic change, and that the United States has a unique opportunity to bring together the world’s democracies. He insisted that he is succeeding at doing so and that he wants to finish the job.

Having spoken to Biden before, I would say that central to his worldview is the belief that the world today is being shaped by challenges from autocratic states — Russia, China, Iran, North Korea — and that the future will hinge on how the democracies respond to these challenges. Like anyone who wants to be president, Biden has a healthy ego, and he has wanted the job since he was a young man, but I think it’s fair to say he is also driven by a sense that the future of the international order is on the line.

The stakes are high — and they are made much higher by the fact that, for the first time since the World War II era, the basic issue of America’s engagement with the world is becoming a partisan issue. The United States stepped onto the world stage in 1917 to prevent a great power from dominating Europe. In 1945, after World War II, it stayed engaged to ensure peace and stability in Eurasia. But today, as Russia wages a brutal war in Europe that seems a throwback to World War II, there is deep division in America about staunchly opposing that aggression.

Consider the numbers: According to a recent Gallup poll, 79 percent of Democrats want to help Ukraine regain lost territory, even if that means prolonging the conflict. By contrast, 49 percent of Republicans would like to end the conflict quickly — even if that means letting the Russians hold on to the territories they have acquired by force.

On NATO, Democrats approve of it by a wide margin, 76 percent to 22 percent, while Republicans are split, with 49 percent approving and the same number disapproving, according to a Pew Research Center survey conducted in March. On the broader issue of engagement with the world, 60 percent of Democrats in the same poll said they believe that “it’s best for the future of our country to be active in world affairs,” while only 39 percent agreed that “we should pay less attention to problems overseas and concentrate on problems here at home.” For Republicans those numbers are essentially reversed, with 71 percent wanting to focus at home and just 29 percent believing in an active world role for the United States.

This is not a settled issue. There is a debate within the Republican Party. Some senior figures,

including Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (Ky.) and former vice president Mike Pence, are vigorously making the case for an active and engaged America. But the party’s base seems to be with the isolationists, as can be seen in the tilting stances of the weather-vane speaker of the House, Kevin McCarthy (Calif.). From Donald Trump to his copycat, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, and the party’s most powerful media ideologist, Tucker Carlson, conservatives are increasingly contemptuous of America’s support for Ukraine and its strong alliance with Europe. Sen. Josh Hawley (Mo.) told the New York Times that although some Republicans remain staunchly interventionist, “That’s not where the voters are.”

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As The Post’s Max Boot has pointed out, some conservatives claim to be against supporting Ukraine but in favor of confronting China. That, as he notes, is because China is an economic foe, run by the Communist Party. But this also has to do with the fact that many conservatives are not interested in an engaged foreign policy. They’re focused on building tariffs and walls, subsidizing domestic industry, raising xenophobic suspicions about Chinese students and Chinese Americans, and giving the Pentagon even bigger budgets. This is a reprise of the old Jacksonian foreign policy of a fortress America.

The Republican Party might be returning to its roots. It bitterly opposed the United States’ entry into World War II (until Pearl Harbor). Even after the war, many Republicans opposed NATO and U.S. engagement with the world — even though they were strong anti-communists. (Then, as now, they claimed to want to focus on China.)

Dwight D. Eisenhower offered not to run against Sen. Robert A. Taft (the leading Republican of his day) if Taft would endorse NATO. Taft refused, so Eisenhower ran to preserve the United States’ engagement with the world and the international peace and stability that it brought. Alas, there is no Eisenhower to redirect the Republican Party today, and the stakes are as high as they were in 1952, if not higher.

As we look around the world, we see that the single biggest risk to the international order may lie not in the killing fields of Ukraine or across the Taiwan Strait, but rather on the campaign trail in the United States.