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# Walkable Urbanism as Foreign Policy

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## The rise of suburbia helped America win the Cold War. Could urbanism do the same today in a world of changing threats?

Earlier this month, national security scholar Patrick Doherty published a proposal in *Foreign Policy* magazine for America's next "grand strategy," a plan for how the U.S. should reposition itself in a world defined less by threats from communism or terrorism and more by the global challenge of sustainability. His offering is among a crop of such foreign policy tracts all aiming big ideas at the newly re-inaugurated president.

These treatises usually have little to do with the more prosaic problems of cities, with housing or transportation or unemployment. But part of Doherty's particular argument snagged our attention: He believes a central piece of American security and strength in the 21st century will reside in walkable neighborhoods.

Walkability, as we typically think of it in cities, is deeply connected to sustainability, public health and economic development. But foreign policy? That was a new one even for us.

Doherty's basic idea is that pent-up demand for such communities could help power a new American economic engine in the same way that suburban housing (and all of the consumption that came with it) made America economically and globally powerful in the Cold War era.

This idea may change how you look at the mixed-use condo on your street corner (it's helping to make America strong again!). But it also changes how you may think about the history of suburban development. For decades, in fact, America's suburban project – and now our tentative shift away from it – has been intimately tied up in the story of American defense.

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In the mid 1940s, U.S. officials needed to redirect what was a wartime economy built on the production of ships and weapons and other instruments of war. "And they knew," Doherty says, "that they could aim the economy where the demand was in the system." It was, in short, in housing.

Sixteen million Americans went into uniform during the war. Close to 15.5 million ultimately came home, setting the stage for the baby boom generation. World War II simultaneously altered America's demographics in one less celebrated way: five million Americans left their farms during the war, and fewer than 350,000 went back once it was over.

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## **Suburbia made America economically strong, and it was simultaneously enabled by another federal project with the nation's defense in mind: the Interstate Highway System.**

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These two demographic movements – one away from rural farmland, the other returning from the war – required vast new housing. And by then Americans already had an idea of what it should look like. The famous Futurama exhibit at the 1939 New York World's Fair had offered a glimpse of America covered in highways and leafy suburbs. "It was this perfect confluence," Doherty says, "of government interest in putting Americans back to work, and Detroit's interest in creating infrastructure for their product to be more marketable."

That vision was shut down for several years by the war. But it was resuscitated quickly afterwards as the solution to America's shifting demographics and as a way to stave off the kind of recession the country (and its veterans) suffered after World War I. Up to that moment in history, at the close of World War II, Americans had gone through 15 years in a kind of austerity, between the depression and the rationing of the war. And so there was tremendous built-up demand for not only housing, but consumption of all kinds.

In the years to come, Doherty says, suburban housing became the foundation of the Cold War economy. And that shift to the suburbs necessitated so many others: When you no longer live by a laundromat, you need your own washing machine; when you no longer live by a train station, you need a second car. In so many ways, the second pillar of the Cold War economy – consumption – followed from the primary driver of housing.

All of this became increasingly relevant to America's strategy for dealing with the Soviet Union. "The trick was to contain them while outperforming and outlasting them economically," Doherty says. Diplomat George Kennan first articulated this plan of containment in 1946 (in the original "grand strategy" on which Doherty models his today). "That basic formula was our strategy for the Cold War."

Suburbia made America economically strong, and it was simultaneously enabled by another federal project with the nation's defense in mind: the Interstate Highway System. In 1949, after the Soviets developed their own nuclear weapon, President Truman directed government agencies to use their leverage to disperse industrial production and populations out of urban areas. The idea was to make America less susceptible to nuclear attack. "That's what gave us Silicon Valley," Doherty says. That's also one reason why most of our national labs are in the middle of nowhere.

Over time, nothing enabled America to decentralize quite like the new highway system, created by the 1956 National Interstate and Defense Highways Act. Today, we often forget about the early defense roots of our national roads. But relics of it remain: some reinforced straightaways in the highway system were designed as backup landing strips for military cargo planes. And all of those highway overpasses warning of a 14-foot clearance were set at that height for a specific reason: They were high enough to enable missiles riding on the backs of trucks to pass below. The whole concept of the highway system had multiple intertwined motivations.

"Part of it was supercharging suburbia," Doherty says. "Part of it was 'what's good for GM is what's good for America.' Part of it was moving missiles around country."



This is the lesson, Doherty says, we should take from that era: "The real key to American strategic success in the 20th century – both during World War II and the Cold War – was not the military stuff. The key was that we understood how to let our economic engine do the heavy lifting."

It's clear today, though, that suburbia can no longer do this for us. The children of baby boomers are less interested in living their parents' lifestyle. And baby boomers themselves are increasingly rejecting it, wary of a choice between isolated houses and nursing homes. If anything, the development model of suburbia now seems to be weakening our economy instead of propping it up. Without eternal new development, the infrastructure costs of existing subdivisions are becoming clearer. And as demand shifts back toward urban centers, we're left with a dramatic oversupply of another era's housing (which we continued to build long after the Cold War ended).

So what replaces suburbia as the engine of our economy?

"There's no good growth story," Doherty says. Or, at least, that's how many investors and CFOs feel. But he believes an answer does exist among findings we've covered before from real estate theorist Christopher Leinberger: it's in the rising demand for walkable urbanism.

By Leinberger's account, Americans are now as eager to make a dramatic shift in their housing choices – necessitating vast new development – on the scale that we saw in the 1950s when families first started moving en masse to the suburbs. The capital exists to make this possible, Doherty insists, it's just waiting for such an investment. The timing, in effect, couldn't be better: Americans are asking for sweeping new development at just the moment when we're shifting about looking for some new source to power our economy.

"It is extraordinarily lucky," Doherty says. "It is I think one of the great historical circumstances that we have to take advantage of."

The ultimate point isn't to economically empower America to take on the modern-day equivalent of communists. Doherty frames the coming foreign policy mandate in notably different terms. Over the next two decades, three billion people are projected to join the global middle class (for comparison's sake, one billion people did this in the past 20 years). Their emergence will of course be one of the great success stories of the 21st century. But it will also cause tremendous resource strain across the world and, at worst, new global conflicts over the raw ingredients for middle-class living.

This is the international challenge America will have to navigate, and it ties back to two other direct benefits that walkable neighborhoods can offer. First, they will reduce the demand for oil. Suburban living required loads of it (which in turn required U.S. military might in volatile oil-rich regions of the world). In that future with three billion more middle-class people, Doherty adds, "there's a strategic imperative to dramatically reduce our energy and resource consumption." And walkable living, by definition, does that in ways that go beyond consuming less oil. In Doherty's view, walkable development is both the means to drive the economy and the product that enables us to live more sustainably.

Of course, in the context of foreign policy, we will ultimately need much more than some new high-rises in Chicago and Salt Lake City. Doherty is also calling for a focus on regenerative agriculture in the American heartland (to help feed all those middle-class people sustainably), and a revolution in engineering and manufacturing to develop the new products for a less resource-intense world. If America is to lead on sustainability – and help the world get there with minimal conflict – that will require a host of other policy changes.

But how Americans live at home isn't unrelated to how America interacts with the rest of the world. Doherty put it this way in *Foreign Policy*: "By living the American Dream, Americans helped stop Soviet advances." Now, he tells us, "there's demand for this new American Dream."

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