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Competing and complementary regions in US foreign policy

ANDREW GAWTHORPE AND CATHERINE WOOD*

One of the most common geographical tropes in contemporary commentary on United States foreign policy is the idea that there is a competition for resources and attention between different global regions, which we refer to as competing regions discourse. This discourse often analyses US foreign policy in terms of the trade-offs which exist between policy goals in different regions and views these regions as discrete units rather than part of an interconnected whole. It frequently leads to policy prescriptions based on the perceived need to refocus attention and resources away from one region towards another.

Although this discourse has generated useful insights, it suffers from at least two major limitations. The first is that it has been demonstrably limited in effect. Many commentators—as well as every administration since that of Barack Obama—have proclaimed the need to divest resources away from Europe and the Middle East and towards the Indo-Pacific, but wars in Ukraine, Afghanistan, Gaza and against Islamic State have rendered this goal largely unattainable. Consequently, the administration of Joe Biden invested new resources in Europe, the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific.

The second limitation of competing regions discourse is that it tends to encourage the view that regions exist in isolation rather than as part of an interconnected system. This critical insight follows closely from the first. The fact that many global challenges—including those posed by individual states—touch simultaneously on different regions is one of the main reasons why successive US attempts to ‘pivot’ or ‘rebalance’ away from any particular region have been unsuccessful. The key challenges facing the US and its allies must instead be understood as being posed by interregional networks requiring action in multiple parts of the world, rather than as a competition among discrete regions for scarce resources. This is not to say that the United States and its allies can do everything, everywhere, all at once. Difficult choices need to be made about resource allocation, and there are times when competing regions discourse can help with making them. However, there are also times when it obscures the fact that what is really needed

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is smart, interconnected action *across* regions. Just as the problems that face these regions are interconnected, so their solutions can be complementary.

This insight is particularly important now, in the early months of the second administration of Donald Trump. Trump has historically viewed international relations in a highly transactional and simplistic way, denigrating US allies as resource drains while paying little attention to the ways in which they can be a force multiplier for the US in their own region and around the world. Important factions within the Republican Party have also come to subscribe to competing regions discourse, particularly in denigrating the importance of Europe and insisting on a focus on the Indo-Pacific. If policy-makers worldwide want to fight back against these tendencies, they will be aided by a nuanced understanding of the strengths and flaws of competing regions discourse.

This policy paper unfolds in three parts. The first explores the competing regions discourse and acknowledges some of the valuable insights that it offers. The second section advances an alternative understanding that sees challenges to US foreign policy as posed by interregional networks. The third section examines the Biden administration's adherence to an interregional conception and the prospects for this continuing during the second Trump administration. It also outlines a conceptual framework that can guide future research into US foreign policy within and between regions.

Competing regions discourse

The contemporary debate over US foreign policy can be divided into three schools: restrainers, prioritizers and neo-primacists.¹ Regions play a key role in the world-views of each school. All agree that Europe, Asia (often now called the 'Indo-Pacific') and the Middle East are the most important regions for US foreign policy, implicitly or explicitly downgrading the importance of other regions, including Africa and Latin America. Beyond this, they disagree on the exact role that the United States should play in these three key regions. Neo-primacists argue that the US must maintain or re-establish its preponderance of power in all three.² Prioritizers argue that resource constraints mean that the US should focus on one key region, typically the Indo-Pacific.³ Meanwhile, restrainers argue that the United States should carry out a general retreat from the world, arguing that US security can be preserved with a reduced global footprint.⁴

¹ See Majda Ruge and Jeremy Shapiro, 'Polarised power: the three Republican "tribes" that could define America's relationship with the world', European Council on Foreign Relations, 17 Nov. 2022, <https://ecfr.eu/article/polarised-power-the-three-republican-tribes-that-could-define-americas-relationship-with-the-world>. For neo-primacy, see Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, 'Neo-primacy and the pitfalls of US strategy toward China', *The Washington Quarterly* 43: 4, 2020, pp. 79–104, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2020.1849993>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 8 April 2025.)

² On primacy and neo-primacy, see Shiffrin, 'Neo-primacy'.

³ See, for example, Elbridge A. Colby, *The strategy of denial: American defense in an age of great power conflict* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022).

⁴ See, for examples, Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: a new foundation for U.S. grand strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014); Emma Ashford, 'Strategies of restraint: remaking America's broken foreign policy', *Foreign Affairs*, 24 Aug. 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-08-24/strategies->

Competing regions discourse plays the greatest role in the world-view of the prioritizers. Elbridge Colby, Trump's under secretary of defense for policy in his second administration, is one of the most vocal proponents of this view. In his 2021 book *The strategy of denial*, Colby argued that resource constraints will compel the United States to reduce its commitments in Europe and the Middle East in order to focus on defending its Asian allies against China. Colby views regions as largely self-contained, and argues that the US should only be involved in a region if a favourable balance of power cannot be maintained in that region without its involvement.⁵

Prioritizers highlight real dilemmas in contemporary US foreign policy. The rise of peer or near-peer military competitors and cutting-edge military technologies have forced US defence planners to abandon the ambition of being able to fight and win two conflicts simultaneously.⁶ Colby has argued that adopting a one-war standard while continuing to refuse to prioritize the Indo-Pacific amounts to an unsustainable bluff.⁷ Even if US forces are not directly engaged, multiple regional commitments place a substantial drain on the US defence-industrial base, which produces the munitions and weapons platforms deployed by US and partner forces.⁸

Competing regions discourse also influences the world-view of restrainers, who often counsel an even more radical withdrawal from overseas commitments than prioritizers. The restrainer camp is perhaps the most heterogeneous, stretching from conservative realists to progressive idealists. Members of this camp share a belief that US security can be ensured with a much-reduced global footprint and that involvement in too many regions strains US resources. Many restrainers unite on the need for the United States to reduce its commitments in the Middle East, which they see as the most obvious site of US overstretch and hubris.⁹ The attitude of restrainers towards other regions is more varied, but a core feature of the restrainer world-view is an emphasis on the costs of each regional presence and a concomitant desire to minimize them to the bare minimum necessary to preserve US security.

As well as arguing on the basis of resource constraints, restrainers raise insightful points about the ethical and reputational costs of US overcommitment. Active involvement in more parts of the world raises the risk that US policy-makers will make ethically questionable choices which are undesirable in themselves and will also cause reputational damage as a result. In the Middle East and South Asia, US involvement in a series of post-9/11 wars and interventions has made it harder

restraint; Miranda Priebe, John Schuessler, Bryan Rooney and Jasen Castillo, 'Competing visions of restraint', *International Security* 49: 2, 2024, pp. 135–69, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00498.

⁵ Colby, *The strategy of denial*, p. 28.

⁶ Jim Mitre, 'A eulogy for the two-war construct', *The Washington Quarterly* 41: 4, 2018, pp. 7–30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2018.1557479>.

⁷ Elbridge Colby (@ElbridgeColby) via X (formerly Twitter), 'But having a one war military with a two war policy? That's a bluff ...', 22 July 2023, <https://x.com/ElbridgeColby/status/1682825575545688065>.

⁸ Seth G. Jones, *Empty bins in a wartime environment: the challenge to the U.S. defense industrial base* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2023).

⁹ Ashford, 'Strategies of restraint'.

for American policy-makers to argue that they are acting to uphold a rules-based international order. Accusations of US hypocrisy make it tougher to mobilize support for Ukraine in the global South and could have the same effect in a future crisis centred on Taiwan.¹⁰ The Biden administration's efforts to support Israel in its war with Hamas after 7 October 2023 also demonstrated how an unpopular commitment in one region can undermine domestic support for commitments in other regions. In this case, Biden faced backlash from voters, which cost his vice-president, Kamala Harris, crucial votes in swing states in the November 2024 election. It was one factor among many that contributed to Trump's being handed the keys to the White House; Trump's support for American commitments in Europe and Asia seems less certain.¹¹

The attitude of neo-primacists towards competing regions discourse is more complicated. Policy-makers and writers in this school often see additional US regional presences as fundamentally additive: by doing more things in more places, the US is better able to ensure that destabilizing threats to its primacy cannot gather steam. Neo-primacists are particularly concerned with the ideas of credibility and deterrence, believing that US withdrawal from one region will invite assaults on its position in others.¹² Many neo-primacists, including the long-serving Republican senator Mitch McConnell, advocate a dramatic increase in US defence spending and a return to the old two-war standard.¹³

Such a dramatic rise in defence spending is unlikely, and neo-primacists exaggerate the extent to which foreign policy problems can be solved through military power. Neo-primacists hence provide an easy foil for restrainers and prioritizers alike. But there is also a risk that, in rejecting the excesses of neo-primacy, we lose sight of the insight that the world's regions and the problems they pose to US foreign policy are interconnected. What is needed is an approach to all of the world's regions that takes their interconnections into account—rather than treating them as isolated individual units—and that capitalizes on their complementary potential.

A world of interconnected regions

One of the weaknesses of the competing regions discourse is that it is insufficiently attentive to the fact that the United States is not the only country capable of pursuing a multiregional foreign policy. Colby, for instance, focuses on balances of power *within* regions and argues that the United States ought only to involve

¹⁰ Chris Alden, 'The global South and Russia's invasion of Ukraine', in Michael Cox, ed., *Ukraine: Russia's war and the future of global order* (London: LSE Press, 2023), pp. 359–78.

¹¹ Masood Farivar, 'In historic shift, American Muslim and Arab voters desert Democrats', *Voice of America*, 7 Nov. 2024, <https://www.voanews.com/a/in-historic-shift-american-muslim-and-arab-voters-desert-democrats/7854995.html>.

¹² Hal Brands and Eric Edelman, *Avoiding a strategy of bluff: the crisis of American military primacy* (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2017), pp. i–ii.

¹³ Mitch McConnell, 'The price of American retreat: why Washington must reject isolationism and embrace primacy', *Foreign Affairs*, 16 Dec. 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/price-american-retreat-trump-mitch-mcconnell>.

itself in a particular region if a favourable balance of power cannot be maintained there without a US presence.¹⁴ But this downplays the extent to which the most antagonistic states to the US and its allies are increasingly linking up *across* regions. In recent years—and particularly since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022—Russia, China, North Korea and Iran have deepened their economic, military and technological cooperation. China, Iran and North Korea have provided Russia with weapons, and North Korea even sent troops to fight against Ukraine. In return, Russia has given these countries access to advanced military technology. China's help has also been vital in enabling Russia to escape the worst consequences of western sanctions, a favour which could be returned in a future conflict over Taiwan.¹⁵ These developments have demonstrated that countries do not have to be able to project military force beyond their home region to exert influence and to fuel instability there.

This does not mean that the US approach to each of these adversaries should be defined by militarized containment. Much of the debate between neo-primacists, restrainers and prioritizers concerns the US military's force structure and global footprint. But if the terms of the debate are mostly set by hammers, the discussion of every problem can be reduced to whether or not it is a nail. Even as it reduces its military footprint, for instance in the Middle East, there is a need for the United States to remain diplomatically and economically engaged in order to reduce adversaries' freedom of action and to provide a rallying point for friendly states.

A second problem with competing regions discourse is that it obfuscates the ways in which interregional cooperation between US allies is required to deal with the very resource constraints that the discourse highlights. As an example, let us consider the case of military materiel. The United States and Europe have both deindustrialized, making it vital to pool their manufacturing capacity in order to confront that of China. The war in Ukraine has led the European Union to take steps to revitalize its own defence-industrial base, a step encouraged by the Biden administration.¹⁶ Other US allies also have important production capacities. Japan and Israel produce missile defence systems; both Japan and South Korea excel at shipbuilding; and Norway manufactures top-of-the-line anti-ship missiles, a key munition for defending Taiwan.¹⁷ Japan can now export a fighter jet co-developed with the United Kingdom and Italy to certain third countries, including the US

¹⁴ Colby, *The strategy of denial*, pp. 18 and 28.

¹⁵ Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Richard Fontaine, 'The axis of upheaval: how America's adversaries are uniting to overturn the global order', *Foreign Affairs*, 23 April 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/axis-upheaval-russia-iran-north-korea-taylor-fontaine>.

¹⁶ Théo Bourgery-Gonse, 'Blinken urges EU to strengthen defence industrial base, think long-term', Euractiv, 3 April 2024, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/blinken-urges-eu-to-strengthen-defence-industrial-base-think-long-term>; Jacopo Barigazzi, Laura Kayali and Joshua Posaner, 'EU plans to create defense-industrial complex ready for war', Politico, 27 Feb. 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-plan-war-ready-complex-european-defence-industrial-strategy>.

¹⁷ Thomas G. Mahnken, 'A three-theatre defense strategy: how America can prepare for war in Asia, Europe, and the Middle East', *Foreign Affairs*, 5 June 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/theater-defense-war-asia-europe-middle-east>; Motoko Rich, 'Breaking with postwar history, Japan to sell Patriot missiles to U.S.', *New York Times*, 21 Dec. 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/21/world/asia/japan-postwar-missile-defense-sales.html>.

and Germany.¹⁸ Just as Russia, China, Iran and North Korea benefit from cooperating with each other, these steps can give the United States and its allies a broader and more resilient defence-industrial base.

Meanwhile, the US and its allies remain dependent on Middle Eastern petro-states for fossil fuels in order to operate their military machines and domestic economies. This is a reliance which neither surging US domestic energy production nor the green transition is likely to break in the foreseeable future.¹⁹ In other words, countries in the three pivotal regions of concern to US foreign policy—the Indo-Pacific, Europe, and the Middle East—are not just competing for scarce US resources, but are also contributing to enabling continued US commitments beyond their home regions.

Prioritizers and restrainers might counter that the US can continue to enjoy these benefits while maintaining a laser-like focus on the Indo-Pacific. They often argue that the best way to encourage European countries to boost their own defence spending and take responsibility for containing Russia is for the US to gradually reduce its security role in Europe.²⁰ Under this scenario, European countries would presumably continue to contribute to the West's defence-industrial base while taking the job of containing Russia out of US hands. It might also be argued that Middle Eastern oil producers will continue to sell their product to the West regardless of the geopolitical context. In other words, recognizing the logic of competing regions means that the United States can both focus the application of its own resources and continue to enjoy the benefits of interregional cooperation between its allies and partners.

These arguments are overstated because they do not account for the ways in which US disengagement may lead to changes in the foreign policies of key countries in Europe and the Middle East. Restrainers and prioritizers argue that a US withdrawal from Europe would cause countries on the continent to step up their efforts to contain Russia.²¹ However, given the diverging threat perceptions that European countries have towards Russia and the barriers to European defence integration, this cannot be taken for granted. US leadership was vital in giving European countries a rallying point in response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and such a unified response would be far from guaranteed without that leadership.

The enduring popularity of far-right political parties across Europe reinforces this point. Even far-right parties that have contested but not won national elections have enjoyed high or record vote shares. France and Germany's popular far-right parties have, at best, advocated cultivating close relations with Russia and, at worst,

¹⁸ Mari Yamaguchi, 'Why is Japan changing its ban on exporting lethal weapons, and why is it so controversial?', Associated Press, 26 March 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/japan-military-sale-lethal-weapons-fighter-jet-f6d578f8256ec87a44fd86f3240f8c36>.

¹⁹ Daniel Dale, 'Fact check: despite claims of Trump-era "energy independence," the US never stopped importing foreign oil', CNN, 15 March 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/03/15/politics/energy-independence-fact-check/index.html>.

²⁰ Posen, *Restraint*, pp. 87–91; Stephen M. Walt, 'Exactly how helpless is Europe?', *Foreign Policy*, 21 May 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/05/21/exactly-how-helpless-is-europe>.

²¹ Posen, *Restraint*, p. 90.

become directly mired in scandals over spreading pro-Russian propaganda.²² The idea that the United States is abandoning Europe could easily give rise to fatalism and to accommodative attitudes towards Russia. Amid these divisions, a US that is vocally supportive of NATO and Ukraine—which Trump’s second administration is not—is crucial in providing leadership and motivation to the Atlanticist camp.

US engagement also affects European attitudes towards China, which show similar divergence. For some, China is a tempting economic and technological partner, and its dominance in green technology that will be key to the energy transition—particularly electric vehicles—makes it even more so. At a time when the Trump administration is engaged in a trade war with Europe, a hypothetical scenario in which the US withdrew from Europe and no longer provided a centre of gravity for NATO would risk the collapse of European solidarity against China. This would be particularly likely if Europe were simultaneously forced to reach an accommodation with Russia. The consequences of this could reverberate beyond Europe and also undermine the US position in the Indo-Pacific.

A final problem with competing regions discourse is the regions it leaves out. A debate which is structured around a competition for resources and attention between the Middle East, Europe and the Indo-Pacific implicitly downgrades the importance of regions such as Africa and Latin America. US policy-makers have been insufficiently attentive to these regions, which require sustained diplomatic and economic engagement rather than military resources. African countries have been courted heavily by China and Russia, while the United States has seen the collapse of its security partnerships with Niger and Chad.²³ While Biden followed through on some investment and diplomatic efforts, he visited just one African country—Angola—during his presidency, fuelling the perception that Africa was not a priority.²⁴ The measures that the Biden administration took in Africa were also overly focused on military and security matters. Instead, US policy-makers should focus on building trust and diplomatic ties on the continent. This means showing interest and deeply engaging with civil society through well-developed programmes. Security concerns should not be ignored, but allaying them requires more than troop deployments and hard power. The Biden administration tried to use the release of secret intelligence to increase international awareness about Russian activities in African countries, including the Wagner Group’s alleged plot to assassinate the president of Chad.²⁵ If executed carefully, these ‘strategic downgrades’, combined with diplomatic and economic cooperation, could help erode Russian and Chinese influence without costly interventions.

²² Giorgio Leali and Laura Kayali, ‘French far right pulls manifesto that included controversial Russia, NATO plans’, Politico, 17 June 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/france-far-right-manifesto-russia-nato-national-rally>; Pierre Emmanuel Ngendakumana, ‘Von der Leyen castigates far-right AfD over Russiagate scandal’, Politico, 13 April 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/ursula-von-der-leyen-germany-afd-russia-scandal-voice-of-europe>.

²³ Natasha Bertrand, ‘US withdraws troops from base in Chad following government demand’, CNN, 1 May 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/05/01/politics/us-withdraws-troops-chad/index.html>.

²⁴ Nandita Bose, ‘Biden plans to visit Africa in February if he is re-elected’, Reuters, 22 May 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/biden-plans-visit-africa-february-if-he-is-re-elected-2024-05-22>.

²⁵ Erin Banco and Anastasiia Carrier, ‘To counter Russia in Africa, Biden deploys a favored strategy’, Politico, 7 May 2023, <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/05/07/wagner-russia-africa-00095572>.

Competing regions discourse also fails to account for the ways in which cooperation between regions like Africa and Latin America can be beneficial. In Latin America, transnational problems such as drug-trafficking, criminal gangs and climate change have fuelled instability and violence across swathes of the region, leading to flows of refugees—an important topic in the 2024 presidential election in the United States. In Haiti, Kenya has taken the lead in a United Nations-backed police mission meant to help local officials regain control from increasingly militarized criminal gangs and reduce Haitian out-migration. The US, which in May 2024 welcomed Kenyan President William Ruto to Washington in a state visit that was the first by an African leader under the Biden administration, and the first under any administration in 16 years, has been the largest financial backer of this mission. Such initiatives, when sufficiently funded and in accordance with human rights norms, underscore how regions can act in a complementary, rather than competitive, manner.

Biden's and Trump's policies of regions

Even as a debate structured largely by the competing regions discourse raged around it, the Biden administration mostly stuck to—or at least eventually arrived at—policies which recognized the interlinked nature of the world's regions. Its stress on multilateralism, US leadership and interregional cooperation was fruitful, even as it did not allow the United States to completely transcend the resource constraints highlighted in competing regions discourse. When Biden entered office, his administration signalled a desire to focus on containing China and to liquidate some commitments in other regions, notably the Middle East and South Asia.²⁶ The administration swiftly withdrew US forces from Afghanistan, a key demand of restrainers and prioritizers which nevertheless was viewed as a negative credibility signal in Europe.²⁷ At the same time, the administration sought to find opportunities for multilateral cooperation within and between regions—for instance, the Australia–UK–United States (AUKUS) security partnership, the US–Japan–South Korea trilateral pact and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (a grouping of Australia, India, Japan and the US). The Biden administration also provided leadership to the coalition of countries which aided Ukraine, and worked with European countries on the economic and technological containment of China.²⁸

The administration's policy in the Middle East was more mixed. Under Biden, the United States distanced itself from what the administration saw as hubristic

²⁶ Alex Thompson, Phelim Kine and Max Tani, 'Jake's nest of China hawks', Politico, 13 April 2022, <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/west-wing-playbook/2022/04/13/jakes-nest-of-china-hawks-00024976>; The White House, *National Security Strategy October 2022*, 2022, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/8-November-Combined-PDF-for-Upload.pdf>.

²⁷ Matthew Karnitschnig, 'Disbelief and betrayal: Europe reacts to Biden's Afghanistan "miscalculation"', Politico, 17 Aug. 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-reacts-bidens-afghanistan-withdrawal>.

²⁸ Andrew Gawthorpe, 'Biden's "new Washington consensus" is weaponizing trade', *World Politics Review*, 15 May 2023, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/us-china-trade-war-globalized-united-states-economy-policy-biden>.

attempts to transform the region. However, it also attempted to retain leadership of a coalition of states aiming to contain Iran. This contributed to the administration's decision to strongly support Israel's heavily-militarized response to the Hamas massacre of October 2023—an operation which has been reminiscent of the US-led 'war on terror' in terms of humanitarian harm and lack of connection between the use of military force and a sustainable political end-state. The Biden administration's unwavering support for Israel has had negative diplomatic and reputational repercussions beyond the Middle East, making it harder to legitimize the defence of Ukraine and any future defence of Taiwan in the eyes of many states. Given that Israel has taken actions that have the potential to draw the United States into a conflict with Iran, this support was the most counterproductively militarized aspect of the administration's foreign policy.

In his second term thus far, Trump is rejecting the idea of complementary regions. This indicates a continuation of the pattern of his first term, in which Trump frequently denigrated US allies and preferred to act unilaterally, rather than building coalitions within and between regions. Nothing has exemplified Trump's unilateral approach better than the fact that he has launched trade wars on both China and all of America's allies at the same time, rather than trying to enlist western countries in the economic containment of China as the Biden administration did. His administration is also taking a sceptical view of the US commitment to Europe's security generally—and Ukraine's more specifically. So far, Trump appears comfortable with Russia making major gains in any negotiation to end the war in Ukraine and may revive his first-term threats to withdraw from NATO or undermine its mutual defence clause. At the same time, he may revive his first-term push to renegotiate the terms of US troop deployments in South Korea and Japan, calling into question the US commitment to its allies rather than searching for ways they can act together to address shared challenges. In sum, Trump looks on track to intensify the 'America First' policy-making of his first term. This will further antagonize and alienate allies, withdraw US leadership from Europe and the Indo-Pacific and spark new, divisive trade wars.²⁹

It is unlikely that Trump will change course and fully commit to a strategy of complementary regions in his second term. However, US allies can try for incremental wins and improvements in the administration's policy by making a case for how they can all work together—or, at least, why the Trump administration should back down from implementing some of the most extreme policy ideas from the 2024 campaign. After all, the first Trump administration was not completely insensitive to outside events. The president eventually dropped many of his harmful trade actions and his threat to withdraw from NATO. In seeking to persuade Trump anew, there is one final way in which US allies must pursue complementary courses of action. Rather than rushing to establish friendly bilateral relations with Trump in order to shield themselves from harm, they need to keep seeking complementarities and ways to work together—including with the

²⁹ Markus Jaeger, 'On trade, a return of Trump would spell trouble for the EU', *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, 13 May 2024, <https://ip-quarterly.com/en/trade-return-trump-would-spell-trouble-eu>.

United States. At other times, they might need to band together against Trump, and they will increase their negotiating leverage by sticking together. As they seek to do so, they will benefit from clearly articulating the limits of the competing regions discourse and the value of cross-regional cooperation—not only to themselves, but also to the United States.

Looking forward

To aid both this understanding and policy innovation on its basis, future policy research into interregional complementarities should focus on how the US can leverage various elements of national power to create interregional coalitions and force multipliers. The first tool to consider is diplomacy, a relatively low-cost instrument that should be emphasized in all regions. Strong diplomatic relationships are vital to persuade allies of the United States to expend more of their own resources, both within and outside their home region. This is particularly true in Europe, where the Biden administration's leadership enabled a dramatic increase in defence spending. However, diplomacy must also be used in concert with other tools. The US cannot expect its European allies to act as reliable partners if it constantly threatens to ignite trade wars or to disengage as a bulwark of European security. The same logic applies in regions like Africa, where US diplomatic engagement begins from a lower base. Some investment of material resources will be necessary to develop relationships, but in the long term this cultivates useful allies.

Various forms of economic engagement—trade, investment and aid—can also help the US and its allies to achieve their goals in a world of complementary regions. Although they have recently fallen out of fashion in Washington, multilateral trade agreements and investment pacts can strengthen geopolitical ties and create a framework in which allies are more likely to use their own resources to support US foreign policy goals within and beyond their home region. When the US withdraws from pursuing these deals, it risks seeing them proceed without it, excluding it from a position of influence and potentially benefiting its competitors. On the other hand, attempting to unstitch the fabric of the globalized economy in pursuit of narrow unilateral gains will ultimately leave the US with fewer resources into which it can tap as the economies of its allies shrink. Aid also remains an important tool to buttress relationships, particularly in the global South, where many countries have an enormous need for capital in order to decarbonize their economies. Economic action and industrial policy are also important at home. By making itself a centre of green technology innovation—a goal pursued by the Biden administration—the United States increases its attractiveness as an ally while strengthening its own economy.

The United States should also deploy military resources on a sizeable scale in a limited number of regions. Military engagement can quickly spiral into a quagmire that causes reputational damage and limits the US' ability to employ other foreign policy tools effectively. When determining whether to invest military resources

in a region, the US should consider the high human and financial costs of such investment and the impact of those costs on its ability to use diplomatic and economic tools elsewhere. At the same time, underemphasizing the importance of military deployments can undermine deterrence and invite even more costly conflict. The key task for the United States is to combine its commitment to the defence of allies in Europe, the Indo-Pacific and the Middle East with a diplomatic and economic strategy that encourages them to contribute to interregional complementarities and thus reduces the direct burden on the US itself.

Finally, research and policy innovation should be directed into the ways in which a strategy of interregional complementarity ultimately increases the resilience of US foreign policy, allowing it to react to rapidly changing conditions which alter the desired policy mix in any given region. Pursuing resilience based on a series of win-win bargains with allies in different regions will ultimately be more beneficial than unilateral withdrawal or attempting to implement a series of credibility-damaging—and ultimately strategically impossible—‘pivots’. In a world in which its own relative power is declining, what the United States needs is a broad set of allies able to deploy a spectrum of fungible capabilities both within and beyond their home regions. Competing regions discourse has identified a real problem—but complementary regions must be part of the solution.