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Week 4/28 – 5/2

U.S. Foreign Policy in the Post-Cold War World

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Host Organization: Johns Hopkins SAIS Foreign Policy Institute (FPI)

Moderator: Carla Freeman, *Senior Lecturer for International Affairs and Director of the Foreign Policy Institute at SAIS*

Speaker: Frank Lavin (SAIS '90), *Former U.S. Ambassador to Singapore and Author of "Inside the Reagan White House"*

Mr. Lavin's presentation focuses on an overview of U.S. foreign policy in the post-World War II era, highlighting foreign policy legacies, consistent characteristics, and notable trends that have shaped its development over time. He began the talk by stating that U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War was largely a continuation of, and shaped by, the lessons learned from World War II, guided by five core principles that not only define that era but still play a vital role in shaping policy today. Before getting into these five principles, as he began listing and describing the six principles, I immediately noticed strong parallels to Paul Nitze's *NSC-68* - a top-secret policy paper in 1950.

The first principle, dating back to the Cold War era, is international engagement, which served as a central strategy to protect and advance U.S. interests abroad through various channels. During that period, it was largely driven by the global struggle against Soviet communism, compelling the U.S. to support allies and defend vulnerable nations worldwide. The well-known "domino theory" not only embodied and reinforced the principle of international engagement during the Cold War - evident in conflicts like the Korean War, the Bay of Pigs, and the Vietnam War - but also continues to influence U.S. foreign policy today. The logic remains strikingly similar: just as the fall of Vietnam to communism would threaten neighboring countries like Thailand and Malaysia, the fear now is that if Ukraine were to fall under Russian influence, nations like Poland and Hungary could be next. Closely aligned with the principles of realist international relations theory, the core rationale behind U.S. international engagement during the Cold War – and today's debates on foreign aid - was not primarily driven by a deep-rooted commitment to human rights or global peace. Rather, it stemmed from a balance-of-power calculation: American policymakers feared that a Soviet victory would dangerously shift the balance of power in a bipolar world, prompting the U.S. to devote vast resources to deterring Soviet aggression, especially in Europe.

As the leading nation of the democratic world, the affirmation of Western values, particularly liberal democracy, served as a key driver behind the U.S.'s efforts to promote democratic proliferation. In my view, this commitment was arguably the most important source of American soft power well into the 21st century. That source, however, appears to have started fading away in recent years due to the rise of populism and the democratic backsliding seen in various forms since the 2016 election and the January 6th. Mr. Lavin argues that, particularly during the global wave of decolonization and the collapse of communism, U.S. foreign policy placed strong emphasis on promoting the appeal of liberal democracy and economic prosperity as central pillars of its foreign policy.

The third and fourth principles - rebuilding American defenses and advancing technological superiority - are closely interrelated, as both aim to enhance U.S. hard power or actual power. These two points presented by Mr. Lavin strongly resonate with and overlap many of the readings I have encountered in my studies. In *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, John Mearsheimer defines power as a state's ability to control or influence others, particularly its capacity to compel another state to act against its will. He identifies two key sources of power: latent power, derived from a state's economic capacity and population, and military power, or the ability to project force. Adding on to Mr. Lavin's points and Mearsheimer's definition of power, Paul Nitze's policy recommendations in *NSC-68* clearly called for a substantial increase in military spending to strengthen internal security, civilian defense, and intelligence. He argued that military strength was essential not just for defense, but to enhance U.S. leverage in negotiations with the Soviet Union and to make the Kremlin choose the path of accommodation, given his central argument that direct or nuclear warfare should be avoided.

Last but not least, the principle of pursuing all other goals - international engagement, affirmation of Western values, strengthening defenses, and advancing technology - through alliance formation is fundamentally advantageous to U.S. national security. By operating through alliances like NATO and partnerships with Japan, Taiwan, or Europe, the U.S. can rally allied capabilities and resources around its leadership, amplifying its influence, sharing strategic burdens, and reinforcing a rules-based international order. As I noted in one of my previous policy briefs, U.S. foreign policymakers during the Cold War learned a crucial lesson from World War II: in modern great power conflicts, victory does not necessarily go to the most powerful state alone, but to the one most capable of building and sustaining a stronger, more unified alliance. Revisiting Paul Nitze's *NSC-68*, he begins by asserting that the outcome of the Cold War hinges on a more rapid building up of the political, economic, and military strength of the free world. Although many view the division between the 'Free World" and the "Communist bloc" as an inevitable or natural phenomenon of the Cold War, these alliances were, in fact, the result of deliberate foreign policy efforts and tireless work by policymakers on both sides to create, sustain, and consolidate them. The alliances and partnerships the U.S. forged during the Cold War have endured and continue to shape global politics today, giving Washington a far stronger network of allies than China possesses, thereby preserving its hegemonic position in what some view as a new iteration of the Cold War.

I would also like to highlight an interesting point Mr. Lavin raised in his presentation: the history of U.S. foreign policy has long wrestled with the question of whether the U.S. should be the one acting a minute earlier or a minute later. I interpret the former as reflecting a tendency toward isolationism, given that this country is geographically buffered by two oceans, which has provided a rationale for holding back from entanglement in international affairs and waiting. It is true that this rationale had dominated U.S. foreign policy and reflected the actual approach taken by policymakers in response to international crises throughout much of the country's history. The "one minute earlier" leans toward interventionism by stepping in proactively to shape events, equipping the U.S. with more strategic flexibility and, a greater ability to form alliances, mobilize militarily, and send credible signals to other states. This approach is arguably one of the most significant legacies of U.S. foreign policy from the Cold War, becoming a dominant and widely favored strategy from the Cold War through the 21st century.

Analytical question

- We have rich historical records, such as the aggressive rise of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan in the 1930s, suggest that the "domino effect" can indeed play out in international politics. Given that, should U.S. policymakers commit resources to intervene even when there is only a low probability that the fall of one state could trigger the collapse of others? And how do they distinguish the worst-case domino scenarios from the actual strategic value and military/economic actions of U.S. intervention or foreign assistance?