

The decay of American democracy is real

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Fareed Zakaria

“America is back,” Joe Biden [kept repeating](#) on his first trip abroad as president. It’s a fair description of what he accomplished — a restoration of the United States’ role as the country that can set the global agenda, encourage cooperation and deter malign behavior. So, American diplomacy is back — but is America? That’s a more complicated question.

The United States’ influence has always been built on a combination of power and purpose. Biden went into this trip with two significant achievements under his belt. First, he ramped up vaccinations so far and so fast that the United States is the first major country to enter a post-pandemic world. Second, he passed a massive relief bill that will ensure that the U.S. economy has a roaring recovery.

But prosperity alone is not enough to lead. President Donald Trump presided over a booming economy before the pandemic, yet [polls](#) showed that most leading nations neither respected him nor the United States under his leadership.

The Biden team has led by focusing on the big issues on which U.S. allies agree: strengthening ties among free countries, combating climate change, deterring Russian aggression in various forms, stepping up to the challenge from China. It was a far cry from the behavior of Trump, who reveled in denigrating NATO and its members.

The meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin was not a “superpower summit,” as some in the media [described it](#). Russia is not a superpower. Its economy doesn’t even crack [the top 10](#) and is in decline on many key measures. But the country, spanning [11 time zones](#), has one of the world’s largest arsenals of nuclear weapons, a robust military and a United Nations veto. Under Putin, it has been eager to play the role of spoiler on the international stage — annexing territory in Europe for the first time [since 1945](#), engaging in cyberattacks on a massive scale, and pursuing and assassinating dissidents even if they live abroad.

Biden handled the meeting with his Russian counterpart with professionalism and skill, prompting [Putin](#) to call Biden “a very experienced” statesman and “a balanced, professional man” (in contrast to his [recent comments](#) about Trump being a “colorful individual” who made “impulse-based” decisions). Despite Trump’s fawning behavior toward Putin, Putin might recognize that it is better to have a calm and rational U.S. president than a mercurial and unpredictable showman. For its part, Washington’s goal toward Russia should not be ceaseless hostility but rather some kind of stable relationship in which problems can be discussed, negotiated and managed.

The biggest news out of the Biden-Putin meeting involves cyberspace. The problem of cyberattacks, cybercrime and ransomware has grown exponentially. And yet governments have appeared either unable or unwilling to do much about it. When North Korea launched a devastating [cyberattack](#) on Sony Pictures in 2014 to punish it for a movie satirizing Kim Jong Un, [destroying 70 percent](#) of the company's computers, the U.S. government did little in response.

Biden has moved policy in this realm significantly forward, for the first time [signaling](#) that the United States would be willing to use its considerable cyber capacities to retaliate against a Russian attack. Biden gave Putin a list of 16 critical systems that should be considered off limits, hinted that the retaliation could take the form of crippling Russia's oil pipelines, and agreed to have U.S. and Russian experts begin discussing these issues to define some rules of the road. This a policy shift that is likely to last.

It was a trip with modest but realistic goals, most of which were achieved. The United States is perceived once more as a constructive force in the world, with an astonishing rebound in its approval ratings across the globe, according to a recent [Pew Research Center survey](#).

But the story is not entirely positive. One aspect of the United States' power remains substantially diminished: its role as a beacon of democracy. Among countries surveyed, 57 percent of people said the United States is no longer the model for democracy it used to be. Young people worldwide are even more skeptical about America's democratic institutions.

In one fundamental way, things look worse now than in prior periods of crisis. After Watergate, many were surprised that the world looked up to the United States for facing and fixing its democratic failures. It was a sign of the country's capacity to course-correct. But imagine if after that scandal, the Republican Party, instead of condemning Nixon, had embraced him slavishly, insisted that he did absolutely nothing wrong, settled into denial and obstructionism and proposed new laws to endorse Nixon's most egregious conduct? Imagine if the only people purged by the party had been those who criticized Nixon?

The decay of American democracy is real. It's not a messaging or image problem. Until we can repair that, I'm not sure we can truly say America is back.