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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

By Katrina vanden Heuvel

24.09.2022

## ***What Do Americans Care About? Not a Cold War With Russia and China***

The Biden administration will [soon release](#) its National Security Strategy, which is being revised in the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The document will no doubt trigger a renewed debate about how the United States should gear up for a new Cold War against Russia and China. But before we plunge into a global great-power competition, it’s worth recalling President Biden’s promise to create a [“foreign policy for the middle class”](#) and take a look at what most concerns Americans.

Congress is about to add [tens of billions](#) of dollars to the military budget. Unrepentant hawks [scorn this as inadequate](#), urging a 50 percent increase, or an additional \$400 billion or more a year. Aid to Ukraine totals more than [\\$40 billion this year](#), and counting. A new buildup is underway [in the Pacific](#). Biden summons Americans to the global battle [between](#) democracy and autocracy, implying that U.S. security depends on spreading democracy—and, implicitly, regime change—worldwide.

Americans, it is safe to say, have different—one might suggest more practical—concerns, as revealed in a [recent Quinnipiac University poll](#). Asked about the most urgent issue facing the country today, 27 percent of respondents—the highest number—ranked inflation as No. 1, while only 2 percent ranked Ukraine at the top. In a range of Economist-YouGov [polls](#) over the past month, the top foreign-policy concerns included immigration and climate change.

The foreign policy “blob” may be gearing up for a global Cold War, but Americans are

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focused on [security at home](#). According to a survey by the nonpartisan Eurasia Group Foundation, nearly half of Americans think the United States [should decrease its involvement](#) in other countries' affairs; only 21.6 percent would increase it. Nearly 45 percent would decrease U.S. troop deployments abroad; only 32.2 percent would increase them.

Polls, of course, are merely snapshots—and war fever can transform opinion. However, a 2021 report by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs reported many of the same priorities. Far more Americans (81 percent) said they were concerned about threats from within the country than from outside the country (19 percent). Among foreign policy goals, more than 75 percent of respondents ranked protecting American workers' jobs and preventing the spread of nuclear weapons, respectively, as very important. Ranked lowest were “helping to bring a democratic form of government to other nations” (18 percent) and “protecting weaker nations against foreign aggression” (32 percent).

What would a sensible strategy for the middle class look like? A recent paper from the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft—[“Managed Competition: A U.S. Grand Strategy for a Multipolar World”](#)—offers a good start. The author is [George Beebe](#), a former head of the CIA's Russia analysis unit who is currently director of grand strategy at the institute

Beebe argues that over the past three decades, “yawning gaps” have emerged not only between “America's ambitions in the world and its capacity for achieving those goals,” but also between a “Washington foreign policy elite too focused on promoting U.S. primacy” and “ordinary Americans yearning for greater stability and prosperity at home.”

He echoes the priorities of most Americans, arguing that “the chief strategic challenge Washington faces today is not to win a decisive battle between freedom and tyranny but to gain a breathing spell abroad that will allow the country to focus on desperately needed internal recovery.”

He then outlines the core of a strategy for this time: a “managed competition” with Russia and China. Recognizing that our economic health is intertwined with China's, and that Russia's nuclear arsenal demands prudence, he would “avoid promoting regime change”

or otherwise “undermining political and economic stability in Russia and China.” Instead, in a managed competition, our rivals would be countered not only by American power and alliances, but also by rebuilding “agreed rules of the game,” beginning presumably with efforts to revive nuclear arms agreements and create cyber agreements to limit these growing security challenges.

For this to occur, [he notes elsewhere](#), there must be an agreed end to the war in Ukraine. Beebe concedes that Vladimir Putin’s attack required a strong American-led response. But as when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, Beebe would distinguish between repelling Putin’s aggression and efforts to foster regime change in Moscow or to bring Ukraine into the Western orbit.

In the current euphoria over Russian reversals in Ukraine, this caution is likely to fall upon deaf ears. But a foreign policy for the middle class must find a way to curb our adventures abroad so that we can rebuild our democracy and strength at home. A Cold War against Russia and China might empower the foreign policy elite, enrich the military-industrial-congressional complex and excite our bellicose media, but it ignores the American people’s common sense.

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