



PERSPECTIVES

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Neo-Jacksonianism: US Foreign Policy at a Historic Crossroads

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The American turn toward Jacksonian isolationism could ultimately put it in the difficult position of having to exercise hard power to fill the very gap it created. As rogue elements take the opportunity left by the American retreat to try to impose their maximalist goals on the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean, American foreign policy finds itself at a historic crossroads with little time left in which to act.

The end of the Cold War, for reasons that had to do with American exceptionalism and also with Washington's pragmatic decision not to pursue the chimera of global domination, did not result in the systemic transition from a bipolar to a stifling unipolar international balance of power. On the contrary: the US favored the unfolding of a new systemic structure in which Russia, China, and India were to play a major role in both international politics and international trade.

The emergence of the 21st century multipolar system, together with the appearance of nihilistic militant groups such as al-Qaeda, ISIS, Boko Haram, and al-Shabab, produced a novel geostrategic mosaic in which international politics experience a constant blend of political volatility, financial unpredictability, and systemic inconsistency. The new era is characterized by constant military friction, economic asymmetric interdependency in its most extreme form since the end of the second industrial revolution, a surge of radicalism, and the endorsement of populism in both domestic and international politics.

Yet while in the 20th century the US was the Western element most willing and able to intervene in order to offer a way out of such a conundrum, the

“shining city on the hill” has instead embraced a version of Jacksonianism in the 21st century. It now appears to prefer to watch the world’s movements rather be its driving locomotive, the role it played for a century.

This is not because the US is getting weaker. The American economy is still the strongest in the world; the US leads NATO, the most powerful military alliance in human history; American technology is at the top, especially in artificial intelligence; and American soft power continues to rise. Perhaps this is not the “American century,” but the American style of life remains a global ideal.

Yet the US is unwilling to lead the western world from the front. Forms of Jacksonianism prevail domestically in the States on both sides of the partisan aisle while the rest of the globe is faced with continuous ontological crises. This has created an unprecedented gap between the US and Europe that jeopardizes both western stability and American status.

In the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East, this gap gives an opportunity to the two revisionist states in the region, Iran and Turkey, to maximize their agendas at the expense of regional peace and security. Iran has tripled its stockpile of enriched uranium since November 2019 according to the International Atomic Energy Agency, which puts it within reach of the amount needed to produce a nuclear weapon. Turkey has destabilized Greece by weaponizing tens of thousands of refugees who are encouraged to cross the Aegean Sea and the Evros River. The US did not interfere as Ankara threw its efforts into driving the Syrian Kurds as far as possible from the Turkish-Syrian border and creating a continuous humanitarian crisis on the borders of Greece, threatening its fragile economy and social cohesion—both of which have been under strain for more than 10 years due to the Greek economic crisis.

Jacksonianism, an ideology that wants minimal American international exposure, offers the worst possible service to US foreign policy in these regions. Local anti-western elements now feel emboldened to act in the most provocative way and expect to face no consequences. American prestige has rapidly diminished in a region that had long and enduring links with Atlantic ideals. Close American allies feel they are left to face a dystopic reality alone, while revisionist actors are acquiring more power by imposing their ambitions on the evolutionary course of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East.

Watching the domestic American political scene, it appears that Jacksonianism will only deepen despite the harm it will cause to American international status for decades to come.

If the US wishes to spend less time dealing with international affairs without permitting the collapse of its post-Cold War international status, it will be essential to counterbalance its systemic unresponsiveness with the provision of sustenance for the empowerment of infrastructure in key regions such as the Eastern Mediterranean. Local economies must be helped to reach an adequate technological level to meet the demands of the fourth Industrial Revolution. Washington should enhance military and political cooperation among those states in the Eastern Mediterranean that are willing and able to act as guardians of the region's peace and security against revisionist elements.

American foreign policy must work more closely with its allies in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East to ensure that the regions maintain their western status and construct a more durable and efficient deterrent mechanism against the rogue elements that continue to pursue their maximalist aims even amid the global pandemic. If Iran and Turkey are allowed to pursue their agendas against other states of the region, the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East will enter their most dangerous phase since the end of WWII. Such a turn would require the US to adopt a Hamiltonian approach, opening a new circle of international exposure for American hard power with Washington in the unpleasant position of having to maximize its efforts in order to fill a gap it created.

American foreign policy is at a historic crossroads, and there is not much time left in which to act.

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