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U.S. Role in the World: Background and Issues for Congress

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Summary

The U.S. role in the world refers to the overall character, purpose, or direction of U.S. participation in international affairs and the country's overall relationship to the rest of the world. The U.S. role in the world can be viewed as establishing the overall context or framework for U.S. policymakers for developing, implementing, and measuring the success of U.S. policies and actions on specific international issues, and for foreign countries or other observers for interpreting and understanding U.S. actions on the world stage.

While descriptions of the traditional U.S. role in the world since the end of World War II vary in their specifics, it can be described in general terms as consisting of four key elements: global leadership; defense and promotion of the liberal international order; defense and promotion of freedom, democracy, and human rights; and prevention of the emergence of regional hegemons in Eurasia.

The issue for Congress is whether the U.S. role in the world has changed, and if so, what implications this might have for the United States and the world. A change in the U.S. role could have significant and even profound effects on U.S. security, freedom, and prosperity. It could significantly affect U.S. policy in areas such as relations with allies and other countries, defense plans and programs, trade and international finance, foreign assistance, and human rights.

Some observers, particularly critics of the Trump Administration, argue that under the Trump Administration, the United States has substantially changed the U.S. role in the world. Other observers, particularly supporters of the Trump Administration, while acknowledging that the Trump Administration has changed U.S. foreign policy in a number of areas compared to policies pursued by the Obama Administration, argue that under the Trump Administration, there has been less change and more continuity regarding the U.S. role in the world.

Some observers who assess that the United States under the Trump Administration has substantially changed the U.S. role in the world—particularly critics of the Trump Administration, and also some who were critical of the Obama Administration—view the implications of that change as undesirable. They view the change as an unnecessary retreat from U.S. global leadership and a gratuitous discarding of long-held U.S. values, and judge it to be an unforced error of immense proportions—a needless and self-defeating squandering of something of great value to the United States that the United States had worked to build and maintain for 70 years.

Other observers who assess that there has been a change in the U.S. role in the world in recent years—particularly supporters of the Trump Administration, but also some observers who were arguing even prior to the Trump Administration in favor of a more restrained U.S. role in the world—view the change in the U.S. role, or at least certain aspects of it, as helpful for responding to changed U.S. and global circumstances and for defending U.S. values and interests, particularly in terms of adjusting the U.S. role to one that is more realistic regarding what the United States can accomplish, enhancing deterrence of potential regional aggression by making potential U.S. actions less predictable to potential adversaries, reestablishing respect for national sovereignty as a guidepost for U.S. foreign policy and for organizing international affairs, and encouraging U.S. allies and security partners in Eurasia to do more to defend themselves.

Congress's decisions regarding the U.S. role in the world could have significant implications for numerous policies, plans, programs, and budgets, and for the role of Congress relative to that of the executive branch in U.S. foreign policymaking.

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Introduction

This report provides background information and issues for Congress regarding the U.S. role in the world, meaning the overall character, purpose, or direction of U.S. participation in international affairs and the country's overall relationship to the rest of the world. The U.S. role in the world can be viewed as establishing the overall context or framework for U.S. policymakers for developing, implementing, and measuring the success of U.S. policies and actions on specific international issues, and for foreign countries or other observers for interpreting and understanding U.S. actions on the world stage.

Some observers perceive that after remaining generally stable for a period of more than 70 years (i.e., since the end of World War II in 1945), the U.S. role in the world under the Trump Administration has undergone a substantial change. A change in the U.S. role in the world could have significant and even profound effects on U.S. security, freedom, and prosperity. It could significantly affect U.S. policy in areas such as relations with allies and other countries, defense plans and programs, trade and international finance, foreign assistance, and human rights.

The issue for Congress is whether the U.S. role in the world has changed, and if so, what implications this might have for the United States and the world. Congress's decisions regarding the U.S. role in the world could have significant implications for numerous policies, plans, programs, and budgets, and for the role of Congress relative to that of the executive branch in U.S. foreign policymaking.

A variety of other CRS reports address in greater depth specific international issues mentioned in this report. **Appendix A** provides a glossary of some key terms used in this report, such as *international order* or *regional hegemon*. For convenience, this report uses the term *U.S. role* as a shorthand for referring to the U.S. role in the world.

Background

Overview of Traditional U.S. Role: Four Key Elements

While descriptions of the traditional U.S. role in the world since the end of World War II vary in their specifics, it can be described in general terms as consisting of four key elements:

- global leadership;
- defense and promotion of the liberal international order;
- defense and promotion of freedom, democracy, and human rights; and
- prevention of the emergence of regional hegemons in Eurasia.

The following sections provide brief discussions of these four key elements.

Global Leadership

The traditional U.S. role in the world since the end of World War II is generally described, first and foremost, as one of global leadership, meaning that the United States tends to be the first or most important country for identifying or framing international issues, taking actions to address those issues, setting an example for other countries to follow, organizing and implementing multilateral efforts to address international issues, and enforcing international rules and norms.

Observers over the years have referred to U.S. global leadership using various terms, some of which reflect varying degrees of approval or disapproval of this aspect of the U.S. role. Examples of such terms (other than global leader itself) include leader of the free world, superpower, indispensable power, system administrator, hyperpower, world policeman, or world hegemon.

The U.S. role of global leadership has resulted in extensive U.S. involvement in international affairs, and this, too, has been described with various phrases. The United States has been described as pursuing an internationalist foreign policy; a foreign policy of global engagement or deep engagement; a foreign policy that provides global public goods; a foreign policy of liberal order building, liberal internationalism, or liberal hegemony; an interventionist foreign policy; or a foreign policy of seeking primacy or world hegemony.

Defense and Promotion of Liberal International Order

A second key element of the traditional U.S. role in the world since World War II—one that can be viewed as inherently related to the first key element above—has been to defend and promote the liberal international order[1] that the United States, with the support of its allies, created in the years after World War II. Although definitions of the liberal international order vary, key elements of it are generally said to include the following:

- respect for the territorial integrity of countries, and the unacceptability of changing international borders by force or coercion;
- a preference for resolving disputes between countries peacefully, without the use or threat of use of force or coercion, and in a manner consistent with international law;
- respect for international law, global rules and norms, and universal values, including human rights;
- strong international institutions for supporting and implementing international law, global rules and norms, and universal values;
- the use of liberal (i.e., rules-based) international trading and investment systems to advance open, rules-based economic engagement, development, growth, and prosperity; and
- the treatment of international waters, international air space, outer space, and (more recently) cyberspace as international commons rather than domains subject to national sovereignty.

Most of the key elements above (arguably, all but the final one) can be viewed collectively as forming what is commonly referred to as a rules-based international order. A traditional antithesis of a rules-based order is a might-makes-right order (sometimes colloquially referred to as the law of the jungle), which is an international order (or a situation lacking in order) in which more powerful countries routinely impose their will arbitrarily on less-powerful countries, organizations, and individuals, with little or no regard to rules.

[1] Other terms used to refer to the liberal international order include *U.S.-led international order*, *postwar international order*, *rules-based international order*, and *open international order*. Observers sometimes substitute *world* for *international*, or omit *international* or *world* and refer simply to the liberal order, the U.S.-led order, and so on. In the terms *liberal international order* and *liberal order*, the word *liberal* does not refer to the conservative-liberal construct often used in discussing contemporary politics in the United States or other countries. It is, instead, an older use of the term that refers to an order based on the rule of law, as opposed to an order based on the arbitrary powers of hereditary monarchs.

Though often referred to as if it is a fully developed or universally established situation, the liberal international order, like other international orders that preceded it, is

- incomplete in geographic reach and in other ways;
- partly aspirational;
- not fixed in stone, but rather subject to evolution over time;
- sometimes violated by its supporters;
- not entirely free of might-makes-right behavior;
- resisted or rejected by certain states and nonstate actors; and
- subject to various stresses and challenges.

Some observers, emphasizing points like those above, argue that the liberal international order is more of a myth than a reality. Other observers, particularly supporters of the order, while acknowledging the limitations of the order, reject characterizations of it as a myth and emphasize its differences from international orders that preceded it.

As mentioned above, the liberal international order was created by the United States with the support of its allies in the years immediately after World War II. At that time, the United States was the only country with both the capacity and willingness to establish a new international order. U.S. willingness to establish and play a leading role in maintaining the liberal international order is generally viewed as reflecting a desire by U.S. policymakers to avoid repeating the deadly major wars and widespread economic disruption and deprivation of the first half of the 20th century—a period that included World War I, the Great Depression, the rise of communism and fascism, the Ukrainian famine, the Holocaust, and World War II.

U.S. willingness to establish and play a leading role in maintaining the liberal international order is also generally viewed as an act of national self-interest, reflecting a belief among U.S. policymakers that it would strongly serve U.S. security, political, and economic objectives. Supporters of the liberal international order generally argue that in return for bearing the costs of creating and sustaining the liberal international order, the United States receives significant security, political, and economic benefits, including the maintenance of a favorable balance of power on both a global and regional level, and a leading or dominant role in establishing and operating global institutions and rules for international finance and trade. Indeed, some critics of the liberal international order argue that it is primarily a construct for serving U.S. interests and promoting U.S. world primacy or hegemony. The costs and benefits for the United States of defending and promoting the liberal international order, however, are a matter of debate.

Defense and Promotion of Freedom, Democracy, and Human Rights

A third key element of the traditional U.S. role in the world since World War II has been to defend and promote freedom, democracy, and human rights as universal values, while criticizing and resisting authoritarian and illiberal forms of government where possible. This element of the U.S. role is viewed as consistent not only with core U.S. political values but also with a theory advanced by some observers (sometimes called the democratic peace theory) that democratic countries are more responsive to the desires of their populations and consequently are less likely to wage wars of aggression or go to war with one another.

Defending and promoting freedom, democracy, and human rights is additionally viewed as a key component of U.S. soft power, because it can encourage like-minded governments, as well as organizations and individuals in other countries, to work with the United States, and because it has the potential to shape the behavior of authoritarian and illiberal governments that are acting

against U.S. interests by shaming those governments and inspiring prodemocracy organizations and individuals within those countries.

Prevention of Emergence of Regional Hegemons in Eurasia

A fourth element of the traditional U.S. role in the world since World War II—one that U.S. policymakers do not often state explicitly in public—has been to oppose the emergence of regional hegemons in Eurasia. This objective reflects a U.S. perspective on geopolitics and grand strategy developed by U.S. strategists and policymakers during and in the years immediately after World War II that incorporates two key judgments:

- that given the amount of people, resources, and economic activity in Eurasia, a regional hegemon in Eurasia would represent a concentration of power large enough to be able to threaten vital U.S. interests; and
- that Eurasia is not dependably self-regulating in terms of preventing the emergence of regional hegemons, meaning that the countries of Eurasia cannot be counted on to be able to prevent, though their own actions, the emergence of regional hegemons, and may need assistance from one or more countries outside Eurasia to be able to do this dependably.[2]

Preventing the emergence of regional hegemons in Eurasia is sometimes also referred to as preserving a division of power in Eurasia, or as preventing key regions in Eurasia from coming under the domination of a single power, or as preventing the emergence of a spheres-of-influence world, which could be a consequence of the emergence of one or more regional hegemons in Eurasia.

U.S. actions that can be viewed as expressions of the U.S. goal of preventing the emergence of regional hegemons in Eurasia include but are not necessarily limited to the following:

- U.S. participation in World War I,[3] World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War;[4]
- U.S. alliances and security partnerships, including
  - the NATO alliance, which was established in large part to deter and counter attempts by the Soviet Union (now Russia) to become a regional hegemon in Europe;

[2] For additional discussion, see CRS In Focus IF10485, *Defense Primer: Geography, Strategy, and U.S. Force Design*, by Ronald O'Rourke.

[3] Although the goal of preventing the emergence of regional hegemons was not articulated in explicit terms (at least not widely) by U.S. strategists until World War II and the years immediately thereafter, U.S. participation in World War I against Germany can in retrospect be viewed as an earlier U.S. action reflecting this goal.

[4] U.S. participation in the Vietnam War was justified in part by the so-called domino theory, which argued that a victory by communist-ruled North Vietnam over South Vietnam could be followed by other countries in the region falling, like dominos in a row, under communist control. Opponents of the domino theory challenged its validity and argue that it was disproven when North Vietnam's defeat of South Vietnam was not followed by other countries in the region falling under communist control. The theory's supporters argue that the theory was not disproven, because the years-long U.S. effort to defend South Vietnam, though ultimately unsuccessful in preventing victory by North Vietnam, gave other countries in the region time and space to develop their political institutions and economies enough to deter or resist communist movements in their own countries. Valid or not, the domino theory's use as a justification links U.S. participation in the war to the goal of preventing the emergence of a regional hegemon (in this case, a communist hegemon of China and/or the Soviet Union).

  - U.S. alliances with countries in East Asia and the Pacific, which were established in large part to deter and counter attempts by the Soviet Union or China to become a regional hegemon in East Asia; and
  - U.S. security partnerships with countries in the Persian Gulf region, which were established in large part to deter or counter attempts by Iran or the Soviet Union (now Russia) to become a regional hegemon in that region; and
- additional U.S. political, diplomatic, and economic actions to contain and oppose the Soviet Union during the Cold War, including the Marshall Plan and subsequent U.S. foreign assistance programs.

In pursuing the goal of preventing the emergence of regional hegemons in Eurasia, U.S. policymakers have sometimes decided to work with or support nondemocratic regimes that for their own reasons view Russia, China, or Iran as competitors or adversaries. As a consequence, the goal of preventing the emergence of regional hegemons in Asia has sometimes been in tension with defending and promoting freedom, democracy, and human rights.

Changes over Time

Although the traditional U.S. role in the world was generally stable over the past 70 years, the specifics of U.S. foreign policy for implementing that role have changed frequently for various reasons, including changes in administrations and changes in the international security environment. Definitions of the U.S. role have room within them to accommodate some variation in the specifics of U.S. foreign policy.

Long-Standing Debate over Its Merits

The fact that the U.S. role in the world has been generally stable over the past 70 years does not necessarily mean that this role was the right one for the United States, or that it would be the right one in the future. Although the role the United States has played in the world since the end of World War II has many defenders, it also has critics, and the merits of that role have been a matter of long-standing debate among foreign policy specialists, strategists, policymakers, and the public, with critics offering potential alternative concepts for the U.S. role in the world.

The most prominent dimension of the debate is whether the United States should attempt to continue playing the active internationalist role that it has played for the past 70 years, or instead adopt a more restrained role that reduces U.S. involvement in world affairs. A number of critics of the U.S. role in the world over the past 70 years have offered multiple variations on the idea of a more restrained U.S. role. (For additional discussion, see **Appendix B**.)

A second major dimension within the debate over the future U.S. role concerns how to balance or combine the pursuit of narrowly defined material U.S. interests with the goal of defending and promoting U.S. or universal values such as democracy, freedom, and human rights. A third major dimension concerns the balance in U.S. foreign policy between the use of hard power and soft power. Observers debating these two dimensions of the future U.S. role in the world stake out varying positions on these questions.

Issues for Congress

The issue for Congress is whether the U.S. role in the world has changed, and if so, what implications this might have for the United States and the world. The sections below provide some discussion of this issue.

Has the United States Changed Its Role?

There currently are multiple views on the question of whether the United States under the Trump Administration has changed the U.S. role in the world, some of which are outlined briefly below.

Some Observers Believe the United States Has Changed Its Role

Some observers, particularly critics of the Trump Administration, argue that under the Trump Administration, the United States has substantially changed the U.S. role in the world by altering some or all of the four key elements of the U.S. role described earlier. Although views among these observers vary in their specifics, a number of these observers argue that the Administration's America First construct, its emphasis on national sovereignty as a primary guidepost for U.S. foreign policy, and other Administration actions and statements form a new U.S. role characterized by

- a voluntary retreat from or abdication of global leadership,
- a greater reliance on unilateralism,
- a reduced willingness to work through international or multilateral institutions and agreements,
- an acceptance of U.S. isolation or near-isolation on certain international issues,
- a more skeptical view of the value of alliances to the United States,
- a less-critical view of certain authoritarian or illiberal governments,
- a reduced or more selective approach to promoting and defending certain universal values,
- the elevation of bilateral trade balances, commercial considerations, monetary transactions, and ownership of assets such as oil above other foreign policy considerations, and
- an implicit tolerance of the reemergence of aspects of a might-makes-right international order.

In support of this view, these observers cite various Administration actions and statements, including, among other things

- the Administration's decisions to withdraw from certain international agreements—including the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) regional trade agreement, the multilateral Paris climate agreement, and the Iran nuclear agreement—and from the World Health Organization (WHO);
- its earlier proposals for reducing State Department funding and foreign assistance funding, and delays in filling senior State Department positions;
- the President's skeptical statements regarding the value to the United States of certain U.S. alliances (particularly with European countries and South Korea) and more generally his apparent transactional and monetary-focused approach to understanding and managing alliance relationships;
- what these observers view as the President's affinity for certain authoritarian or illiberal leaders, as well as his apparent reluctance to criticize Russia and his apparent continued desire to seek improved relations with Russia, despite Russian actions judged by U.S. intelligence agencies and other observers to have been directed against the United States and overseas U.S. interests;

- the President's decision, announced by the Administration on October 6, 2019, to withdraw U.S. troops from northern Syria, and the Administration's initiatives to reduce the U.S. military presence in Germany, Afghanistan, and Iraq;
- the Administration's focus on pursuing bilateral trade negotiations with various countries (as opposed to regional or multilateral trade negotiations); and
- the Administration's infrequent or inconsistent statements in support of democracy and human rights, including the Administration's reaction to the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi and some of the President's statements regarding the prodemocracy protests in Hong Kong.

Other Observers Disagree

Other observers, particularly supporters of the Trump Administration, disagree with some or all of the perspective above. While acknowledging that the Trump Administration has changed U.S. foreign policy in a number of areas compared to policies pursued by the Obama Administration, these observers argue that under the Trump Administration, there has been less change and more continuity regarding the U.S. role in the world. In support of this view, these observers cite, among other things

- the Administration's December 2017 national security strategy (NSS) document and its January 2018 unclassified summary of its supporting national defense strategy (NDS) document—large portions of which refer to U.S. leadership, a general emphasis on great power competition with China and Russia, and strong support for U.S. alliances;
- Administration statements reaffirming U.S. support for NATO, as well as Administration actions to improve U.S. military capabilities in Europe for deterring potential Russian aggression in Europe;
- the Administration's willingness to impose and maintain a variety of sanctions on Russia;
- the Administration's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) construct for guiding U.S. policy toward the Indo-Pacific region;
- the Administration's more confrontational policy toward China, including its plan to increase funding for U.S. foreign assistance programs to compete against China for influence in Africa, Asia, and the Americas;
- U.S. trade actions that, in the view of these observers, are intended to make free trade more sustainable over the long run by ensuring that it is fair to all parties, including the United States; and
- the Administration's (admittedly belated) support of Hong Kong's prodemocracy protestors, its criticism of China's human rights practices toward its Muslim Uyghur population, and its emphasis on religious freedom as a major component of human rights.

Still Other Observers See a Mixed or Confusing Situation

Still other observers, viewing points made by both of the above sets of observers, see a mixed or confusing situation regarding whether the United States under the Trump Administration has changed the U.S. role in the world. For these observers, whether the U.S. role has changed is difficult to discern, in part because of what they view as incoherence or contradictions in the Administration's foreign policies and in part because the President's apparent views on certain

issues—such as the value of U.S. alliances, the acceptability of certain actions by Russia or North Korea, and the importance of democracy and human rights as universal values—have frequently been in tension with or contradicted by statements and actions of senior Administration officials (particularly those who served during the first two years or so of the Administration), with the President's views being more consistent with the change in the U.S. role outlined by the first set of observers above, and statements and actions of senior Administration officials frequently being more consistent with a continuation of the U.S. role of the past 70 years outlined by the second set of observers above.

Some Observers Argue That Change Began Earlier

Some observers argue that if the U.S. role has changed, that change started not under the Trump Administration, but under the Obama Administration, particularly regarding the question of whether the United States has reduced or withdrawn from global leadership. In support of this view, these observers cite what they views as the Obama Administration's

- focus on reducing the U.S. military presence and ending U.S. combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan in favor of focusing more on domestic U.S. rebuilding initiatives,
- decision to announce but not enforce a "red line" regarding the behavior of the Syrian government, and
- restrained response to Russian actions in Crimea and eastern Ukraine, and more generally, its reluctance, for a time at least, to fully acknowledge and adapt to less cooperative and more confrontational relationships with Russia and China.

Still others view the start of a change in the U.S. role as occurring even sooner, under the George W. Bush Administration—when that Administration did not respond more strongly to Russia's 2008 invasion and occupation of part of Georgia—or under the Clinton Administration.

For these observers, a change in the U.S. role in the world under the Trump Administration may represent not so much a shift in the U.S. role as a continuation or deepening of a change that began in a prior U.S. administration.

Potential Combined Perspectives

The perspectives outlined in the preceding sections are not necessarily mutually exclusive—assessments combining aspects of more than one of these perspectives are possible.

Implications of a Changed U.S. Role

Among observers who assess that there has been a change in the U.S. role in the world in recent years, there are multiple views regarding the potential implications of that change.

Some Observers View Implications as Undesirable

Some observers who assess that the United States under the Trump Administration has substantially changed the U.S. role in the world—particularly critics of the Trump Administration, and also some who were critical of the Obama Administration—view the implications of that change as undesirable. They view the change as an unnecessary retreat from U.S. global leadership and a gratuitous discarding of long-held U.S. values, and judge it to be an unforced error of immense proportions—a needless and self-defeating squandering of something of great value to the United States that the United States had worked to build and maintain for 70

years. More specifically, they argue that the change in the U.S. role in recent years that they see is doing some or all of the following:

- reducing U.S. power and foreign-policy capacity, particularly by weakening or hollowing out the State Department and reducing or devaluing elements of U.S. soft power;
- weakening the U.S. ability to leverage its power and foreign-policy capacity in international affairs—and isolating the United States on certain international issues, effectively turning the concept of America First into "America Alone"—by
  - damaging long-standing and valuable U.S. alliance relationships,
  - reducing U.S. participation in multilateral political and trade negotiations and agreements, and
  - making the United States look more erratic and impulsive as an international actor, and less reliable as an ally and negotiating partner;
- weakening the U.S.-led international order and encouraging a reemergence of aspects of a might-makes-right international order;
- slowing the spread of democracy and human rights, encouraging a moral equivalency between the United States and authoritarian and illiberal countries, and tacitly facilitating a reemergence of authoritarian and illiberal forms of government;
- disregarding the costly lessons of the first half of the 20th century, and how the U.S. role in the world of the last 70 years has been motivated at bottom by a desire to prevent a repetition of the horrific events of that period; and
- creating vacuums in global leadership in establishing and maintaining global rules and norms, on the disposition of specific disputes and other issues, and in regional power balances that China and Russia as well as France, Turkey, Syria, Iran, and other countries are moving to fill, often at the expense of U.S. interests and values.

Other Observers View Implications as Helpful

Other observers who assess that there has been a change in the U.S. role in the world in recent years—particularly supporters of the Trump Administration, but also some observers who were arguing even prior to the Trump Administration in favor of a more-restrained U.S. role in the world—view the change in the U.S. role, or at least certain aspects of it, as helpful for responding to changed U.S. and global circumstances and for defending U.S. values and interests. More specifically, they argue that the change in the U.S. role in recent years that they see is doing some or all of the following:

- winding down U.S. participation in so-called endless wars (aka forever wars) in places such as Afghanistan and Iraq, and also not starting new wars;
- emphasizing religious freedom—a core U.S. value—as a central tenet in U.S. foreign policy;
- adjusting the U.S. role to one that is more realistic regarding what the United States can accomplish in the world today and in the future, particularly given limits on U.S. resources and the reduction in U.S. economic and military

preponderance in recent decades as other countries have grown economically and developed their militaries;

- enhancing deterrence of potential regional aggression by making potential U.S. actions less predictable to potential adversaries;
- reestablishing respect for national sovereignty as a guidepost for U.S. foreign policy and for organizing international affairs;
- encouraging U.S. allies and security partners in Eurasia to do more to defend themselves, thereby reducing U.S. costs and developing Eurasia's potential to become more self-regulating in terms of preventing the emergence of regional hegemons;
- placing an emphasis on countering and competing with China, which poses a uniquely strong and multidimensional challenge to U.S. security and prosperity;
- working to strengthen the security architecture of the Indo-Pacific region under the FOIP construct;
- exploring possibilities for improving relations where possible with countries such as Russia and North Korea; and
- making trade agreements more fair to the United States.

Some Related or Additional Issues

The following sections provide brief discussions of some related or additional issues for Congress regarding the U.S. role in the world.

Potential Impact of COVID-19 (Coronavirus) Pandemic

A new (i.e., since about March 2020) issue is the question of whether and how the global COVID-19 pandemic might lead to profoundly transformative and long-lasting changes in the U.S. role in the world in areas such as U.S. global leadership, China's potential for acting as a global leader, U.S. strategic competition with China, U.S. relations with allies, and U.S. definitions of U.S. national security. Some observers argue that the COVID-19 pandemic is the first major international crisis since World War II for which the United States has not served as the global leader for spearheading, organizing, or implementing an international response.

Another CRS report provides an overview of the potential implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for the international security environment and the U.S. role in the world, as well as a list of CRS reports addressing various aspects of this issue and examples of other writings addressing this issue from various perspectives,[5] See also some of the more recent writings cited in **Appendix C** of this CRS report.

Costs and Benefits of Allies

Within the overall debate over the U.S. role in the world, one longstanding specific question relates to the costs and benefits of allies. As noted earlier, some observers believe that under the Trump Administration, the United States has become more skeptical of the value of allies, particularly those in Europe, and more transactional in managing U.S. alliance relationships.

[5] CRS Report R46336, *COVID-19: Potential Implications for International Security Environment—Overview of Issues and Further Reading for Congress*, by Ronald O'Rourke, Kathleen J. McInnis, and Michael Moodie.

Skeptics of allies and alliances generally argue that their value to the United States is overrated; that allies are capable of defending themselves without U.S. help; that U.S. allies frequently act as free riders in their alliance relationships with the United States by shifting security costs to the United States; that in the absence of U.S. help, these allies would do more on their own to balance against potential regional hegemons; and that alliances create a risk of drawing the United States into conflicts involving allies over issues that are not vital to the United States.

Supporters of the U.S. approach to allies and alliances of the past 70 years, while acknowledging the free-rider issue as something that needs to be managed, generally argue that alliances are needed and valuable for preventing the emergence of regional hegemons in Eurasia and for otherwise deterring potential regional aggression; that alliances form a significant advantage for the United States in its dealings with other major powers, such as Russia and China (both of which largely lack similar alliance networks); that although allies might be capable of defending themselves without U.S. help, they might also choose, in the absence of U.S. help, to bandwagon with would-be regional hegemons (rather than contribute to efforts to balance against them); that in addition to mutual defense benefits, alliances offer other benefits, particularly in peacetime, including sharing of intelligence, information, and technology and the cultivation of soft-power forms of cooperation; and that a transactional approach to alliances, which encourages the merits of each bilateral alliance relationship to be measured in isolation, overlooks the collective benefits of maintaining alliances with multiple countries in a region.

U.S. Public Opinion

U.S. public opinion can be an important factor in debates over the future U.S. role in the world. Among other things, public opinion can

- shape the political context (and provide the impulse) for negotiating the terms of, and for considering whether to become party to, international agreements;
- influence debates on whether and how to employ U.S. military force; and
- influence policymaker decisions on funding levels for defense, international affairs activities, and foreign assistance.

Foreign policy specialists, strategists, and policymakers sometimes invoke U.S. public opinion poll results in debates on the U.S. role in the world. One issue relating to U.S. public opinion that observers are discussing is the extent to which the U.S. public may now believe that U.S. leaders have broken a tacit social contract under which the U.S. public, and particularly the middle class, has supported the costs of U.S. global leadership in return for the promise of receiving certain benefits, particularly steady increases in real incomes and the standard of living.

Operation of U.S. Democracy

Another potential issue for Congress is how the operation of democracy in the United States might affect the U.S. role in the world, particularly in terms of defending and promoting democracy and criticizing and resisting authoritarian and illiberal forms of government.

During the Cold War, the effective operation of U.S. democracy at the federal level and lower levels was viewed as helpful for arguing on the world stage that Western-style democracy was superior, for encouraging other countries to adopt that model, and for inspiring people in the Soviet Union and other authoritarian countries to resist authoritarianism and seek change in the direction of more democratic forms of government. The ability of the United State to demonstrate the effectiveness of democracy as a form of government was something that in today's parlance would be termed an element of U.S. soft power.

The end of the Cold War led to a diminution in the ideological debate about the relative merits of democracy versus authoritarianism as forms of government. As a possible consequence, there may have been less of a perceived need during this period for focusing on the question of whether the operation of U.S. democracy was being viewed positively or otherwise by observers in other countries.

The shift in the international environment over the past few years from the post-Cold War era to an era of renewed great power competition[6] has led to a renewed ideological debate about the relative merits of Western-style democracy versus 21st-century forms of authoritarian and illiberal government. Articles in China's state-controlled media, for example, sometimes criticize the operation of U.S. democracy and argue that China's form of governance is more advantageous. The potential issue for Congress is whether, in a period of renewed ideological competition, there is now once again a need for focusing more on the question of whether the operation of U.S. democracy is being viewed positively or otherwise by observers in other countries.

Potential Implications for Congress as an Institution

Another issue for Congress is what implications a changed U.S. role in the world might have for Congress as an institution, particularly regarding the preservation and use of congressional powers and prerogatives relating to foreign policy, national security, and international economic policy, and more generally the role of Congress relative to that of the executive branch in U.S. foreign policymaking. Specific matters here include, among other things, the question of war powers, the delegation of authority for imposing tariffs, and whether a change in the U.S. role would have any implications for congressional organization, capacity, and operations.[7]

Reversibility of a Change in U.S. Role

Another potential issue for Congress is whether a change in the U.S. role in the world would at some point in the future be reversible, should U.S. policymakers in the future desire to return to a U.S. role in the world more like that of the past 70 years. Potential questions for Congress include the following:

- What elements of change in the U.S. role might be more reversible, less reversible, or irreversible? What elements might be less reversible due to technological developments, changes in international power dynamics, or changes in U.S. public opinion?
- How much time and effort would be required to implement a return to a U.S. role like that of the past 70 years?
- How might the issue of reversibility be affected by the amount of time that a change in the U.S. role remains in place before an attempt might be made to reverse it?
- How might decisions that Congress and the executive branch make in the near term affect the question of potential downstream reversibility? What actions, if any, should be taken now with an eye toward preserving an option for reversing nearer-term changes in the U.S. role?

[6] For more on this shift, see CRS Report R43838, *Renewed Great Power Competition: Implications for Defense—Issues for Congress*, by Ronald O'Rourke.

[7] For additional discussion, see Kevin Kosar, ed., *Congress and Foreign Affairs: Reasserting the Power of the First Branch*, R Street Institute, 2020, 64 pp.

- What are the views of other countries regarding the potential reversibility of a change in the U.S. role, and how might those views affect the foreign policies of those countries?

Additional Writings

As potential sources of additional reading, **Appendix C** presents a list of recent writings reflecting various perspectives on whether the United States under the Trump Administration has changed the U.S. role in the world and what the implications of such a change might be.

Appendix A. Glossary of Selected Terms

Some key terms used in this report include the following:

Role in the world

The term *role in the world* generally refers in foreign policy discussions to the overall character, purpose, or direction of a country's participation in international affairs or the country's overall relationship to the rest of the world. A country's role in the world can be taken as a visible expression of its grand strategy (see next item). In this report, the term *U.S. role in the world* is often shortened for convenience to *U.S. role*.

Grand strategy

The term *grand strategy* generally refers in foreign policy discussions to a country's overall approach for securing its interests and making its way in the world, using all the national instruments at its disposal, including diplomatic, informational, military, and economic tools (sometimes abbreviated in U.S. government parlance as DIME). A country's leaders might deem elements of a country's grand strategy to be secret, so that assessments, assumptions, or risks included in the strategy are not revealed to potential adversaries. Consequently, a country's leaders might say relatively little in public about the country's grand strategy. As mentioned above, however, a country's role in the world can be taken as a visible expression of its grand strategy. For the United States, grand strategy can be viewed as strategy at a global or interregional level, as opposed to U.S. strategies for individual regions, countries, or issues.

International order/world order

The term *international order* or *world order* generally refers in foreign policy discussions to the collection of organizations, institutions, treaties, rules, norms, and practices that are intended to organize, structure, and regulate international relations during a given historical period. International orders tend to be established by major world powers, particularly in the years following wars between major powers, though they can also emerge at other times. Though often referred to as if they are fully developed or firmly established situations, international orders are usually incomplete, partly aspirational, sometimes violated by their supporters, rejected (or at least not supported) by certain states and nonstate actors, and subject to various stresses and challenges.

Unipolar/bipolar/tripolar/multipolar

In foreign policy discussions, terms like *unipolar*, *bipolar*, *tripolar*, and *multipolar* are sometimes used to refer to the number of top-tier world powers whose actions tend to characterize or give structure to a given historical period's international security situation. The Cold War that lasted from the late 1940s to the late 1980s or early 1990s is usually described as a bipolar situation featuring a competition between two superpowers (the United States and the Soviet Union) and their allies. The post-Cold War era, which followed the Cold War, is sometimes described as the unipolar moment, with the United States being the unipolar power, meaning the world's sole superpower.

As discussed in another CRS report,[8] observers have concluded that in recent years, there has been a shift from the post-Cold War era to a new international security situation characterized by renewed great power competition between the United States, China, and Russia, leading observers to refer to the new situation as a tripolar or multipolar world. Observers who might list additional countries (or groups of countries, such as the European Union) as additional top-tier world powers, along with the United States, China, and Russia, might also use the term multipolar.

Eurasia

The term Eurasia is used in this report to refer to the entire land mass that encompasses both Europe and Asia, including its fringing islands, extending from Portugal on its western end to Japan on its eastern end, and from Russia's Arctic coast on its northern edge to India on its southern edge, and encompassing all the lands and countries in between, including those of Central Asia, Southwest Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. Eurasia's fringing islands include, among others, the United Kingdom and Ireland in Europe, Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean, the archipelagic countries of Southeast Asia, and Japan. There are also other definitions of Eurasia, some of which are more specialized and refer to subsets of the broad area described above.

Regional hegemon

The term *regional hegemon* generally refers to a country so powerful relative to the other countries in its region that it can dominate the affairs of that region and compel other countries in that region to support (or at least not oppose) the hegemon's key policy goals. The United States is generally considered to have established itself in the 19th century as the hegemon of the Western Hemisphere.

Spheres-of-influence world

The term *spheres-of-influence world* generally refers to a world that, in terms of its structure of international relations, is divided into multiple regions (i.e., spheres), each with its own hegemon. A spheres-of-influence world, like a multipolar world, is characterized by having multiple top-tier powers. In a spheres-of-influence world, however, at least some of those top-tier powers have achieved a status of regional hegemon, while in a multipolar world, few or none of those major world powers (other than the United States, the regional hegemon of the Western Hemisphere) have achieved a status of regional hegemon. As a result, in a spheres-of-influence world, international relations are more highly segmented on a regional basis than they are in a multipolar world.

Geopolitics

The term *geopolitics* is often used as a synonym for international politics or for strategy relating to international politics. More specifically, it refers to the influence of basic geographic features on international relations, and to the analysis of international relations from a perspective that places a strong emphasis on the influence of such geographic features. Basic geographic features involved in geopolitical analysis include things such as the relative sizes and locations of countries or land masses; the locations of key resources such as oil or water; geographic barriers

[8] CRS Report R43838, *Renewed Great Power Competition: Implications for Defense—Issues for Congress*, by Ronald O'Rourke.

such as oceans, deserts, and mountain ranges; and key transportation links such as roads, railways, and waterways.

Hard power and soft power

In foreign policy discussions, the term *hard power* generally refers to coercive power, particularly military and economic power, while the term *soft power* generally refers to the ability to persuade or attract support, particularly through diplomacy, development assistance, support for international organizations, education and cultural exchanges, and the international popularity of cultural elements such as music, movies, television shows, and literature.

Appendix B. Past U.S. Role vs. More Restrained Role

This appendix provides additional discussion on the debate over whether the United States should attempt to continue playing the active internationalist role that it has played for the past 70 years, or instead adopt a more restrained role that reduces U.S. involvement in world affairs.

Among U.S. strategists and foreign policy specialists, advocates of a more restrained U.S. role include (to cite a few examples) Andrew Bacevich, Doug Bandow, Ted Galen Carpenter, John Mearsheimer, Barry Posen, Christopher Preble, William Ruger, and Stephen Walt. These and other authors have offered multiple variations on the idea of a more restrained U.S. role. Terms such as *offshore balancing*, *offshore control*, *realism*, *strategy of restraint*, or *retrenchment* have been used to describe some of these variations.[9] These variations on the idea of a more restrained U.S. role would not necessarily match in their details a changed U.S. role that might be pursued by the Trump Administration.[10]

Arguments in Favor of a More Restrained U.S. Role

Observers advocating a more restrained U.S. role in the world make various arguments regarding the United States and other countries. Arguments that they make relating to the United States include the following:

- **Costs and benefits.** In terms of human casualties, financial and economic impacts, diplomatic impacts, and impacts on domestic U.S. values, politics, and society, the costs to the United States of defending and promoting the liberal international order have been underestimated and the benefits have been overestimated. U.S. interventions in the security affairs of Eurasia have frequently been more costly and/or less successful than anticipated, making a strategy of intervening less cost-effective in practice than in theory. U.S. interventions can also draw the United States into conflicts involving other countries over issues that are not vital or important U.S. interests.
- **Capacity.** Given projections regarding future U.S. budget deficits and debt, the United States in coming years will no longer be able to afford to play as expansive a role in the world as it has played for the past 70 years. Overextending U.S. participation in international affairs could lead to excessive

[9] The terms *offshore balancing* and *offshore control* refer in general to a policy in which the United States, in effect, stands off the shore of Eurasia and engages in the security affairs of Eurasia less frequently, less directly, or less expansively. The term *retrenchment* is more often used by critics of these proposed approaches.

[10] Debate about this dimension of the U.S. role in the world is not limited to one between those who favor continued extensive engagement along the lines of the past 70 years and those who prefer some form of a more restrained role—other options are also being promoted. For example, one analyst and former White House aide advocates an approach that differs from both retrenchment and reassertion, an approach he labels "re-calibration" to the "geopolitical, economic, technological and other dynamics driving the 21st-century world." Such an approach, he argues, would entail a reappraisal of U.S. interests, a reassessment of U.S. power, and a repositioning of U.S. leadership. (See Bruce Jentleson, "Apart, Atop, Amidst: America in the World," *War on the Rocks*, January 2017.)

As another example, a different analyst argues in favor of a U.S. role based on "a better nationalism"—what he describes as a more benign and constructive form that "would not dismantle the post-war order and America's post war project, but would take a harder-edged and more disciplined approach to asserting U.S. interests." (Hal Brands, "U.S. Grand Strategy in an Age of Nationalism: Fortress American and it Alternatives," *Washington Quarterly*, Spring 2017: 73-93.)

amounts of federal debt and inadequately addressed domestic problems, leaving the United States poorly positioned for sustaining any future desired level of international engagement.

- **Past 70 years as a historical aberration.** The U.S. role of the past 70 years is an aberration when viewed against the U.S. historical record dating back to 1776, which is a history characterized more by periods of restraint than by periods of high levels of international engagement. Returning to a more restrained U.S. role would thus return U.S. policy to what is, historically, a more traditional policy for the United States.
- **Moral standing.** The United States has not always lived up to its own ideals, and consequently lacks sufficient moral standing to pursue a role that involves imposing its values and will on other countries. Attempting to do that through an interventionist policy can also lead to an erosion of those values at home.
- **Public opinion.** It is not clear that U.S. public opinion supports the idea of attempting to maintain a U.S. role in the world as expansive as that of the past 70 years, particularly if it means making trade-offs against devoting resources to domestic U.S. priorities. In public opinion polls, Americans often express support for a more restrained U.S. role, particularly on issues such as whether the United States should act as the world's police force, funding levels for U.S. foreign assistance programs, U.S. participation in (and financial support for) international organizations, and U.S. defense expenditures for defending allies.

Arguments that these observers make relating to other countries include the following:

- **Growing wealth and power.** Given the rapid growth in wealth and power in recent years of China and other countries, the United States is no longer as dominant globally as it once was, and is becoming less dominant over time, which will make it increasingly difficult or expensive and/or less appropriate for the United States to attempt to continue playing a role of global leadership.
- **Ideas about international order.** Other world powers, such as China, have their own ideas about international order, and these ideas do not match all aspects of the current liberal international order. The United States should acknowledge the changing global distribution of power and work with China and other countries to define a new international order that incorporates ideas from these other countries.
- **Eurasia as self-regulating.** Given the growth in the economies of U.S. allies and partners in Europe and Asia since World War II, these allies and partners are now more capable of looking after their own security needs, and Eurasia can now be more self-regulating in terms of preventing the emergence of regional hegemons in Eurasia. Consequently, the level of U.S. intervention in the affairs of Eurasia can be reduced without incurring undue risk that regional hegemons will emerge there. The current substantial level of U.S. intervention in the affairs of Eurasia discourages countries in Eurasia from acting more fully on their own to prevent the emergence of regional hegemons.
- **Hegemons and spheres of influence.** Even if one or more regional hegemons were to emerge in Eurasia, this would not pose an unacceptable situation for the United States—vital U.S. interests could still be defended. Similarly, the emergence of a spheres-of-influence world need not be unacceptable for the

United States, because such a world would again not necessarily be incompatible with vital U.S. interests.

Arguments in Favor of Continuing U.S. Role of the Past 70 Years

Observers who support a continuation of the U.S. role in the world of the past 70 years generally reject the above arguments and argue the opposite. Arguments that these observers make relating to the United States include the following:

- **Costs and benefits.** Although the costs to the United States of its role in the world over the past 70 years have been substantial, the benefits have been greater. The benefits are so long-standing that they can easily be taken for granted or underestimated. U.S. interventions in the security affairs of Eurasia, though not without significant costs and errors, have been successful in preventing wars between major powers and defending and promoting vital U.S. interests and values. A more restrained U.S. role in the world might be less expensive for the United States in the short run, but would create a risk of damaging U.S. security, liberty, and prosperity over the longer run by risking the emergence of regional hegemons or a spheres-of-influence world.
- **Capacity.** Projections regarding future U.S. budget deficits and debt need to be taken into account, but even in a context of limits on U.S. resources, the United States is a wealthy country that can choose to play an expansive role in international affairs, and the costs to the United States of playing a more restrained role in world affairs may in the long run be much greater than the costs of playing a more expansive role. Projections regarding future U.S. budget deficits and debt are driven primarily by decisions on revenues and domestic mandatory expenditures rather than by decisions on defense and foreign-policy-related expenditures. Consequently, these projections are an argument for getting the country's fiscal house in order primarily in terms of revenues and domestic mandatory expenditures, rather than an argument for a more restrained U.S. role in the world.
- **Past 70 years as a historical aberration.** Although a restrained U.S. foreign policy may have been appropriate for the United States in the 18th and 19th centuries, the world of the 18th and 19th centuries was quite different. For example, given changes in communication, transportation, and military technologies since the 18th and 19th centuries, the Atlantic and Pacific oceans are much less effective as geographic buffers between the United States and Eurasia today than they were in the 18th and 19th centuries. Experiences in more recent decades (including World Wars I and II and the Cold War) show that a more restrained U.S. foreign policy would now be riskier or more costly over the long run than an engaged U.S. foreign policy.
- **Moral standing.** The United States, though not perfect, retains ample moral authority—and responsibility—to act as a world leader, particularly in comparison to authoritarian countries such as China or Russia.
- **Public opinion.** Other public opinion poll results show that Americans support a U.S. global leadership role.

Arguments that these observers make relating to other countries include the following:

- **Growing wealth and power.** Although the wealth and power of countries such as China have grown considerably in recent years, future rates of growth for those countries are open to question. China faces the prospect of declining rates of economic growth and the aging and eventual shrinkage of its population, while Russia has a relatively small economy and is experiencing demographic decline. The United States has one of the most favorable demographic situations of any major power, and retains numerous advantages in terms of economic and financial strength, military power, technology, and capacity for innovation. Although the United States is no longer as dominant globally as it once was, it remains the world's most powerful country, particularly when all dimensions of power are taken into consideration.
- **Ideas about international order.** The liberal international order reflects U.S. interests and values; a renegotiated international order incorporating ideas from authoritarian countries such as China would produce a world less conducive to defending and promoting U.S. interests and values. Americans have long lived in a world reflecting U.S. interests and values and would not welcome a world incorporating Chinese values on issues such as the rule of law; the scope of civil society; political and human rights; freedom of speech, the press, and information; and privacy and surveillance.
- **Eurasia as self-regulating.** Eurasia historically has not been self-regulating in terms of preventing the emergence of regional hegemons, and the idea that it will become self-regulating in the future is a risky and untested proposition.
- **Hegemons and spheres of influence.** A regional hegemon in Eurasia would have enough economic and other power to be able to threaten vital U.S. interests. In addition to threatening U.S. access to the economies of Eurasia, a spheres-of-influence world would be prone to war because regional hegemons historically are never satisfied with the extent of their hegemonic domains and eventually seek to expand them, coming into conflict with other hegemons. Leaders of regional hegemons are also prone to misjudgment and miscalculation regarding where their spheres collide.

Appendix C. Additional Writings

As potential sources of additional reading, this appendix presents a list of writings over the past six months reflecting various perspectives on whether the United States under the Trump Administration has changed the U.S. role in the world and what the implications of such a change might be, listed in chronological order, with the most recent on top. Writings from more than six months ago can be found in earlier versions of this report.

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Robbie Gramer and Colum Lynch, "Trump Officials Seek to Push Social Conservative Values in International Agreements," Foreign Policy, September 30, 2020.

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Jonathan Alter, "How the United States Learned to Love Human Rights," *Foreign Policy*, September 29, 2020.

James Jay Carafano, "Mike Pompeo's South America Trip Demonstrates Need for Sustained Commitment," Heritage Foundation, September 29, 2020.

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Brett Schaefer and Danielle Pletka, "The Human Rights Council Must Reform to Earn U.S. Re-Engagement," Heritage Foundation, September 29, 2020.

Alexander Vindman and John Gans, "Trump Has Sold Off America's Credibility for His Personal Gain," *New York Times*, September 29, 2020.

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Donna Rachel Edmunds, "Pompeo: The Chinese Communist Party is re-writing the Bible, Speaking at a Recent Summit, State Secretary Mike Pompeo Said That America Was Standing Up for Religious Freedom Worldwide, As Where It Fails, Totalitarism [sic] Soon Follows," *Jerusalem Post*, September 27, 2020.

Charles A. Kupchan, "*Isolationism* Is Not a Dirty Word, Americans Have Lost Touch With a Crucial Strain of Their Foreign-Policy Tradition," *Atlantic*, September 27, 2020.

James Goldgeier and Bruce W. Jentleson, "The United States Is Not Entitled to Lead the World, Washington Should Take A Seat at the Table—But Not Always at Its Head," *Foreign Affairs*, September 25, 2020.

Evan Osnos, "The TikTok Fiasco Reflects the Bankruptcy of Trump's Foreign Policy," *New Yorker*, September 25, 2020.

Jimmy Quinn, "Europe Makes Its Choice," *National Review*, September 25, 2020.

William J. Burns, "The Blob Meets the Heartland, Foreign Policy Should Work Better for America's Middle Class," *Atlantic*, September 24, 2020.

Kristine Lee, "The United States Can't Quit on the UN, When America Withdraws, China Wins," *Foreign Affairs*, September 24, 2020.

Armstrong Williams, "How Donald Trump Is Shaping History, At the End of the Day, There Is Only One Person in Charge, One Person to Whom We Can Credit This Deal That So Many Doubters Thought Would Never Come. That Person is Donald Trump," *National Interest*, September 24, 2020.

William J. Burns and Linda Thomas-Greenfield, "The Transformation of Diplomacy, How to Save the State Department," *Foreign Affairs*, September 23, 2020.

Zachary Cohen, "Trump Says He Likes Putin. US Intelligence Says Russia Is Attacking American Democracy," *CNN*, September 22, 2020.

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Dina Smeltz, Ivo Daalder, Karl Friedhoff, Craig Kafura, and Brendan Helm, *Divided We Stand, Democrats and Republicans Diverge on US Foreign Policy, Results of the 2020 Chicago Council Survey of American Public Opinion and US Foreign Policy*, Chicago Council on Global Affairs, undated, released September 17, 2020, 47 pp.

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