

# America's Advantage and Biden's Chance

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November 20, 2020

Ever since then U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright memorably called the United States “indispensable” more than two decades ago, both Americans and publics abroad have vigorously debated the proposition. Today, as President Donald Trump’s term comes to a close, foreign observers of the United States are more prone to use a different word: “incompetent.”

The Trump administration’s response to the most urgent problem in the world today—the coronavirus pandemic—has been worse than that of any other nation. This, in turn, has understandably tarnished perceptions of the United States: according to recent Pew Research Center polling conducted in 13 major economic powers, a median of 84 percent of respondents agreed that the United States has done a poor job of handling COVID-19—by far the most damning appraisal received by any major country or institution. Yet the mishandling of the pandemic is just the latest in a string of lapses in basic competence that have called into question U.S. capabilities among both long-standing allies and countries whose partnership Washington may seek in the years to come. A brand once synonymous with the world-changing creations of Steve Jobs, with feats of strength and ingenuity such as the Berlin airlift and the moon landing, and with the opportunity represented by the Statue of Liberty now projects chaos, polarization, and dysfunction.

For all the criticism directed at U.S. foreign policy in eras past, foreign leaders and publics largely retained respect for the United States’ willingness to undertake challenging endeavors and its ability to accomplish difficult tasks—a significant but underappreciated cornerstone of American power. Today, the fact that fewer and fewer people identify the United States as capable of solving big problems should be a major concern for those who believe that U.S. leadership must play a central role in tackling climate change and other shared global problems whose solutions demand both expertise and effective coalition building.

What’s more, unlike in the recent past, today the United States has a potent competitor on the world stage, and it is increasingly common to hear people contrast Washington’s debilitating partisanship and gridlock with the ruthless efficiency of Beijing’s authoritarian rule. Yet even as the United States has faltered in highly visible and costly ways, China is fumbling the mantle of global leadership, too—with its lethal cover-up of the pandemic, its bullying diplomacy and extraterritorial belligerence, its controversial approach to development, and its ongoing human rights horrors, including the mass internment of its Uighur Muslim population. This reality creates an opportunity for President-elect Joe Biden and his administration.

Some Americans are confident that after four years of Trump, the relief in foreign capitals will be so immense that U.S. leadership on key issues will be readily welcomed. Biden has said that his first foreign policy move will be to call foreign leaders and say, “America’s back: you can count on us,” and he has laid out plans for reversing U.S. withdrawals from international bodies, revoking harmful policies, ending “forever wars,” and restoring alliances. He has also pledged to prioritize the fight against climate change—outside of addressing the pandemic and its fallout, the most urgent problem for every nation in the world.

These moves will garner headlines, but while they are of course necessary, they will not be enough. The new president will have to grapple with the widespread view that in key domains, the United States—home to over 40 percent of all Nobel Prize winners in peace, literature, economics, chemistry, medicine, and physics—does not have the competence to be trusted. Restoring American leadership, accordingly, must include the more basic task of showing that the United States is a capable problem solver once more.

The new administration will rightly give precedence to problem solving at home—ending the pandemic, jump-starting an equitable economic recovery, and reforming fraying democratic institutions. Biden has said he plans to pull the country out of the current crisis by “building back better” in a way that confronts economic inequality, systemic racism, and climate change. Yet major structural changes will take time. The Biden administration should therefore also pursue foreign policy initiatives that can quickly highlight the return of American expertise and competence. Here, Biden should emphasize policies that provide clear, simultaneous benefits at home; meet a critical and felt need abroad; are highly visible; and—the missing ingredient in so many U.S. foreign policy endeavors of late—produce tangible outcomes. This means less rhetorical emphasis on the abstract cause of “the liberal international order” and more practical demonstrations of the United States’ distinctive ability to deliver on issues that matter right now in the lives of hundreds of millions of people.

Three areas ripe for such leadership are the following: spearheading global COVID-19 vaccine distribution, ramping up educational opportunities in the United States for foreign students, and waging a high-profile fight against corruption at home and abroad. By playing to U.S. strengths and taking advantage of the opening that Chinese overreach has created, such initiatives would have a measurable impact on confidence in U.S. competence—a necessary foundation for the persuasion and coalition building needed to advance U.S. interests in the years ahead.

## **america the incompetent**

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Debates among Americans over how the United States should engage with other countries in a post-Trump era have led to valid questions about whether it can conceivably regain the trust needed to lead again. Biden will return the United States to the Paris climate accord, the World Health Organization, and (if the right terms can be secured) the Iran nuclear deal. He has said that his administration will reengage in a

variety of international forums and initiatives that Trump abandoned, such as the UN Human Rights Council and the Global Compact for Migration. He has vowed to end the destructive policies of the Trump administration, such as the travel ban on Muslim-majority nations, the slashing of U.S. refugee numbers to historic lows, family separations at the southern border, the berating of allies, and the embrace of authoritarian leaders. And he has promised to draw on the deep ties he has built over four decades of work in foreign policy to convince countries in Asia and Europe that Washington can once again be counted on as an ally.

These steps may show the United States to be a more willing and honest partner, but they will not be sufficient to address reasonable concerns about whether it is a competent one. Over the past three years, according to [Gallup polls](#), approval of U.S. leadership across more than 130 countries has dropped precipitously. And in the last year alone, Pew's polling has shown favorable views of the United States dropping by double-digit margins and hitting record lows in Australia, Canada, France, Japan, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United Kingdom—which Pew attributes primarily to the view that the United States has done a poor job of handling the pandemic.

Beyond the statistics, examples of diminished faith in U.S. competence have accumulated. After Trump began endorsing malaria medications as COVID-19 treatments, health authorities in Africa—including the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the continent's primary public health institution—had to scramble to dissuade people from [taking them](#). A Norwegian university encouraged its students to return home from countries “with poorly developed health services and infrastructure . . . for example the USA.” A journalist on Bosnia's 24-hour cable news channel N1 observed of the United States: “The vice president is wearing a mask, while the president doesn't. Some staffers wear them; some don't. Everybody acts as they please. As time passes, the White House begins to look more and more like the Balkans.”

Biden will have to grapple with the widespread view that the United States does not have the competence to be trusted.

The pandemic may be the most important event of our lifetimes, and it will not be easy to alter impressions of the United States' inability to execute an effective response on behalf of its own citizens, never mind with an eye to the well-being of those in other countries. Reinhard Bütikofer, a German member of the European Parliament, summed up how the United States has come to be seen in Europe: “The shining city on the hill is not as shining as it used to be.”

In 2009, the last time Biden entered the executive branch, those of us who were part of the Obama administration confronted analogous concerns stemming from the disastrous Iraq war and the United States' responsibility for the global financial crisis. President Barack Obama took steps similar to those Biden has promised: moving to rejoin UN bodies and pay UN dues, banning unethical practices such as torture, repairing the damage to alliances caused by the invasion of Iraq, and proclaiming, “We

are ready to lead once more.” But while these moves were necessary and helpful in generating international goodwill, my own impression—as someone who served through all eight years of that administration—is that the United States’ stock didn’t hit its peak until 2014–15, when confidence in U.S. leadership was boosted by a succession of visible results.

In that period, Obama mobilized over 62 countries to eradicate the Ebola virus in West Africa, deploying health-care workers, building Ebola treatment units, and dispatching labs to carry out rapid testing. U.S. nuclear experts negotiated innovative ideas for blocking Iran’s pathways to a nuclear weapon, and U.S. diplomats rallied the support of China, Russia, and other major powers to back a deal built on those ideas. U.S. scientists and diplomats leveraged immense national climate expertise and political capital to secure an agreement in Paris that included commitments to reduce emissions and take other steps to mitigate climate change from almost every country in the world. By the end of 2015, while walking the halls of the UN as the U.S. ambassador and interacting with my counterparts, I encountered a palpably higher level of faith in the United States and eagerness to partner with us than two years prior.

Perceptions of U.S. foreign policy as unreliable and erratic are of course far more entrenched now that the world has seen such a radical turn from Obama to Trump. Moreover, the strong electoral showing for Trump and the backing he got from prominent Republicans in his attempts to deny Biden’s victory will only deepen concerns that perceived improvements in U.S. foreign policy will prove fleeting. Nonetheless, there is still much one can learn from the past: each of these Obama-era initiatives relied on more than just the diplomacy that Biden and other Democrats have rightly pledged to restore. They required—and showcased—immense operational know-how and the deployment of economic, technical, and intelligence resources few other countries have at their disposal. Most important, they delivered clear results, on issues then of central concern to publics in both the United States and abroad.

## **chinese overreach?**

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For all the concerns that China would take advantage of the United States’ retreat from the world stage, the record of the last few years has not inspired a surge in faith in China as an alternative global leader. China’s rise to global power over the past decade has been perhaps the most consistent storyline in the world, but Gallup polling has found that China’s global approval rating—a median of 32 percent among over 130 countries—has hardly budged in ten years. The same Pew polling that has shown the United States’ substantial favorability deficits has also indicated that majorities in those countries surveyed hold unfavorable views of China, too, and in many cases, those views are only getting worse. In the United Kingdom, disapproval of China was under 40 percent five years ago; today, it is almost 75 percent—a trend also evident in Australia, Canada, Germany, and South Korea. Doubts about how China has handled the pandemic remain high: a median of 61 percent of those surveyed agreed that Beijing did a bad job of dealing with the outbreak (only the United States got worse ratings).

Beijing's combative actions over the last year have compounded the unease. China has stepped up its aggressiveness around Taiwan, in the South China Sea, on its border with India, and in Hong Kong. When Australia called for an international investigation into the origins of the coronavirus, China responded by imposing a punishing 80 percent tariff on barley, a key Australian export. Fijian officials watched in horror as Chinese diplomats showed up, uninvited, to a reception celebrating Taiwan and beat up a Taiwanese diplomat who tried to keep them from entering. After the Netherlands changed the name of its trade-oriented diplomatic mission in Taiwan to Netherlands Office Taipei, reflecting a broadening of the bilateral relationship beyond economics, China threatened to cancel shipments of medical supplies for fighting the coronavirus.

China's bullying is already driving a backlash. As illustrated by the Pew polling, Beijing's threats helped cause Dutch distrust of Chinese President Xi Jinping to rise by 17 percentage points in one year. In Australia, Prime Minister Scott Morrison is now seeking new powers aimed at diminishing Chinese influence in the country. Canada's defense minister has decried the imprisonment of two innocent Canadians, in retaliation for the arrest in Canada of a Chinese executive, as "hostage diplomacy." During the early months of the pandemic, the French Foreign Ministry publicly rebuked the Chinese ambassador in Paris after his embassy accused France of leaving elderly people to "die from starvation and disease" in nursing homes. India banned over 100 Chinese-made mobile apps in response to months of border tensions that have led to the deaths of more than 20 Indian soldiers.

The United States has a singular capacity to help countries with their strategies for administering a vaccine.

Even before the pandemic, global concern was growing about Chinese development practices, pursued most prominently through the massive infrastructure-building drive known as the Belt and Road Initiative, and particularly the steep interest charged on its loans. Sri Lanka's difficulties servicing its debt on a Chinese-built port infamously ended in a deal that left the development under Beijing's control. When the Malaysian prime minister canceled billions of dollars' worth of Chinese-financed infrastructure projects approved by his predecessor, he explained, "It's all about pouring in too much money which we cannot afford, we cannot repay. . . . With that debt, if we are not careful, we can become bankrupt." After Tanzania's president canceled deals his predecessor had made with China, he similarly observed that only a "madman" would accept the terms that had been negotiated. In Nigeria, politicians have demanded an official investigation into China's lending practices after rumors spread last summer that Beijing might begin seizing the country's assets. In Zambia, a former commerce minister has asked the Constitutional Court to rule on the legality of the country's secretive loan deals, which have left the country owing a quarter of its debt to China.

There is debate about whether Beijing is pursuing a deliberate strategy of "debt-trap diplomacy," and it is complicated to pinpoint just how much China is owed by developing countries. But a 2019 study estimated that the 50 biggest recipients of

Chinese lending then had debts with China worth about 15 percent of their GDPs, on average, up from less than one percent in 2005. Meanwhile, Chinese infrastructure development has lost some of its luster because of concerns over transparency, environmental degradation, and the flood of Chinese workers who have taken jobs that locals believed would be available to them. Public opposition to Belt and Road projects has surfaced even in countries that impose strict restrictions on voicing dissent, including Kazakhstan, Laos, and Myanmar.

Many countries naturally still see significant opportunity in deeper ties with China. Yet over the last four years, opinions on Beijing's leadership have soured in critical areas. And for Biden, that provides an opening. But to fully seize it, the new administration must restore the United States' reputation for competence.

## Hour of need

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Demonstrating competence requires an ability to do more than one big thing at once—as the Obama administration did during the financial crisis, rescuing the American economy while also galvanizing the G-20 to provide over \$1 trillion in stimulus for other struggling countries, thus helping keep the global economy intact. The United States can reenter all the deals and international organizations it wants, but the biggest gains in influence will come by demonstrating its ability to deliver in many countries' hour of greatest need.

Beginning with the issue on which the United States' reputation has suffered the most—the pandemic—the Biden administration can spearhead global vaccine distribution in a way that reminds the world of what the United States can uniquely do. Under any president other than Trump, the government would already be racing not just to produce a vaccine for domestic consumption; it would also be leading the world in developing a blueprint for vaccine distribution globally. Trump has shown no interest in vaccines reaching other countries. Along with initiating the United States' withdrawal from the World Health Organization, he proudly rejected participation in COVAX, a 184-nation initiative that is aiming to make two billion vaccine doses available worldwide, mainly to high-risk populations and frontline health-care workers, by the end of 2021.

The United States is well positioned to vaccinate Americans when a safe and effective vaccine is available. The U.S. government has already purchased 800 million doses for the country's population of 328 million from companies hustling to develop a viable vaccine. But beginning to vaccinate Americans alone will not be enough to guarantee American well-being; the global pandemic will not fully end, nor will the U.S. economy fully recover, while COVID-19 is still raging elsewhere. China's attempt to convince the world that it is a "responsible great power" through helping other countries gain access to vaccines should provide an additional impetus for Republicans to get onboard with supporting a global effort, even in an immensely difficult budget environment.

Biden should start by having the United States join COVAX, which will play a key role in the equitable distribution of vaccines. Yet even if fully funded and able to meet its goals, COVAX is expected to reach only a quarter of the global population by the end of 2021. The United States should go further, launching bilateral partnerships with low- and middle-income countries that need help with the complexities of vaccinating their citizens. The United States has an obvious competitive advantage for this effort: its unparalleled scientific expertise and unrivaled global reach. Although China overtook the United States in total number of diplomatic outposts in 2019, having a vast diplomatic network and using it for good are two very different propositions. Both the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) have deep experience with immunization programs and long-standing working relationships with ministries of health, nongovernmental organizations, academic institutions, and the private sector in foreign countries.



The El Paso medical examiner's office during a surge of COVID-19 cases, El Paso, Texas, November 2020

Ivan Pierre Aguirre / Reuters

Public health experts have made clear that providing widespread access to a COVID-19 vaccine will be a highly complex undertaking, requiring precise temperature controls during shipping and storage; new methods of global distribution at a time when commercial air traffic has fallen sharply (drug companies typically ship half their products in the cargo holds of passenger planes); the sourcing and manufacture of huge quantities of materials, such as glass vials and syringes; and the development of convincing vaccine messaging tailored to particular populations. In but one testament

to the challenge, a recent evaluation of supply chain resilience, conducted by the logistics company DHL, concluded that “large parts of Africa, South America and Asia could not be readily supplied” with a vaccine due to a lack of the technology needed to keep the doses at the right temperature.

With decades of expertise from global immunization campaigns targeting polio, measles, and smallpox, as well as the more recent campaign against Ebola in West Africa, the United States has a singular capacity to help other countries with their strategies for administering a vaccine. This would include helping manage global logistics for distribution and troubleshooting the inevitable issues that arise with international supply chains, supporting public information campaigns, providing technical expertise on quality control, training local health-care workers, and implementing programs for increasing access and uptake in hard-to-reach communities. All these tasks would draw on long-standing U.S. partnerships with governments and other actors in the more than 60 countries where thousands of CDC and USAID staff already work.

Judging from the reaction to the U.S. provision of lifesaving aid in other contexts, such an effort would also have a significant positive effect on American standing internationally. While this would by no means be the main motivation, it should nonetheless be a relevant consideration for an administration that will be trying to show a skeptical world that the United States can be counted on again. After the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan, and the 2011 tsunami in Japan, high-profile U.S. disaster relief almost immediately boosted favorable opinions of the United States in those places. A more enduring example of this impact can be seen in the realm of public health, where the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, President George W. Bush’s signature international initiative, has provided antiretroviral treatment to more than 16 million people, including 700,000 children. In addition to its enormous humanitarian benefits, PEPFAR has made a significant and lasting impact on the attitudes of foreign publics toward the United States—producing a “substantial” increase in U.S. standing among nations that have participated in the program, according to a 2014 academic study. Indeed, when Bush left office in 2009, Gallup measured his approval rating at 34 percent in the United States—and 73 percent among African nations.

## **academic excellence**

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While no initiative would have the impact of U.S. leadership on vaccines, one of the best ways to showcase the United States’ ingenuity and know-how is to again make its universities the most attractive in the world to foreign talent. Biden has pledged to end Trump’s most visibly prejudicial immigration policies, such as the Muslim ban and inhumane asylum restrictions. But American universities have a special place in the global imagination, and lowering the visa hurdles for study in the United States while



creating better, more accessible pathways for international students to work in the United States after graduation can pay both short- and long-term dividends in expanding U.S. influence.

Before Trump's presidency, initiatives to attract international students to the United States would not have been controversial. For many decades, the United States has been the leading destination for foreign students. Over one million non-Americans are educated in the United States annually, and according to the Department of State, for the four academic years beginning in 2012, the total number of international students coming to the United States grew between seven and ten percent annually, thanks to efforts that had bipartisan support. Yet due to fresh visa restrictions and the Trump administration's anti-immigrant posture, in the 2018–19 (pre-pandemic) school year, new enrollments were down by eight percent compared with four years earlier.

Prior administrations have supported international education, but their efforts rarely got much attention, as they were in keeping with the general impression of the United States as a diverse nation that welcomed foreign talent. After the last four years, however, Biden has an opportunity to reboot this undertaking in a way that increases global recognition of just how many foreign students obtain education in the United States and expands domestic awareness of the benefits. He can also help neutralize the chilling effects of Trump's xenophobic rhetoric, which even before the pandemic had caused many young people to forgo study in the United States in favor of places such as Australia and Canada. It is hard to think of a more cost-effective way for Biden to reach global populations concerned about the direction of the United States than by celebrating the fact that the country is again welcoming bright young minds from around the world.

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Biden could start by delivering a major speech announcing that his administration is joining with American universities in again welcoming international students, making clear that they are assets rather than threats. The administration should set a target to once again annually grow the number of foreign students at the 7–10 percent range achieved earlier in the decade, and it should seek commitments from universities to recruit from parts of the world whose students have historically been underrepresented on U.S. campuses. He should also integrate immigration and visa policy deliberations into the larger discussion of how to safely reopen the United States. And he should take a number of steps that will make an immediate difference for foreigners considering studying in the United States, including issuing and publicizing guidance to U.S. Customs and Border Protection officials to stop harassing and intimidating foreign students, ensuring that students will not have to seek visa extensions in the middle of their programs of study, and reconstituting the moribund Homeland Security Academic Advisory Council, composed of university presidents and educational experts that advise the Department of Homeland Security on how its policies affect foreign students, teaching, and academic research. He should also order a speedy review to determine

how to modernize the handling of student visa applications, assessing which administrative hurdles can be removed and which can be expedited and made more transparent for students whose lives are often left in limbo as they await the necessary clearances.

Such an educational-opportunity initiative would bring many benefits. At a time when confidence in longtime American strengths has waned, international students would gain exposure to fonts of knowledge and innovation in the United States. New opportunities, friendships, and professional relationships would generate lasting goodwill. Meanwhile, during what will be a prolonged and difficult economic recovery, more international students would mean more money going into the American economy. In 2019, even as new enrollments ebbed, international education constituted the United States' sixth-largest service-sector export, contributing nearly \$44 billion to the U.S. economy and, according to a Commerce Department analysis conducted during the Trump administration, supporting more than 458,000 jobs. At a time when China has turned itself into a prime destination for students looking to study abroad, this initiative would also be an important counterweight, attracting international talent, exposing future leaders to the values of an open society, and making many of them lifelong ambassadors for democracy—and for strong ties between their home countries and the United States.

Because world-class American universities have been a beacon for high-achieving young people of all nationalities, many foreign graduates have gone on to found companies and make their scientific discoveries in the United States. Others who have returned home have risen to run their own countries: as Bloomberg pointed out recently, more than 20 percent of current African leaders studied in the United States, including those at the helm in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia. The long-term benefits of fostering ties with new generations of foreign nationals has not been lost on the Chinese. “There are more than 300 world leaders, including presidents, prime ministers, and ministers around the globe, that graduated from U.S. universities, but only a few foreign leaders that graduated from Chinese universities,” Wang Huiyao, an influential adviser to China’s State Council, said in 2017. “So we still need to exercise effort to boost academic exchange and educate more political elites from other countries.”

The United States’ competitive advantage has always flowed from its diversity and ability to provide opportunities. Americans should be proud that a majority of the most valuable U.S. startups were created by immigrants—a quarter of whom came to the United States as international students. Ensuring that this trend continues—and doing more to advertise it—will demonstrate to people around the world that it is far too soon to bet against American dynamism.

## **corruption crackdown**

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If vaccine distribution would harness U.S. capabilities to help save lives and if expanding educational opportunities would demonstrate U.S. intellectual firepower and openness, a global initiative to combat corruption would allow the United States to

visibly mobilize its unique capabilities for tracking, exposing, and prosecuting financial crimes, meeting demands for accountability coming from citizens in every corner of the world. Biden has promised to issue a presidential directive that declares the fight against corruption “a core national security interest.” He has also pledged to host a major summit with other democracies during his first year in office, with corruption as one of its key agenda items. But he can go further, making anticorruption a centerpiece of his international agenda.

The United States is the central hub of a global financial system that between 1999 and 2017 moved at least \$2 trillion in funds connected to arms dealers, drug traffickers, money launderers, sanctions evaders, and corrupt officials. The real amount of illicit money coursing through the global economy is surely much greater (the \$2 trillion includes only what banks themselves flagged), with the annual cost of corruption in 2019 perhaps reaching some \$4 trillion—five percent of global GDP. The World Bank estimates that each year, individuals and business pay \$1 trillion in bribes alone. For the good of people at home and abroad, the Biden administration can take the lead in driving changes that reduce corruption, money laundering, and global tax evasion—practices that finance autocratic leaders and parties, exacerbate income inequality, and violate individual rights.

The notable rise of autocrats and populists around the world has generated a worrying sense of momentum for repressive regimes, but corruption is a key area of vulnerability for these leaders. While they may perceive few costs from constituents when they reject human rights principles or openly admire the “China model” of authoritarian capitalist governance, no leader wants it known that he has used his position of power and privilege to help himself and his cronies profit at the expense of citizens.



Antigovernment protesters in Baghdad, Iraq, October 2020  
Thaier Al-Sudani / Reuters

Anger over corruption and misconduct has been a driving force behind a surge in mass mobilizations around the world. Over the last decade, the Center for Strategic and International Studies has tracked an average annual 11.5 percent increase in the number of protests taking place around the world, with opposition to corruption playing a central role in roughly half of the record 37 major protest movements that occurred in 2019. In countries including Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon, Malta, and Sudan, these protests led to leaders' resignations and changes of government. In recent years, revelations that the powerful Brazilian construction firm Odebrecht paid \$788 million in bribes across Latin America brought down major political figures and upended politics in a dozen nations in the region. Although not every corruption scandal leads to such a dramatic fallout, academic studies provide ample evidence that perceptions of corruption contribute significantly to dissatisfaction with democracy, particularly in established democracies. Aggressively tackling corruption can thus play a role in helping blunt the global democratic recession at the same time as it helps countries preserve precious state funds during the pandemic and the resulting economic crisis.

As with most major foreign policy issues, the foundation for Biden's leadership will need to be laid at home, beginning with measures to clean up after the most corrupt and self-dealing presidency in U.S. history. Financial institutions and other private-sector entities that have been caught laundering dirty money appear to view fines as the cost of doing business; for genuine deterrence, the use of more severe sanctions, including criminal prosecution, is necessary. And Democrats need to dedicate themselves to the

uphill work of overturning *Citizens United*, the 2010 Supreme Court decision that allowed corporations and other groups to make unlimited campaign expenditures, and implementing additional measures to keep foreign money out of U.S. elections.

But there is much to do on the international front, as well. The United States could insist that a country make a set of minimum anticorruption commitments in order to enter into preferential trading arrangements, ramping up technical assistance to those countries eager to do more. It can employ the corruption prong of the Global Magnitsky Act, coordinating the resulting sanctions against corrupt individuals and entities with U.S. allies. For those nations with decent laws already on the books, the Biden administration can encourage far greater application of laws prohibiting foreign bribery and money laundering, as enforcement has dropped markedly around the world. Indeed, according to Transparency International, only four out of the top 47 exporting countries actively enforce antibribery laws.

Anticorruption is another domain in which the United States has a competitive advantage over China. Since 1977, the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act has prohibited American citizens and companies from bribing foreign officials abroad and has required transparent accounting. Although Trump looked into getting rid of the FCPA and the number of new FCPA investigations has fallen of late, the Department of Justice and the Securities and Exchange Commission continue to enforce it, as well as the Anti-Bribery Convention of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. By contrast, China—the world’s largest exporter, its second-largest economy, and the headquarters of companies implicated in numerous corruption scandals in other countries—did not open any investigations into foreign bribery between 2016 and 2019.

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Shell companies registered in the United States are frequently used by corrupt foreign actors to conceal stolen state funds or to hide payments they have received through bribes and kickbacks. Whether through securing passage of the pending bipartisan legislation in Congress called the Corporate Transparency Act or through the Biden administration’s own executive actions, the United States must update its anti-money-laundering practices, which haven’t been reformed in decades, including requiring disclosure of who actually profits from or controls properties, companies, and trusts registered in the United States. In mandating the establishment of a public registry of these actual beneficiaries, the Biden administration should press other countries to do the same, closing loopholes in Europe and beyond, so the true owners can be subjected to legal oversight. These registries are indispensable in ensuring that illegal money flows are detected and investigated. As a complement, Biden should also direct U.S. intelligence agencies to devote more resources to uncovering major transnational financial crimes, making sure that the administration does not focus disproportionately on technical standard setting while neglecting the evidence gathering needed to actually build cases and dismantle corruption networks.

Few people—whether in the United States or elsewhere—are likely aware of such programs or prosecutions, even when they work as designed. To enhance the profile of U.S. anticorruption efforts, the Biden administration should consider taking steps to ensure that ordinary citizens hurt by corruption begin to actually see benefits from enforcement. When Western countries recover proceeds from foreign bribery, they tend to reflexively return the money to foreign state treasuries. Washington should explore arrangements through which individuals harmed by the paying of bribes or the pilfering of national assets can secure compensation, encouraging other countries to move in a similar direction. The U.S. legal system has stringent requirements for establishing an individual's or a group's standing in court. It is essential, however, that those harmed by corrupt actors—whether, for example, through the embezzlement of state funds that could have been used to buy ventilators or the health hazards resulting from environmental permits being wrongly granted—see a far more tangible return on the United States' global anticorruption work.

As vice president, Biden invested significant time advocating on behalf of the preservation of Guatemala's anticorruption commission, known as CICIG, which initiated cases against hundreds of current or former government officials in the country. Established by the UN and funded by the United States and other outside donors, the independent commission's experts investigated the country's entrenched criminal networks and then worked with Guatemalan counterparts to prosecute the graft and other crimes they uncovered. CICIG boasted an 85 percent success rate in resolving cases—its targets included both a sitting president and a sitting vice president—and became the most popular institution in Guatemala. But it was disbanded in 2019 by the Guatemalan government without much protest from the Trump administration. Its domestic renown was but one reflection of the desire of citizens around the world to see corruption and lawlessness investigated by independent bodies, a general principle they should know the United States stands behind.

Under both the Obama and the Trump administrations, the State Department's budget for anticorruption efforts averaged just \$115 million annually. Additional resources should be paired with a directive to U.S. diplomats to raise corruption issues frequently with foreign counterparts and with the designation of a high-profile White House anticorruption coordinator to steer the multiple agencies involved and signal the priority accorded the issue at home and abroad.

## **the world where it is**

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These initiatives will not heal a divided nation made more divided by the contentious 2020 election. They will not make foreign leaders or publics forget broken American promises, harmful American policies, or the fact that the United States has had one of the worst per capita death rates from COVID-19 of any high-income country in the world. And they will not make China any less of a formidable challenger.

What these initiatives can do, however, is meet much of the world where it is: reeling from a deadly pandemic, alienated by the United States' xenophobic turn, and hungering for a form of governance that is accountable to the people. They would also remind the world not of the nebulous "return of U.S. leadership" but of specific U.S. capabilities. These assets, squandered or neglected by Trump, remain core strengths that only the United States has the means to project.

SAMANTHA POWER is Professor of Practice at the Harvard Kennedy School and Harvard Law School and the author of *The Education of an Idealist: A Memoir*. She was U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations from 2013 to 2017.

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