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Negotiating an Age of Conquest: Converting American Power Into Durable Political Outcomes

Cecily Brewer

American Statecraft Program

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About the Author

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American Statecraft Program

The American Statecraft Program develops and advances ideas for a more disciplined U.S. foreign policy aligned with American values and cognizant of the limits of American power in a more competitive world.

Introduction

“In the end, we have all the cards because we’ve defeated them militarily.”¹ President Donald Trump made this declaration about ongoing negotiations on June 8, 2026, three months after launching a military campaign against Iran. Yet pressure continued to mount on both sides, with the United States struggling to convert its military superiority into the political outcomes it wanted, on its desired timeline.² Trump’s statement reflects a deeply rooted assumption in post–Cold War American statecraft: that overwhelming military and economic power translates directly into favorable political outcomes, either through unconditional surrender or overpowering bargaining leverage. But force alone rarely secures political outcomes—and even when it does, the shape of those outcomes depends on more than force. Moreover, negotiations can convert American power into the means to manage competition, settle disputes, and reduce risk even without defeating an opponent or resolving the underlying conflict.

Roughly 243 years earlier, U.S. negotiators confronted a related challenge. After six years of war, the Continental Army had secured a decisive military victory at Yorktown in 1781. Military success alone, however, could not deliver what the revolutionaries most sought: recognition as an independent nation. By 1782, negotiations among the United States, France, and Great Britain had stalled, bogged down by bargaining over territorial boundaries. Progress emerged only after American and British negotiators turned to direct secret talks and reframed the negotiation around longer-term mutual interests rather than maximal demands. The British made substantial territorial concessions to their former colonies while setting the terms for a lucrative trading relationship in the New World. For America, the 1783 Treaty of Paris secured what battlefield victory alone could not: international recognition, territorial settlement, and the foundations of American prosperity.³

From the founding of the nation to recent negotiations with Iran, the United States has grappled with the challenge of how to convert its military, economic, and diplomatic power into durable national security outcomes.⁴ The country has shown it can effectively use negotiations to settle disputes peacefully, manage competition, prevent catastrophic risk, exit costly conflicts, and convert battlefield leverage into political outcomes. Yet it has also repeatedly failed to employ negotiations to their full potential as a core instrument of U.S. statecraft. American political culture has at times painted negotiating as weakness, eschewed talking openly to U.S. adversaries, and denigrated the resulting deals as lesser than what force could have achieved. In an increasingly contested and conflict-prone world, the United States will continue to struggle to close the gap between what the nation wants to achieve and its means to achieve it. In an age of conquest, the ability to negotiate effectively may prove even more vital than overwhelming military force.

This paper focuses narrowly on negotiations in which the United States is a principal party in diplomatic talks related to national security, including deterrence, conflict prevention, de-escalation, crisis response, war, and peace. National security negotiations will be particularly consequential to whether the United States is able to navigate the coming age successfully. To do so, the country will need to negotiate earlier, more willingly, more strategically, and to produce outcomes that are more durable, beneficial to itself but also to the other party. Essential to success will also be judging when not to negotiate, and working to improve alternatives to negotiated outcomes even while engaged in talks. Success will require the political space, or even popular demand, to use negotiations to manage risk, threats, conflict, and competition. It will also depend on expanded U.S. government capacity, including negotiation expertise, cross-case problem-solving, and modern methods and tools to conceptualize and test negotiation strategies. This paper does not attempt to survey the broader universe of economic, trade, climate, or multilateral diplomacy. Nor does it cover the U.S. role as a third-party mediator—even in conflicts with intense U.S. involvement such as Russia-Ukraine talks and the Gaza political process—which merits a subsequent paper.

In an age of conquest, the ability to negotiate effectively may prove even more vital than overwhelming military force.

Negotiations Matter More in a Contested World

The world has entered a period of more frequent—and more consequential—conflict. The post–Cold War order has given way to a more contested, fraught, and unpredictable landscape. States are competing more openly for power and position, with enduring implications for American interests. Over the past four years, combat deaths have reached heights not seen since the end of the Cold War and state-based conflicts are at their highest levels since recording began after World War II.⁵ The erosion of international sovereignty norms and constraints on the use of force is visible in wars of territorial conquest, brazen attacks on civilians and nonmilitary infrastructure, and intensifying proxy competition.⁶ Partnerships of convenience—for example, among Russia, North Korea, Iran, and China—and efforts to evade economic sanctions mean that countries are more resilient in the face of American coercive pressure.⁷ The Iran war has marked a shift away from the era of using diplomacy to alter adversaries’ motivations to pursue nuclear weapons toward one of using military force to try to eliminate the means to produce them.⁸

These structural shifts are compounded by technological change that makes wars “easier to start, harder to win.”⁹ Cheap and widely accessible weapons—from drones to precision-guided missiles—make it easier for weaker military powers to inflict pain on stronger ones. Advanced technologies and artificial intelligence (AI) will continue to hasten the pace of decisionmaking, speeding escalation cycles. AI-driven falsehoods and closed information loops could continue to fracture societies from within, further eroding public support for compromise. As witnessed in recent conflicts, the implications of war are not contained to the battlefield; global trade, supply chains, technology dominance, and the cohesion of diplomatic coalitions are all put at risk. At the same time, the global institutions that once mediated competition and conflict, such as the United Nations, are weakening.¹⁰

If this trajectory continues unchecked, the result will not just be more war, but a more militarized international order in which U.S. interests are under threat in multiple arenas at the same time.¹¹ Just as during periods of the Cold War, the United States may be tempted to meet this challenge predominantly by expending its coercive power. However, overuse of these tools will cause U.S. adversaries to find alternatives or to cooperate with one another, weakening U.S. military and economic dominance over time.¹² Even materially powerful states will struggle to get what they want through coercion alone, and the United States will drain its resources trying to fight its way out of multifront challenges. Thus, looking forward, American power will be more useful as conserved leverage than as an expendable commodity. At home, U.S. popular opinion will influence the type of force U.S. administrations will choose to deploy. As a result, full military victory of the type that allows for the imposition of political outcomes on the vanquished—as was the case after the world wars or the 1991 Gulf War—will be rare. Instead, military force, deterrence, and escalation threats will be most effective as part of a larger political negotiation process to convert this coercive power, as well as inducements, into durable national security outcomes.¹³

Even as negotiations increasingly become a necessary means to harness American power in this context, the resulting agreements will likely be less than fully satisfying to the world’s most powerful nation. The negotiations will take place in a context of constrained leverage, competition, and second-order consequences. Even weaker adversaries will be able to wield great leverage by escalating horizontally, putting pain on more pressure points, and outlasting great powers. The resulting agreements will look more like the limited deals that ended conflicts in Korea, Vietnam, and Afghanistan than the kind of “victor’s peace” that looms large in the American imagination from the nation’s early wars of conquest to the world wars. Still, the United States cannot afford to neglect negotiation as a critical way to advance its interests in a contested world. The United States will increasingly need negotiations not just to end wars, but also to manage continuous competition.

Negotiations as a Strategic Means to Advance American Interests

Since its founding, the United States has successfully used negotiation to convert its vast leverage into national security outcomes. Negotiation is a diplomatic process through which to define political aims (ends) from the outset and harness American power (means) to achieve them. Thus, negotiating is not inherently the opposite of using force. Just as military victory in the Revolutionary War created the leverage to secure American political aims through negotiation, warfighting can be used to achieve diplomatic aims. Moreover, diplomatic negotiations can be used to achieve what warfighting cannot: “to rearrange power in space and time so that the state avoids tests of strength beyond its immediate ability to bear.”¹⁴ While coercive pressure will remain a key means to shape negotiated settlements, going forward, coercive measures alone will struggle to produce enduring political outcomes. One reason is that these measures, such as precision airstrikes and economic sanctions, target a country’s means to undermine U.S. interests, and today, those means are often quickly replaced by partners or cheaply rebuilt. Further, attacking a country can deepen its motivation to resist American aims. Negotiation, by contrast, addresses the motivations behind adversarial action, producing more enduring outcomes.

Attacking a country can deepen its motivation to resist American aims. Negotiation, by contrast, addresses the motivations behind adversarial action, producing more enduring outcomes.

The United States has historically used negotiation to convert military, economic, and diplomatic power into improved national security. Negotiation processes have been used to:

- **Settle disputes peacefully:** U.S. policymakers have wielded negotiations to resolve conflicts peacefully, conserving resources and avoiding military overextension. For example, in 1846, U.S. officials turned to bargaining rather than going to war with the British over the Oregon boundary. While the negotiation entailed striking a compromise between the preferred American and British terms, the United States resolved the matter without opening a second military campaign while fighting the Mexican American war.
- **Manage competition:** In times of intense state-to-state competition, the United States has turned to negotiations to set mutually agreed terms to manage that competition, capping costly arms races and decreasing escalation risk. Examples include the agreements that came out of the 1921 Washington Naval Conference to manage the naval arms race in East Asia as well as the many agreements that managed the development, testing, and deployment of nuclear weapons during and after the Cold

War (for example, the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, Limited Test Ban Treaty, Strategic Arms Limitation Talks, Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, and Strategic Arms Reduction Treaties). It has also used negotiation to realign geopolitical constellations, closing the gap between American national security aims and available means. For instance, President Richard Nixon's diplomatic pivot to engage China through his 1972 visit and the Shanghai Communiqué laid the groundwork for normalized U.S.-China relations, severing the Sino-Soviet partnership, co-opting a potential threat, and strengthening the United States' hand in its competition with the Soviet Union.¹⁵

- **Prevent catastrophic risk:** Diplomatic negotiations have been used to manage risk that could have been catastrophic. The Cuban Missile Crisis negotiation—in which the Soviet Union agreed to dismantle and remove nuclear missiles from Cuba and the United States publicly stated it would not invade Cuba and secretly agreed to remove nuclear missiles from Türkiye—is credited with avoiding nuclear war. Negotiations over North Korea's nuclear program from 1993–1994 that produced the Agreed Framework, as well as the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on Iran's nuclear program, aimed to decrease the adversary's means and motivation to threaten U.S. interests *before* conflicts flared into catastrophic crises.
- **Exit costly conflict and reprioritize resources:** Evidenced by the Korean Armistice Agreement, the Paris Peace Accords on ending the Vietnam War, the Status of Forces Agreement with Iraq, and the Doha Agreement with the Taliban, the United States has repeatedly turned to political negotiation to secure its military withdrawal once the direct threat waned, other priorities emerged, and public support evaporated. The final agreements prioritized an end to U.S. combat operations, but notably, they did not ultimately deliver the originally sought, broader foreign policy aims in a durable way.
- **Convert battlefield leverage into political outcomes:** The United States has turned battlefield victories into major political outcomes through negotiated settlements such as the Treaty of Paris ending the American Revolutionary War; Treaty of Ghent ending the War of 1812; the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ending the Mexican-American War; the Treaty of Versailles ending World War I; the treaties that ended World War II; and the Gulf War ceasefire mandated by United Nations Security Council Resolution 687. Even with military victory, the United States used negotiation to codify its gains, including making some concessions such as paying for territory it acquired.

Of course, for all of the negotiation processes that have produced an agreement or resulted in a durable outcome, there are many that have stalled or failed outright. Negotiation success should not be measured solely by whether an agreement is signed, but by whether the process advances American aims in a durable way, relative to the alternatives. Negotiation is a tool, not inherently good or bad. The policy goal shapes the kind of deal achieved and the

leverage, risks, and timeline needed to reach it. Just as negotiation has been used to prevent violence, end war, or avoid annihilation, so too has negotiation veiled a surprise attack (for example, Japan only terminated its negotiation with the United States after it attacked Pearl Harbor), to buy time to refit for renewed fighting, to appease parties bent on war, and to “erode the legal and moral foundations of peace.”¹⁶ Given politicians’ divergent views of American interests and how best to achieve them, the success of many U.S. negotiations is likely to remain contested. But that does not make negotiation a less valuable tool.

Structural Constraints to Fully Utilizing Negotiations

Whereas the U.S. role as mediator, a third-party helping to end conflict, tends to engender long-term U.S. bipartisan political support (for example, in Northern Ireland, Bosnia, the Middle East, and Sudan), the U.S. role as negotiator, as a direct party to talks, tends to generate intense political controversy in Washington.

Negotiated political outcomes are rarely the initial focus of U.S. strategy, even though negotiations often determine the political terms on which conflicts involving major U.S. military campaigns end.

Recurring constraints within post–Cold War American political culture and the national security architecture have limited the country’s ability to utilize negotiations to their full potential. These constraints do not just stem from misunderstandings around a negotiation tool’s role in statecraft but also from manifestations of deeper structural features of the American political system and culture. This landscape—defined by America’s superpower status, democratic system, two-party politics, history, culture, and geography—drives a negotiating style that is “forceful, explicit, legalistic, urgent, and results-oriented.”¹⁷ More than that, America’s political landscape often impedes negotiated outcomes. While the constraints summarized below have not defined all national security negotiations, negotiators have often reached agreement *in spite* of these headwinds or been battered by them after agreement. The most common constraints include:

- **A belief that negotiating is showing weakness:** Detractors often voice concern that negotiating “risks a perception of weakness.”¹⁸ In peacetime, critics tend to frame negotiation as appeasement, invoking the 1938 Munich Agreement that only whetted Adolf Hitler’s appetite for aggression.¹⁹ In wartime, critics frame negotiation as undermining the military campaign that they believe will achieve

victory with more time and resources. As a result, negotiated political outcomes are rarely the initial focus of U.S. strategy, even though negotiations often determine the political terms on which conflicts involving major U.S. military campaigns end. From Vietnam to Afghanistan, American leaders have eventually turned to negotiations when they seek to exit a costly conflict, a context in which the United States has very little leverage because the adversary knows time is on its side. While there are certainly times when negotiation is not the right approach, negotiating under coercion need not reward aggression; agreements can be structured to reduce, rather than reinforce, incentives for future aggression. Throughout history, powerful states have consistently negotiated to consolidate their position, buy time, and get others to do what they want.²⁰

- **An aversion to talking to adversaries:** The U.S. political system has typically demonized certain adversaries and denounced talking with them as legitimizing or rewarding them.²¹ With the notable exception of both Trump administrations, this critique has significantly restrained U.S. policymakers from talking openly and directly to adversaries to scope shared interests early in a negotiation. Instead, those early conversations get driven into secret channels, with officials hoping that the benefits of a fully formed agreement will quiet critics. But failing to bring the public and Congress along often produces the blowback the officials were hoping to avoid. Talking to adversaries is often the only way to secure the national security outcomes needed to durably achieve American national security aims.²²
- **A desire to dictate terms on U.S. timelines:** Some administrations have assumed that the United States' vast material power would translate directly into power at the negotiating table, and then grew frustrated when materially weaker countries did not capitulate to U.S. demands.²³ For example, before commencing military operations in Iran on February 28, 2026, the Trump administration avoided compromising on the negotiated agreement at hand, believing that applying more pressure would produce a better deal.²⁴ Yet the consensus nature of negotiations—in which each party has a veto and can walk away from a deal they do not value—means that the stronger party does not necessarily “hold all of the cards.”²⁵ Each negotiating party has a three-part choice: (1) accept terms as they are, (2) reject terms as they are and walk away, or (3) hold out for better terms.²⁶ The stronger a party's “best alternative to the negotiated agreement,” known as BATNA, the stronger their hand in the negotiation because they can afford to push for their terms and risk a collapse of talks.²⁷ Thus, the ability to hold out for better terms is often a more important variable than material power. In U.S.-Taliban relations, this concept was well illustrated by the reported Taliban observation, “You have the watches; we have the time.”²⁸ Just as the stronger party cannot always force its desired terms or timelines in war,²⁹ material strength alone rarely dictates the outcome of a negotiation, especially in a contested world where parties have alternatives to the agreement on offer and can outlast the United States.

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- **A focus on extracting concessions:** Some U.S. policymakers conceptualize an ideal agreement as one that maximizes an opponent's losses, prioritizing compulsion as the means to drive the bargain. Coercion is an important means of leverage in a negotiation, as illustrated by the role economic sanctions have played in bringing Iran to the negotiating table time and again. But policymakers should differentiate between using coercion to incentivize a rival to sign a deal and using coercion to inflict maximum pain. An "I win, you lose" zero-sum bargaining mentality may be successful in one-off transactions like buying a car. It is not, however, an effective approach to produce durable political agreements where implementation requires a continuing relationship between the parties. In this type of agreement, if a party feels it was forced into a deal, it will seek to undermine it when it gets the chance—thus driving up enforcement costs or causing the deal to collapse. Agreements endure when all parties see value in upholding them; therefore, helping an opponent succeed in their aims can be more beneficial to U.S. interests than inflicting the maximum possible loss.
- **A politicized short-term focus:** The U.S. political system tends to reward short time horizons, even though political settlements often require long ones. While the four-to-eight-year mandate of an American president has served as a deadline to drive negotiating progress, it has also encouraged adversaries to delay making a deal in the hopes that leadership change will bring more favorable terms. Most agreements take years to come to fruition and require even longer to implement, requiring cross-administration commitment. A president's personal prioritization and involvement is one of the most necessary, if not sufficient, factors for success.³⁰ Yet in today's fraught domestic political landscape, high-profile presidential investment in a negotiation process risks politicizing it. Further, the polarized nature of American politics can lead to major policy swings that result in the United States withdrawing from agreements such as the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty or the 2015 Iran nuclear deal.³¹ President Joe Biden's administration pushed back the timeline but largely honored the elements of U.S.-Taliban talks that it inherited from the first Trump administration. Still, Biden lamented his constrained options, which he framed as between following through on the imperfect Trump administration deal (for example, it excluded the Afghan government from U.S.-Taliban talks and lacked robust enforcement mechanisms), or returning to fighting the Taliban.³² American negotiation effectiveness rests not just on reaching agreements, but also on sustaining domestic political constituencies to support them over time. If countries doubt that the United States will uphold its negotiated commitments across administrations, they will hesitate to negotiate, demand greater concessions, or look for external entities or mechanisms to guarantee implementation.

These constraints are most acute within the Washington-centric U.S. political apparatus. The broader American public, on the other hand, has generally supported negotiations with America's adversaries even while expressing skepticism that the stated goals could be fully reached via negotiations.³³ In 2021 polling of Americans, more than 65 percent of respondents indicated that diplomacy contributes to national security. By a margin of more than two to one, those polled said it was better for diplomats to lead efforts abroad than for the military to, with respondents describing diplomacy as a means to navigate today's complexity and volatility, avoid armed conflict, and promote peace.³⁴ American support for agreements has been highest after long, costly wars, even as there was initial support for American engagement in the conflict.³⁵ The 2015 Iran nuclear deal is the possible exception, although polling has not been consistent and a large percentage did not have an opinion at the time the deal was signed.³⁶

A Doctrine for Future U.S. Negotiation

In a world of conquest, American interests will be tested on multiple fronts simultaneously and adversaries will have more alternatives to meeting U.S. demands. Not only does the United States need to adapt its warfighting strategies and capabilities, it also needs to reconceptualize its negotiation strategies and capabilities. Harnessing the potential of negotiation while navigating U.S. structural constraints requires a guiding negotiation doctrine. This doctrine can help policymakers as they devise strategies tailored to each national security challenge, sometimes under intense time pressure. A forward-looking U.S. national security negotiation doctrine should include the below set of core principles.

Setting the Objective

- **Define realistic political end states earlier:** With increasing risks to U.S. interests and less ability to resolve them definitively, the United States must prioritize using political processes to rearrange its power in space and time to head off threats and, when they do occur, negotiating with realistic aims. Such strategies should include changing an adversary's motivation to undermine U.S. interests in addition to, or rather than, changing their means to do so. Today, government and think tank analysis, planning, and gaming of future military capabilities dwarf analysis of how to harness them for negotiated outcomes—or how to achieve negotiated outcomes without fighting at all. Even U.S. warfighting plans should consider how best to position the country to achieve a negotiated outcome from the beginning rather than as an afterthought after the military campaign has lost momentum. In an example from Afghanistan with parallels to recent operations in Iran, this could

have meant identifying who the key future Taliban negotiators would be—those at a high enough level to have command and control authority, but not the most extreme ideologues—and keeping communications channels with them open, as well as taking their potential value as negotiators into account when deliberating strike targeting.³⁷

- **Talk directly to adversaries:** The best way to identify mutually beneficial negotiation formulas is to talk to U.S. adversaries directly and openly. Former Biden administration officials have welcomed the Trump administration's approach of talking directly to officials from Iran, the Houthis, and Hamas, among others.³⁸ While the temptation is often to insist on key desired outcomes, such as disarmament or an end to violence, as a precondition to begin talking, this approach rarely makes progress with groups that rely on weapons or the use of violence as their primary means of leverage, or for whom the conflict is perceived as existential. In these cases, agreeing that these issues will be resolved through the negotiation process rather than before it starts is often a key to progress.³⁹ While the United States should continue to use secret talks, back-channels, and third-party mediation to enhance its negotiations when warranted, there is no replacement for the ability to talk face-to-face at key stages of the negotiation.
- **Use negotiations to manage competition and buy-down risk:** At times, the primary objective of negotiating may not be to resolve an underlying conflict but rather to manage competition and decrease the risk of a catastrophe. Negotiations are a means to keep communication channels open even when relations between actors are at the boiling point. Negotiations can create mutually agreed guardrails that manage competition between states, constrain arms races to a more economically feasible level, and reduce the consequences of a potential future escalation. This type of negotiation will continue to be important to not only curbing nuclear weapons development and use, but also to managing competition in the emerging domains of AI, cyber warfare, space, the Arctic, and biotechnology. Critics view such agreements as constraining the United States more than its material power would warrant. In a more contested world, however, the United States risks economic and military overextension, or catastrophic risk, if it fails to set the terms for competition. Doing so from a position of strength, likely sooner rather than later, will enable it to set more favorable terms.

Creating Leverage

- **Negotiate from a position of strength with scoped aims:** As countries increasingly have alternatives to meeting U.S. demands, American military and economic coercive power will be even less able to produce determinative results.⁴⁰ U.S. policymakers should no longer expect to walk away with a deal that looks like unconditional surrender, even in cases where U.S. material power dwarfs that of its

adversary. American officials may face a dilemma: accept a deal that addresses only symptoms (for example, a ceasefire or unblocking an economic chokepoint) but not the underlying cause; or a deal that empowers an adversary or undermines international laws and norms.⁴¹ Rather than waiting until U.S. leverage has dissipated and achieving only limited objectives (for example, in Vietnam and Afghanistan), it is better to begin negotiations earlier, with realistic expectations of what the other party will accept, and build incrementally toward larger objectives. The risk is that an initial partial agreement could remove the United States' leverage and the time pressure needed to compel resolution of the larger issues. Thus, piecemeal or sequenced negotiated outcomes should be made contingent on each other through either a “nothing is agreed until everything is agreed” strategy or a linkage approach in recognition that concessions in one area are often only palatable if matched by reciprocal commitments elsewhere.⁴² That said, at times, larger outcomes will not be achievable in the short term.

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- **Use leverage to ripen disputes for resolution:** In some disputes, a resolution is possible but not *yet* attractive. In such cases, the party may come to the table but will not make major concessions, or it may sign an agreement it has no intention of implementing. The United States can wait until the context changes to one that makes a negotiated settlement more attractive or employ a mediator or track 2 negotiations to help develop the contours of a more enticing deal. Alternatively, it can use its leverage to change the party's cost-benefit calculation—potentially by allying with partners, peeling away the other party's external support, escalating coercion, and/or enhancing incentives. Effective negotiations require managing not only the counterpart, but also the constellation of other stakeholders with the will and means to shape the outcome.

Once a political objective is set, the United States should map the full spectrum of its leverage, from coercive to enticing; assess the short- and long-term consequences of using the leverage; and anticipate how the other parties will respond. In the past, inducements such as trade agreements, debt relief, weapons sales, and foreign assistance have shifted parties' cost-benefit calculations and helped leaders “sell” agreements to their populaces.⁴³ That said, to build durable outcomes, such inducements should be mutually beneficial, sustainable, and transparent, driven by a long-term case for American investment returns rather than short-term or personal gain.⁴⁴

- **Develop alternatives to negotiation:** The United States needs to maximize the power it wields if it is to produce the national security outcomes it desires. Counterintuitively, an important means to maximize negotiation leverage is to

develop the BATNA. Thus, U.S. policymakers should identify and work to enhance their Plan B before and during the negotiation. The United States has struggled in past nuclear negotiations with Iran, for example, because it lacked an alternative means to remove Iran's nuclear threat. During the administration of Barack Obama, sharing the development of the United States' "bunker busting" bomb with Iran was one such strategy, signaling to Iranian negotiators that the United States had an alternative to negotiation.⁴⁵ As demonstrated in the second Trump administration, such capabilities often produce the strongest leverage as merely a threat and sometimes fail to produce the desired leverage when actually applied.

Developing U.S. contingencies for a failed negotiation not only strengthens the United States' hand in the negotiation, but can also help the country position itself better should the talks fall apart—identifying beforehand potential pathways to avoid crisis escalation or the best means to enhance deterrence. Further, evaluating the other party's BATNA can help U.S. policymakers assess more realistically what they can expect from a negotiation.⁴⁶ When possible, the United States should seek ways to weaken the other party's alternatives to negotiation, making delay of a negotiated solution more costly to them. Since time is a critical element of leverage that can determine whether a party accepts the deal on the table, U.S. negotiators should devise ways to make the United States more resilient in the face of protracted negotiations or, alternatively, to increase time pressure on the other side.

Delivering Durable Outcomes

- **Aim for outcomes of mutual gain rather than maximum concession:** Despite all of its power and resources, the United States should not expect to force parties into agreement. Material power does not necessarily translate into bargaining power⁴⁷—as any parent negotiating with a recalcitrant toddler to take a bath can attest. Even when American coercive leverage is enough to achieve something akin to unconditional surrender, as with the Treaty of Versailles that ended World War I, when parties do not see value in a deal, they will continue to look for ways to violate it. In a multipolar context, heavy-handed or overused coercion can backfire, stoking nationalist sentiment, pushing rivals together, or weakening global institutions. Thus, the United States should focus on designing a deal that it and the other party both want to implement.⁴⁸ Reaching such an agreement requires empathy and detailed analysis of the interests behind the other party's stated position; such analysis could include imagining their victory speech to their own public or using AI-driven tools to simulate how they would react to U.S. positions.⁴⁹

- **Preserve credibility:** Credibility is an intangible but valuable asset in negotiations.⁵⁰ Countries will continue to negotiate with the United States as long as it can offer something they want. However, in a world where states have options, Washington will pay a price for repeatedly using negotiations as a cover for military action, breaking negotiated commitments, or abandoning agreements.⁵¹ As game theory illustrates, the optimal strategy for repeated rounds of negotiation differs from one-off encounters: With long-term relationships, the value of cooperation outweighs any momentary gain from defecting from the terms of the agreement.⁵² The United States should use a “repeated games” negotiation strategy, building credibility by negotiating in good faith over time. Short-sighted “single-round” strategies will be remembered not just by the other party, but by all future negotiating partners.
- **Bake in enforcement:** Game theory also indicates that agreements are likely to be broken when noncompliance cannot be detected or when no outside authority exists to enforce them.⁵³ One weakness of the Treaty of Versailles was that it did not have credible enforcement measures, so Germany was able to rebuild its military without initial consequence. In an age of conquest, aggressors are more likely to test agreements, probing to see what violations they can get away with. Indeed, according to analysis on ceasefires between 1989 and 2020 from The Ceasefire Project, in four-fifths of ceasefires without a monitoring system, conflict resumed within a year.⁵⁴ Durable agreements require valued terms for all parties, robust monitoring and verification, incremental incentives for implementation steps (action-for-action), credible and escalating repercussions for violations, and/or strong verification and enforcement structures. Monitoring should be tied directly to credible, costly consequences for violations, specified in the agreement at signing. Ideally, punishment terms will not require subsequent political decisions but be built into the agreement, like the “snapback” sanctions provision in the 2015 Iran nuclear deal. U.S. policymakers and legislators may balk at the cost and risk of such mechanisms, but even the most brilliantly negotiated agreement, if not implemented, is just a piece of paper.

Knowing When Not to Negotiate

- **Assess whether conditions are right:** There are situations where negotiation is not the right approach, and alternatives such as deterrence, surgical military action, covert action, cyber warfare, economic warfare, coercive diplomacy, or doing nothing better advance American interests. The question is whether negotiation can achieve U.S. objectives within an acceptable time frame, cost, and risk level when compared with the alternatives.⁵⁵ The following contexts are not conducive to negotiation:
 - When the other party is not seeking negotiable political aims: Nihilistic actors, such as leaders of global jihadist movements, are unlikely to be interested in political outcomes, for example. That said, localized insurgent groups using

terrorist tactics may shift from an identity defined by violence to one interested in political compromise through the momentum of the negotiation process itself (as happened with Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness of Sinn Féin, the Irish republican political party closely associated with the Irish Republican Army, during the Good Friday Agreement process in Northern Ireland).⁵⁶

- When the other party is not ready for a political settlement: This is often when the party believes it has more to gain by not negotiating, or not yet. Conflicts become “ripe for resolution” when parties see a deal now as better than continued violence or a deal later—typically when a mutually hurting stalemate meets a viable “way out” to a political settlement.⁵⁷
- When the other party lacks the command and control to implement what it agrees to⁵⁸: American negotiators can use ceasefires or other limited agreements early in the negotiations process to test a party’s ability to deliver on its promises.

The question is whether negotiation can achieve U.S. objectives within an acceptable time frame, cost, and risk level when compared with the alternatives.

Box 1. Policymaker’s Checklist: Building a Negotiation Strategy

Taken together, this negotiation doctrine should lead U.S. policymakers to ask themselves this set of central questions:

- What political outcome are we trying to achieve? What is the absolute minimum outcome we can live with? What does the other party want and what is likely its minimum outcome? What is fundamentally nonnegotiable for them? What core interests are they hiding behind their stated demands? Is there overlap between our minimum outcome and theirs, creating an overlapping area of possible agreement? Is there any creative way to generate mutual gain?
- How can we best harness U.S. leverage for the negotiation? How might the other party look to strengthen its leverage? What are our alternatives to negotiating, and what are theirs? How can we improve our alternatives and decrease their perceived value of theirs?
- What is the right time to negotiate? Do they feel time pressure, and how can we increase their sense of urgency and decrease ours?

- What other parties/countries have a stake in the outcome, and how might they insert themselves?
- Do Americans understand the negotiation? How can Congress contribute to, or detract from, the negotiation?
- How should we sequence negotiations, and can we build toward a more comprehensive agreement without losing momentum?
- Who is best placed to negotiate for us? Who do we want to negotiate for their side, and what can we do to make that more likely? Are we poised to best utilize U.S. expertise and government capacity? Have we tested and “red teamed” our negotiation strategy?
- What terms would make them most likely to want to implement the deal? What is the best way to monitor, verify, and enforce a deal, and can we strengthen that mechanism?

How to (Re)Build U.S. Negotiation Capacity

Optimizing negotiation as an element of American statecraft requires strategic investment. In a faster-paced and more dangerous world, the United States will face challenges in capacity, competition, continuity, and credibility. While much has been written about how to conduct diplomatic negotiations,⁵⁹ the greater challenge facing the United States today is building the expertise, planning capacity, tools, and political foundations that will result in each negotiation’s full potential impact.

Build Domestic Foundations for Durable Agreements

Sustaining the gains of negotiated outcomes requires a political constituency that supports a deal across administrations and congressional cycles. When major agreements become partisan projects rather than national commitments, U.S. credibility suffers and adversaries have

incentive to wait for political change. This political constituency starts with the American public and their influence on Congress. Members of Congress serve as negotiators, strategic messengers, and stewards of many of the tools and the financing that underwrite American power. They are often the final arbiter of a deal, voting on whether to support it and how to sustain it. Thus, the American public's support or opposition can be critical to the success of a negotiation. The U.S. Institute of Peace, an independent, nonpartisan, congressionally funded organization, was created by Congress in 1984 with a mandate to support research and educate Americans about means to promote peace and resolve conflict. Yet, nearly all of its employees were fired by the Trump administration in 2025, pending the outcome of a legal battle.⁶⁰

When major agreements become partisan projects rather than national commitments, U.S. credibility suffers and adversaries have incentive to wait for political change.

On the flip side, negotiators must proactively build a base of support among the public and Congress for negotiated agreements, especially when using secret or back-channel talks. An American public that sees negotiation as a means to convert U.S. power into national security outcomes gives officials room to engage directly with adversaries like Hamas or Iran's regime—and to discuss managing major threats via negotiation—with less risk of such actions being thwarted by Congress or political opponents. To do so, American officials will need to shift away from the type of threat politics that has made negotiating with adversaries more politically controversial.⁶¹ As U.S. politics become more polarized, American standing as a credible negotiator should not become one of the many casualties.

Combine Presidential Prioritization with Institutional Capacity

Successful U.S. negotiation demands both presidential prioritization and institutional involvement. To be effective, an envoy must be visibly empowered by the president with a clear mandate and the freedom to shape the terms of the deal in real time outside of day-to-day bureaucratic constraints.⁶² For this reason, many successful American negotiators have been political appointees close to the president. On the other hand, overreliance on a small group of political appointees at the expense of U.S. institutions risks failing to access the expertise and infrastructure needed to generate optimal and enduring outcomes. As career diplomat William Burns illustrates in his memoir *The Back Channel*, the deep bench of regional experts, intelligence analysts, career diplomats, interagency policymakers, lawyers, and communications professionals who carry out sustained analysis, planning, coordination, and implementation are integral to the success of a negotiation.⁶³

For example, Zalmay Khalilzad's negotiation efforts with the Taliban during the first Trump administration were part of a much larger operation that included a dedicated State Department office, robust intelligence support, frequent National Security Council–led

interagency coordination and decisionmaking, and U.S. diplomats on the ground in Afghanistan and the region. This bureaucratic infrastructure was important in maintaining historical memory and continuity as negotiations continued with the change in administration. Further, U.S. diplomats and intelligence tools are essential to maintaining focus on implementation long after the president and envoy have pivoted to focus on other priorities and pulling key officials back in if things start to go off the rails. Negotiation is a national security capability built on diplomatic skill, institutional capacity, and strategic planning. A failure to use any of these three elements well risks a sub-optimal outcome.

Build Negotiation Expertise and Integrate Negotiations Into Strategic Planning

The United States routinely plans for the potential deployment of its military capacity in advance but rarely plans with equal rigor or foresight for the potential need to negotiate in the future. Both the Pentagon and the State Department should build negotiation into integrated crisis contingency planning (for example, how to exit a potential clash with China, defuse a major Arctic dispute, or de-escalate a nuclear crisis with North Korea). This planning should identify desired political end states, acceptable compromises, and potential negotiated pathways to settlement from the initial strategy formulation rather than as an afterthought. A reconstituted State Department Policy Planning office should rebuild the Policy Risk and Opportunity Planning group to drive systematic future-oriented planning for the most consequential foreign policy risks and opportunities, examining how best to position the United States now to negotiate to achieve its aims.

Negotiation is a functional area of expertise built on research, theory, practice, and cross-case lessons.

Like deterrence or democracy, negotiation is a functional area of expertise built on research, theory, practice, and cross-case lessons. The small State Department team that advised on ongoing negotiations was housed in the Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations, which the current Trump administration dismantled.⁶⁴ To rebuild and expand negotiation-specific expertise, the State Department should create a hub of functional negotiation experts to help both policy planners and negotiators devise national security negotiation strategies based on negotiations research, theory, and ideas from past cases.⁶⁵ Diplomatic and military planners, working with this negotiation hub, should develop whole-of-government war game–type simulations (peace games or diplo-gaming), red-teaming exercises, and after-action analysis to test potential pathways to negotiated solutions, check assumptions, and dry-run negotiations on the most consequential policy issues. Further, a Washington think tank or other entity should convene former U.S. negotiators and diplomatic practitioners to serve as a sounding board and problem-solving group for ongoing negotiations, bringing lessons and ideas from other negotiations across regions and decades.

Modernize Negotiation Design Tools

If prudently applied, human-controlled AI tools can enhance U.S. strategic negotiating capacity. Data-driven tools should augment human-driven simulation and diplo-gaming capabilities rather than supplant them, while correcting for the biases inherent in these tools.⁶⁶ Simulations should use large language model predictive tools to help officials conceptualize complex negotiations, in which many actors with competing interests react to each other's moves over time. They can help U.S. officials better assess an opponent's likely moves, explore bargaining positions and pathways to an agreement, test sequencing, and monitor implementation. That said, overreliance or misuse of such tools can pose major risks. These risks include that the tool misdiagnoses another party's true interests or creates a false sense of certainty, or that adversaries compromise inputs to the tool or hack into it to access a government's confidential planning.⁶⁷ Just as governments have developed systems to reduce similar risks posed by humans, the U.S. government should ensure that any use of AI tools for negotiation follow strict procedures and controls. Mitigation measures should include human control over how AI inputs are identified and how outputs are generated. AI tools should be used as input to a human-controlled processes rather than an end result, and be used only on systems designed to handle sensitive data securely. While U.S. diplomats have often been hesitant to embrace computer-driven simulation tools, American adversaries are surely employing such tools to develop and test not just their warfighting strategies, but also their negotiations. As the world undergoes rapid and major transformation, such tools will no longer be optional for a superpower seeking to compete in that world.

Conclusion

American independence was secured both on the battlefield and at the negotiating table. In an age of contested power, recognizing the vital role of negotiation is once again urgent. In a world where wars are easier to start and harder to win, adversaries are more resilient to coercion, and the risk of catastrophic escalation is more severe, the ability to negotiate effectively will increasingly determine whether the United States can convert its immense power into sustained national security outcomes. The United States invests enormous resources in its military capabilities to meet the coming challenges, and negotiation capabilities merit similar prioritization. The ambition for the United States should not simply be to negotiate more, but to negotiate more strategically. In the years ahead, the United States should strive to convert its leverage into durable political settlements, with the credibility, capacity, and resolve to see them through.

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