



## Research Article

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Received: 4 October 2023 / Accepted: 21 December 2023 / Published: 5 January 2024

# The Retrenchment or Continuous Global Engagement

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36941/ajis-2024-0022>

### Abstract

*This article investigates America's global role by addressing three research questions and a central hypothesis. The research questions explore the impact of international partnerships on U.S. engagement, presidential strategies, and evolving public sentiment. The hypothesis suggests that U.S. retrenchment influences global governance and security dynamics. The literature review covers historical perspectives, presidential approaches, public opinion, scholarly debates, and global significance. Qualitative research methods involve data synthesis and comparative analysis. The article examines how recent presidents, like Obama, Trump, and Biden, approached global engagement. It notes shifts in American public opinion from skepticism to divided perspectives on domestic priorities versus global involvement. Scholarly debates encompass retrenchment, realism, and the importance of U.S. global leadership. The study emphasizes the need for continued American leadership in maintaining global stability, promoting democracy, and addressing emerging challenges. In conclusion, this article provides a succinct examination of America's worldwide role, emphasizing its complex dynamics and the vital significance of continued U.S. leadership in the international sphere. Top of Form*

**Keywords:** U.S. leadership, Retrenchment, Engagement, International Stability

## 1. Introduction

In a world marked by a budget crisis, military vulnerabilities, and complex international partnerships, the United States finds itself at a crossroads. The central question that looms is whether it is time for the nation to step back from its more than six-decade-long international engagement as outlined in its Grand Strategy. This debate has garnered attention from prominent scholars in the field of security studies and America's Grand Strategy. While political leaders and the American public expressed their commitment to maintaining U.S. international leadership, scholars have increasingly leaned toward a different perspective in recent decades. They argue that it's time for America to retrench, suggesting a reduction in foreign military involvement, a significant decrease in worldwide security commitments, and a reevaluation of its role as a champion of the liberal international order

(Brooks & Wohlforth, 2016).

This ongoing debate has led to a broader discussion within the realm of international relations, contemplating America's role as a superpower in a changing global landscape. On one side of the spectrum, there are proponents of a more domestically-focused America, advocating for a shift away from extensive international involvement. People who support keeping things as they are can be found on the opposing side. The topic of America's standing in the globe came up throughout the 2016 presidential campaign as well. In this context, this comprehensive analysis delves into the multifaceted aspects of America's global engagement. It examines the stances of American presidents, from President Obama's measured reductions to President Trump's calls for cost-effective approaches, and now, President Biden's nuanced strategy emphasizing multilateral diplomacy. It also explores American public opinion on global engagement, revealing shifts over time, and the differing perspectives within international relations theory, contrasting realist and liberal viewpoints. The argument eventually emphasizes how crucial American involvement in international affairs is, as well as the special position that the United States holds as a global superpower. It asserts that despite evolving global dynamics, America's position as an indispensable nation remains crucial in shaping the future of global affairs (Kissinger, 2014).

### 1.1 Research questions and hypothesis

This study explores America's global role, considering domestic factors, presidential strategies, and public sentiment. Three research questions guide our analysis:

1. How do evolving international partnerships impact the U.S. debate on decades-long international engagement?
2. What are recent presidents' (Obama, Trump, Biden) approach to global engagement, and how do they shape America's role in global affairs?
3. How has American public opinion on global engagement evolved, and what fuels the divide between domestic focus and global involvement?

Our hypothesis states: "U.S. retrenchment from international responsibilities and partnerships significantly affects global governance stability and security dynamics." It suggests that reduced U.S. involvement may disrupt global governance, impacting security at regional and global levels. This hypothesis underscores the link between U.S. foreign policy decisions and global governance and security, emphasizing their interconnectedness.

## 2. Literature Review

The academic studies and scholarly works included in the literature review for this article provide insight into the arguments surrounding the United States' position in world affairs. The key thematic areas explored in the literature include:

- Historical Perspective: Scholars have extensively examined the historical evolution of American foreign policy, from post-World War II internationalism to periods of retrenchment and strategic realignment. This historical context is crucial for understanding the shifts in American global engagement (Ikenberry, 2014; Kagan, 2023).
- Presidential Approaches: Academic study sheds light on the diverse stances taken by American presidents, including Obama's focus on austerity, Trump's nationalist posture, and Biden's multilateralism. These analyses delve into the policy decisions and their implications (Hiatt, 2023; Lindberg, 2020; Gowan, 2021).
- Public Opinion: Public opinion surveys and studies have explored the changing attitudes of the American public toward global engagement. Scholars have examined the factors influencing public sentiment, including the costs of military interventions and the perceived benefits of international alliances (Pew Research Center, 2016; Pew Research Center, 2022; Haas, 2017).

- Debates Among Scholars: The academic discourse on American global engagement is characterized by debates among international relations scholars. These debates include discussions on the merits of offshore balancing, realist perspectives emphasizing national interests, and arguments for continued American leadership in promoting liberal values (Mearsheimer, 2015; Bremmer, 2018; Daalder & Kagan, 2023).
- Global Significance: The literature emphasizes the importance of American engagement abroad, emphasizing the country's contribution to preserving world peace, advancing democracy, and tackling today's problems like great-power rivalry, terrorism, and the provision of global public goods (Monteiro, 2014; Zakaria, 2016; Kagan, 2023).

This literature review provides a foundation for the comprehensive analysis of the debates surrounding American global engagement presented in this article. It includes a wide range of viewpoints and information sources to provide a comprehensive knowledge of the intricate problems at hand.

### 3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, well-suited for analyzing complex issues like global engagement and foreign policy. This interpretive and exploratory method is pivotal for delving into the nuanced aspects of such phenomena.

To comprehend changing American public attitudes toward global engagement, qualitative data from surveys, polls, official documents, and speeches from U.S. presidents and key political figures are gathered from reliable sources. To give historical context and policy viewpoints, speeches, remarks, and papers from American presidents and significant politicians are also compiled.

The collected literature and data are organized into core topic areas that cover the opinions of American presidents, the general public, discussions among international affairs specialists, and the significance of American engagement globally.

It aims to trace the historical evolution of the U.S.'s global role, examine various presidential strategies, and capture shifts in public opinion. The review also critically engages with international relations theories, providing a scholarly context for the study.

This diverse collection aids in understanding changing public attitudes towards global engagement and providing historical and policy context.

Qualitative analysis identifies trends, inconsistencies, and significant arguments within each thematic area. The research examines and contrasts the views of U.S. presidents, the general public, and international relations specialists across different periods. It examines several approaches to foreign policy and assesses how they affect both US interests and global stability. Additionally, it considers the historical context, international factors, and possible consequences of various U.S. involvement tactics.

Considering the various viewpoints and historical background offered in the research, it provides insights into prospective directions for American foreign policy.

The paper intends to provide a comprehensive and well-informed study of the arguments surrounding American global engagement by using this qualitative research approach. It combines a plethora of scholarly literature with empirical data to enable a thorough examination of the subject while taking into account historical background and modern trends.

To develop a more profound understanding of the enduring effects of U.S. foreign policy, the research recommends conducting a longitudinal study. It calls for a well-rounded strategy in global interactions, highlighting the significance of maintaining multilateral partnerships and international collaboration.

In sum, this qualitative methodology offers a comprehensive analysis of America's global engagement role. It combines an extensive literature review with thematic and comparative analysis of varied data sources. The research enhances comprehension of the dynamics in U.S. foreign policy and also offers suggestions for future studies and policy deliberations.

#### 4. The Stands of American Presidents Towards International Engagement

The United States is currently dealing with several issues, such as tight financial restrictions, a weakened military, complicated international alliances, and decreasing popular support for significant global commitments. Some academics maintain that the United States should cut back on its global engagements and retrench. This retrenchment would involve limiting or rejecting foreign military deployments, significantly reducing worldwide security commitments, and relinquishing its role as a champion of the liberal international order (Brooks, Ikenberry, & Wohlforth, 2012).

The position of the United States in the transforming global setting is a matter of discussion among many researchers and think tanks in the field of global affairs. The main concern is whether the United States should continue to be a superpower and preserve its worldwide alliances despite the significant financial expenses involved. This discussion received a great deal of attention during the 2016 American presidential election.

It was President Obama who during his presidency undertook concrete measures towards the reduction of America's international engagement. The withdrawal of troops from Iraq, and plans to do the same thing in Afghanistan, the abandonment of Libya after the fall of the Gaddafi regime, halfhearted support for the Arab Spring movement in search of democracy, and the indifferent reaction to Russia's annexation of Crimea was concrete evidence that America is withdrawing from its global leadership (Hiatt, 2023).

Donald Trump promoted a form of American nationalism during his presidential campaign that encouraged backing away from international commitments. He questioned the necessity of the trans-Atlantic Alliance, labeled NATO as obsolete, and argued that European allies should bear a greater share of their defense expenses (Lindberg, 2020). Trump's stance emphasized cost-effectiveness and challenged the value of certain international engagements, particularly in light of emerging threats like terrorism (Lindberg, *ibid*).

Mentioning partners like Japan and South Korea as examples, Trump also held that U.S. Asian allies should take more responsibility for their security issues. "Europe, Japan, and South Korea, he believed, were now more than capable of providing for their own defense" (Pat Buchanan and an America First Foreign Policy, 2023). His stance challenged the traditional foreign policy elite's perspective, advocating for a more cautious approach to military interventions and emphasizing that the United States should only engage in wars when directly attacked or when its fundamental interests are at risk (*ibid.*).

When President Joe Biden took office in January 2021, he addressed an uncertain global landscape that was full of possibilities and obstacles. He took a balanced stance on whether the United States ought to get involved or retrench from global affairs, putting a high focus on multilateralism, diplomacy, and cooperation. Mr. Biden attempted to reestablish relationships with global organizations and alliances like the United Nations and NATO to reaffirm the USA's dedication to multilateralism (Gowan, 2021). indicating a return to international leadership on environmental issues, the Biden administration re-joined the Paris Agreement on climate change (Center for Climate and Energy Solutions, 2021). Indicating an affinity for diplomatic resolutions over armed conflict, he indicated his willingness to resume the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran (Smith, 2021). His administration has adopted a comprehensive approach to China, seeking to compete with China economically while cooperating on issues such as climate change (Scissors & Krejsa, 2021). President Biden reiterated the U.S. assurance of regional counterterrorism initiatives as the U.S. forces withdrew from Afghanistan (White House, 2021).

As regards the war in Ukraine, the Biden administration underscored its perseverance in restoring American leadership at the UN and other international organizations to preserve and spread American standards, security, and prosperity. In order to deter such acts of aggression and safeguard international peace and security, this crisis is providing a chance to appreciate and rejuvenate the international system (U.S. Multilateral Leadership on The Crisis in Ukraine, 2022).

## 5. American Public Opinion Toward Global Engagement

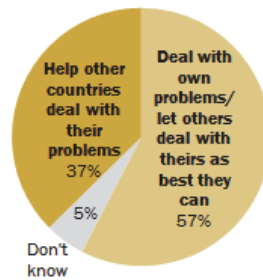
The U.S. administration's stand toward foreign policy was reflected in the American public which strongly decided on the role the United States should play in global affairs. The U.S. public was skeptical of America being involved abroad as the interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan were very costly. They were disappointed with partners seen as not contributing their fair share of the burden. Americans became more and more convinced that the government should prioritize domestic issues above international ones (Haas, 2017).

A Pew Research Center research titled America's Place in the World 2016, which was published in May 2016 found that there was disagreement among the people over the nation's involvement in the globe. Six in ten Americans, or 57% of the population, preferred that the United States "deal with its own problems and let other countries handle their own problems as best they can." In a 2016 poll conducted, only 37% of the people surveyed believed that America should help other countries address their problems (American Way of Global Involvement | Pew Research Center, 2016).

### Americans wary of global involvement

% saying each ...

U.S. should ...



Source: Survey conducted April 12-19, 2016.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

**Figure 1:** Americans wary of global involvement

Currently, the stand of the U.S. public opinion is changing regarding American international involvement. In one of the most recent Pew Research Center surveys, more than 51 percent of American citizens think that the nation ought to prioritize local problems more than international ones. Conversely, about 48% of respondents believe that the future of the nation relies on its active engagement in international matters. This division highlights a fundamental disagreement within American society about the appropriate level of involvement in international matters (Americans Divided on U.S. Role in the World, International Cooperation | Pew Research Center, 2022).

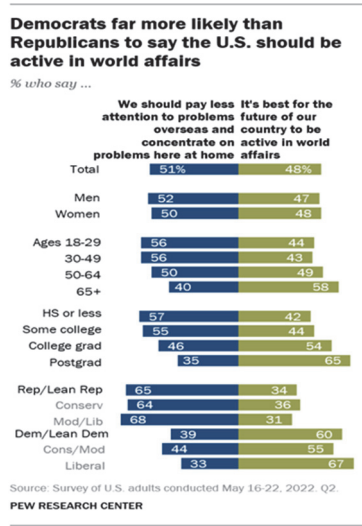


Figure 2:

The American public is also divided concerning its approach toward the trans-Atlantic Alliance. Americans regard NATO membership as valuable for the United States. The majority of Americans (about 77%, representing both parties) believe that NATO participation is a beneficial thing. Only 16% of those polled believed that the United States' membership in NATO had damaged America (Doherty 2016).

NATO is widely seen as good for the U.S. ...

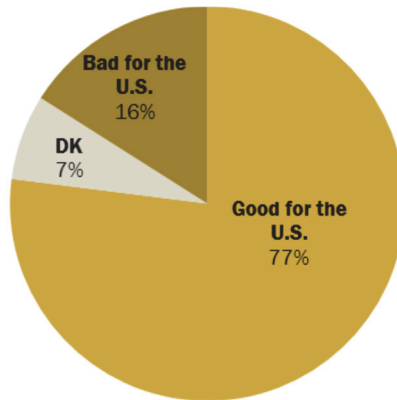


Figure 3: % who say being a member of NATO is  
Source: Pew Research Center 2016

This positive sentiment towards NATO has been consistent, and in 2022, shortly after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it reached its peak at 67%. However, there has been a minor reduction in favorable perceptions since then. Nevertheless, NATO's overall image remains positive among the American population, reflecting a generally favorable perception of the organization (Nadeem, 2023).

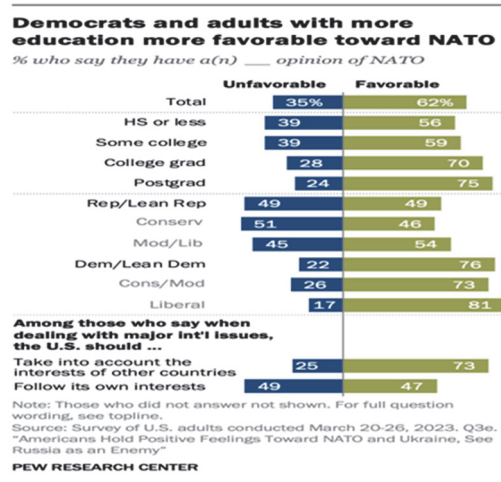


Figure 4:

It is difficult to evaluate public opinion since foreign policy is not a top priority for the American population. Americans have complex and sometimes contradictory views on foreign policy, favoring isolationism but valuing alliances and international cooperation. Clear leadership and messaging are crucial for policymakers dealing with these nuanced perspectives (Kamarck & Muchnick, 2023). This multifaceted debate has played a significant role in the country's contemporary discussion of politics and it includes a wide range of factors including available resources, military strength, and public opinion.

## 6. Debates among IR Scholars Concerning the U.S. Role in Global Issues

Scholars in International Relations (IR) debate the U.S. role in global affairs, including the "off-shore balancing" strategy favoring U.S. retrenchment (Layne, 1997). Some argue that U.S. attempts at global dominance and democracy promotion yielded limited success. They suggest maintaining U.S. hegemony in the Western Hemisphere while preventing it in Eurasia (Mearsheimer, 2015, 34-35).

Prolonged wars in Iraq and Afghanistan shifted public opinion, making Americans hesitant to support costly global engagements. A generational gap has emerged due to changing memories of Cold War-era leadership.

Challenges include rising powers like China challenging U.S. strategies. The main topic of discussion is whether the United States should scale back its interventions, prioritize domestic issues, and take a flexible stance that mixes diplomacy, military might, and upholding American principles (Bremmer, 2018).

Realist scholars argue that in times of economic uncertainty and budget constraints, an expansive American foreign policy can be excessively costly, akin to the former British Empire's historical experience (Simon and Stevenson, 2015, 2). They emphasize prioritizing core national interests and citizen well-being. This entails safeguarding domestic interests, maintaining global positioning, and avoiding complex military interventions like Iraq and Afghanistan. The main goal is ensuring the welfare of American citizens, making engagements that risk American welfare appear reckless unless they promise substantial long-term benefits (Merry, 2016).

The "America First" policy pursued by the Trump administration marked a notable shift in U.S. global engagement. The withdrawal of President Trump from global agreements notably the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the Paris Climate Agreement was considered by many as a retreat



(Jackson, 2017). However, other academics contend that the United States is adjusting to new geopolitical conditions rather than completely retrenchment (Ikenberry, 2018). The United States is attempting to maintain its influence in this situation through alliances and partnerships.

Even NATO, a crucial organization for American leadership, has faced difficulties recently. President Trump openly criticized the alliance and called for member states to increase their defense spending (Braw, 2017). However, since it has been of such significance to maintain stability and safety in the Euro-Atlantic region, NATO remains to be crucial to preserving U.S. leadership in Europe and beyond.

Zooming out to consider the broader impact of U.S. retrenchment or engagement on the global order, scholars have identified significant trends. For instance, Mearsheimer (2019) argues that China's rise as a significant global actor is one of the reasons contributing to the interpretation of the decline of the liberal international order, which the USA helped to enable establish and defend. Mearsheimer contends that the United States should focus on managing the power transition with China to safeguard its global position. On the contrary, Brooks and Wohlforth (2016) contend the United States of America may preserve its leadership role as the planet's dominant force by adapting to the shifting geopolitical circumstances and establishing fresh alliances with emerging nations like China.

The function of soft power is another crucial aspect in the context of U.S. global engagement. The U.S. has always relied on its laws, institutions, culture, and principles to uphold its global supremacy, claims Nye (2017). As the undisputed leader of the world, the United States must keep making investments in these soft power assets, according to Nye, particularly in light of the risks posed by developing countries like China.

It is essential to recognize the substantial changes in American foreign policy viewpoints that took place after World War II while considering the historical backdrop. A historical comparison highlights the contrast between the approaches of past U.S. presidents like Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower, who committed to long-term stabilization and democratization efforts in regions like Europe and East Asia after World War II, and more recent policy inclinations observed during the administrations of Barack Obama and Donald Trump. President Obama's withdrawal from the Middle East, driven by the belief that the region was inherently unfixable, resulted in instability and terrorism, serving as a cautionary tale against isolationist tendencies that could erode the tradition of U.S. leadership and global engagement championed by past presidents (Hiatt, 2023).

After World War II, America has benefited considerably from its role in international leadership and the actual system cannot be overlooked by some politicians. They should be aware that withdrawing from international affairs would result in more disadvantages than advantages due to the associated costs. The existing worldwide system, originally set up by the United States, is encountering unprecedented difficulties as a result of the rise of authoritarian nations, Russia's territorial expansion, China's increasing assertiveness, Iran's pursuit of regional control, and the persistent danger posed by entities like the Islamic State.

These issues won't disappear on their own, and isolation from the world's financial system won't guarantee security. Traditional security measures like borders and seas are no longer sufficient. In sum, there is a great need for continued engagement in international affairs due to the complex nature of the modern world (Daalder & Kagan, 2016).

It is argued that there would be more costs associated with disengaging than benefits. The world order constructed through decades of U.S. engagement faces an array of challenges, some of which are the most formidable since the Cold War. Current global events underscore the potential consequences of American interventions and commitments abroad. Even in the absence of a clear threat to national security, these acts have frequently been driven by a desire to uphold and advance liberalism and principles. The defense of Ukraine and other measures in support of the liberal world order are framed as actions driven by a commitment to upholding a set of beliefs and values. It is argued that diminishing American involvement in the world could escalate great-power conflicts and foster the spread of authoritarianism. Therefore, the importance of continued American leadership



on the global stage is emphasized (Kagan, 2023).

In summary, the ongoing debate among IR scholars regarding the U.S. role in global affairs encompasses diverse perspectives, reflecting shifting international dynamics and evolving domestic priorities. This discussion highlights how difficult it is for the United States to make decisions as it negotiates its place in a linked and changing global environment. Historical context, lessons from past policies, and the potential consequences of retrenchment or engagement all inform the discussions surrounding America's global leadership in the contemporary era.

## 7. The Significance of American Global Engagement

In the contemporary global landscape, isolationism is an untenable option. Daalder and Kagan stress that in the 21st century, traditional security measures like oceans and border walls no longer suffice, and disrupting international trade agreements would be counterproductive (Daalder & Kagan, 2023).

America's profound involvement in global issues serves its strategic interests. Its unmatched military presence ensures global stability and security, making it imperative to strengthen the liberal international order. Through deep global engagement, encompassing alliances, multilateral institutions, free trade, and diplomacy, America promotes international problem resolution and rulemaking, echoing John F. Kennedy's vision (Ikenberry, 2014, 90).

The U.S. and its partners have stood up for democracy all around the world, even confronting dictatorial regimes like those in Russia and China, in the last seven decades. NATO and EU enlargement have bolstered democratic values, creating a safer world for America and its allies. America's extensive network of allies, constituting 75% of global military spending, places China and Russia at a disadvantage (Ikenberry 2014: 87).

America's unipolar dominance, fueled by political, economic, military, and technological power, endures despite foreign policy criticisms. Its global security role is vital, as seen in the hypothetical absence of the "American umbrella" in Europe or military bases in Asia (Monteiro 2014, 179).

The United States remains the sole global hegemon, a status benefiting many nations. Even though the consequences of a U.S. withdrawal are uncertain, the arguments for its continued global presence are compelling (Monteiro 2014, 179).

Military force, while essential, is insufficient alone. A U.S. Grand Strategy must maintain military balance and alliances. America's balanced internal power has earned it acceptance in Europe and Asia. The American Century endures due to its role in producing global public goods and upholding the balance of power, with alliances and institutions key to addressing contemporary threats (Zakaria, 2016).

America's security network, spanning 68 states and constituting a quarter of the global population and three-quarters of economic production, shapes the international system. Its absence would profoundly alter global security dynamics, refuting the notion of imminent unipolar decline (Brooks and Wohlforth 2016, 48).

While many appreciate U.S. international commitments, a distracted and divided America may neglect global problem-solving, potentially leading to crises (Haass 2017).

The United States, as the leading global power, must define its interests broadly, cooperate with other nations, and establish collaborative systems (Zakaria, 2016).

U.S. support for Ukraine and its role in coordinating responses in Eastern Europe signify a shift in American perceptions of global responsibilities, particularly amid Russia's invasion. This transformation underscores the U.S.'s significant role in shaping international outcomes, especially vis-à-vis authoritarian regimes like China (Kagan, 2023; Herbst, 2022).

In conclusion, the United States remains indispensable on the global stage. As Henry Kissinger notes, its pursuit of equilibrium between universal principles and stability is unending, precluding withdrawal (Kissinger 2014, 370).

## 8. Conclusions

This thorough investigation of America's position in world affairs has shown a complicated and dynamic environment. The study's research questions provide insight into the many different factors that affect American involvement abroad.

The analysis of presidential approaches highlights the varying strategies of recent U.S. leaders, from retrenchment to multilateralism. Such strategies have had an influence and continue to have an impact on American foreign policy, demonstrating the significance of solid leadership at the highest levels of government.

American public opinion has undergone a significant transformation, reflecting changing attitudes toward global engagement. The shift from skepticism to a divided perspective underscores the challenges policymakers face in striking a balance between domestic priorities and active involvement in international matters.

Scholarly debates within the field of international relations provide a spectrum of viewpoints, from retrenchment advocates to those who emphasize the enduring significance of American global leadership. These debates reflect the ongoing discourse on the merits and drawbacks of different foreign policy strategies.

In the end, this study emphasizes how crucial the United States' position is in preserving world stability, advancing democratic principles, and tackling current global concerns. The research's premise highlights the possible negative effects of American austerity, highlighting the importance of maintaining American leadership to protect international law and security.

The United States will have to make continuous decisions about its level of foreign participation as the world scene changes. Insightful information on the intricacies of these choices is provided by this study, giving decision-makers a sophisticated grasp of the variables at play and their repercussions for the global system.

The United States' mission as the world's dominant nation continues to be essential in a world characterized by shifting alliances, great-power competition, and global problems. The findings of this study underscore the enduring relevance of American global engagement in an ever-changing global landscape.

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