

Advice for an ‘Americas First Foreign Policy’

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Marco Rubio talks to the media in Guatemala City, Feb. 5. Photo: johan ordonez/Agence France-Presse/Getty Images

Secretary of State Marco Rubio rightly maintains that U.S. foreign policy has paid too little attention to the Western Hemisphere and in particular has neglected Central America and regional diplomacy aimed at safeguarding America’s southern border (“[An Americas First Foreign Policy](#),” op-ed, Jan. 31). But he wrongly suggests that contrary to “past administrations that prioritized the global over the local,” America must give precedence to nations based on geographical proximity.

The better way to organize American diplomacy is the traditional way. In his 1796 Farewell Address, President George Washington oriented foreign affairs around constitutional imperatives and the American spirit: The fundamental goal of U.S. foreign policy is to secure American freedom; subsidiary goals and means serve that overriding aim.

Diplomacy must be adjusted to changing circumstances. Washington concluded that America's "detached and distant situation" required the nation to "trust to temporary alliances" and then only "for extraordinary emergencies." A generation later, President James Monroe asserted that the U.S. would regard further European encroachments in the Western Hemisphere as threats to American freedom. And to secure American freedom in the Cold War, President Ronald Reagan led a worldwide coalition of sovereign nations to defeat Soviet communism.

Mr. Rubio alludes to the core issue when he connects U.S. diplomacy in Central America to the China challenge: "As our regional partners build themselves up, they can more easily resist countries such as China that promise much but deliver little." He adds that "the Chinese Communist Party uses diplomatic and economic leverage—such as at the Panama Canal—to oppose the U.S. and turn sovereign nations into vassal states."

The secretary should extend this line of reasoning and make it explicit. The Communist Party's ambition to achieve worldwide economic dominance, bring nations on every continent under its sway, and create a world order favorable to authoritarianism presents the chief external threat to American freedom. Accordingly, U.S. diplomacy, local and distant, not least in Europe, the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific, should focus on cooperating with friends of freedom to meet the China challenge.

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