Discussion Article

The urgent and the important: A conceptual matrix of US policy prioritisation

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Abstract

This article sets forth a preliminary conceptual framework for understanding how the United States prioritises policy engagement across competing domestic and international demands. Adapting the Eisenhower Matrix, it categorises policy issues along two dimensions – importance and urgency – while situating decision-making within constraints of time, financial resources, public opinion, and elite tolerance for pressure. The framework provides a descriptive tool for analysing how prioritisation unfolds. The article highlights how institutional dynamics, political incentives, and the pressures of the contemporary attention economy shape the assignment and contestation of urgency and importance. It also considers how media cycles and amplification through social media can elevate issues perceived as urgent or important while obscuring less visible but strategically significant priorities. By structuring policy debates within four quadrants of urgency and importance, the framework offers a means for tracing how issues move across categories and why certain policies receive attention or resources. In doing so, it provides analysts with a systematic tool for interrogating US policy choices and the competing visions, constraints, and narratives that shape them.

Keywords

US, governance, public policy, contestation, strategy, media

Introduction

People are naturally inclined to seek tools to make order out of chaos. Such tools offer opportunities to put things in their proper place. The hope is that some meaning or pattern might emerge once items are set in a more structured manner. Similarly, the brain seeks out heuristics as shortcuts to streamline thought and conclusions. This phenomenon is something esteemed researchers such as Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky have written about at length and to great success, possibly because people enjoy reading and learning about their own heuristic tendencies (Tversky and Kahneman, 1974). This inclination appears to be true of the US public and of the global public and leaders, too.

The United States is operating in a moment of pressure on multiple fronts. Policymakers and leaders are required to prioritise engagement across myriad theatres, discern how to balance domestic topics and international commitments, and choose between what are being framed as core security interests versus peripheral matters. These trade-offs are shaped by finite resources of time and money along with electoral incentives, public opinion, and elite tolerance for discomfort. All of this is unfolding amidst the dynamics of the attention economy in the social media era – an information environment where media cycles press urgency and shorten decision windows, and where the spotlight on a brief crisis can overwhelm and undercut long-term strategy. This simultaneously obscures and reinforces how many disputes in US policy can be distilled into how urgency and importance are assigned as a part of wider US visions.

To contribute to this debate, this article reinterprets the Eisenhower Matrix as a conceptual framework for categorising and prioritising issues in US foreign and security policy under political and institutional constraints. This builds on Dye's classic definition of policy as a choice (Dye, 2017). The article's contribution and the setting forth of the matrix is not prescriptive in dictating what the United States should prioritise; rather, it is descriptive, in that it examines the parameters for how prioritisation unfolds. The framework is useful in that it provides an organisational foundation to understand how judgments of "importance" and "urgency" are constructed, contested, and rationalised in practice by stakeholders.

Background: The Seven Habits and the Origin of the Eisenhower Matrix in Personal Management Techniques

The Eisenhower Matrix's two variables are importance and urgency. Its origin is reportedly from a quote attributed to former US President Dwight D. Eisenhower: "I have two kinds of problems, the urgent and the important. The urgent are not important, and the important are never urgent." The Eisenhower Matrix was popularised in the best-selling personal-management book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, by Steven R. Covey (1989). In his book and presentation of the matrix, Covey establishes the fundamental aspects of the matrix and the properties of its components.

In the matrix, the X-axis (vertical) represents the variable of importance and the Y-axis (horizontal) of urgence. There are four resulting quadrants.

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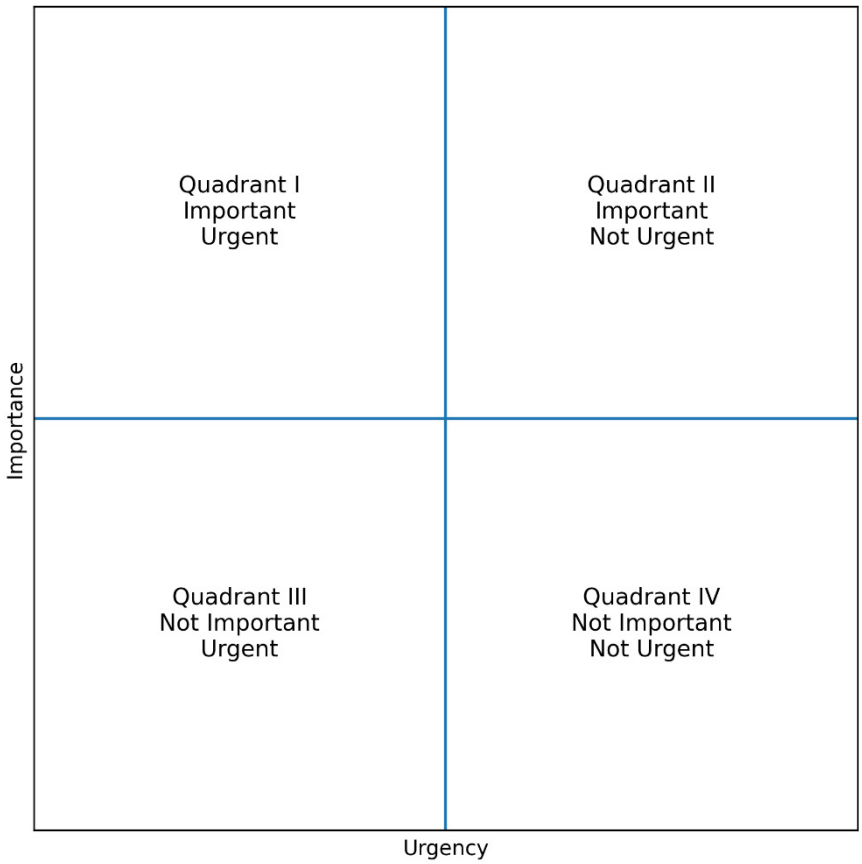

Figure 1. The Eisenhower Matrix, based on Covey (1989, p. 151).

By Covey's definition, "[u]rgent means it requires immediate attention" (1989, p. 150), and he writes that "[u]rgent things act on us." He provides the example of a ringing phone and posits that even if a person had spent many hours preparing for a meeting, that same person might be derailed by the sound of their phone ringing, and almost instinctively respond by picking up the phone. Further, Covey notes that urgent topics typically are visible, "[t]hey press on us; they insist on action" (ibid., p. 151). He notes their popularity with others, presumably on account of this visibility, which results in pressure to complete them. Responding allows an actor the satisfaction of having undertaken the task, of having participated, of having done their part. To reinforce this, Covey ends that urgent items are usually "pleasant, easy, and fun to do" (ibid., p. 151). But, he warns, such items usually lack real importance.

This is because Covey contrasts urgency with importance, which is focused on results. Covey puts the importance of importance on its intersection with a person's "mission", "values", and "high priority goals" (1989, p. 151). Here, a distinction is raised between urgency and importance: items that are urgent usually entail a *reaction*, whereas items that are important usually entail "*initiative*" and "*proactivity*" (ibid., p. 151; emphasis added). The risk is that actors will be drawn by the allure of the quick-fix reward and visibility of responding to urgent items, when actors must have a clear idea of what is important, which is driven by a cultivated vision of results or things one wants to contribute to or impact over time. This causes a dilemma, because resources are finite and require trade-offs.

The United States, despite its status as a global superpower, is constrained. It has limited resources and must choose how and when to allocate those resources. The list of resources that one could enumerate is long, so guardrails must be set. In this discussion of importance versus urgency for priorities of

engagement, the following are selected to be of note: time, money, public approval, and elite tolerance to pressure. These constraints mean that the US government, through its three branches, its political leadership, and its foreign policy establishment, must decide how to manage its resources.

Time includes short-, medium- and long-term. The short term is the amount of time that the US has to reply to a given action, whether that be in response to domestic or international pressure. The medium-term incorporates election and budget cycles as useful benchmarks for policy feedback and pressure. The long-term considers effects of second- and third-order implications that must be considered as an action (or lack of action) develop over time and others respond. While there are benefits to keeping the status quo, or of inaction, there are also issues that might appear to be unimportant but whose neglect results in a long-term sub-optimal situation. This could slowly drain US resources or evolve rapidly to become important and urgent. In either case, complacency or failing to account for the evolution of a situation over time risks higher costs in the end.

Money is the availability of funds and the ability to raise and spend financial resources. Consideration should be given to several elements here. First, the US faces a budget approval process, which impacts policymakers and public opinion. Second, the United States has a growing deficit problem, which introduces political and public opinion constraints. Relatedly, the question of raising more funds through tax policy is a highly contentious domestic policy debate. And finally, on the most basic level, money spent in one area cannot be spent elsewhere: this is a mutually exclusive resource.

Public opinion applies primarily to the US, but it can be widened to include an international audience. Only US citizens can vote their leaders in or out of office, in part based on what they perceive to be a responsible allocation of finite resources in pursuit of US vision and goals. These visions and goals are relative and dependent on the political leaning of the actor or interest group. Therefore, weight is given to US public opinion. Yet, given the media landscape and nature of US power, public opinion can be extended to consider global opinion of countries, leaders, and populations. This factor is also important because much can be done to impact public opinion through reporting from legacy and social media, leaked information, false accounts, scandals, and accusations. Furthermore, Covey himself notes that the deepest, most important work usually receives less attention than the flashy crisis responses, but the general population or outlets that drive popular opinion might, through their own attention reward, incentivise splashy reactivity over deep, meaningful activity.

Elite preferences and tolerance are linked tangentially to public approval, but they are separate components. This is because within decision-making and information spaces, certain individuals will have interests they seek to protect or visions they wish to promote. But even these individuals will face pressure – either from voters or from competing elites. Their tolerance for pressure matters in how hard they can push for a categorisation or a priority.

Each of these constraints – and their interaction – has implications for the model. Because, as Covey notes, the matrix is incumbent upon a vision. But in the US, vision is contested along different fault lines, including between political parties, elites and grassroots movements, and competing interest groups. Furthermore, different actors will have an incentive, either well-intentioned or self-serving, to argue in favour of what they see as the most important elements. Alternatively, actors could share an agreed-upon objective or vision but differ on the means and trade-offs necessary to achieve that shared aim. Finally, visions, and the categorisation of urgence and importance, can evolve with context, information, and timelines.

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The Quadrants in more detail and conceptual development

With the context of constraints and vision contestation in mind, and with the framing of what "Urgent" and "Important" mean in this resource-constraint context, the article now introduces the descriptions of the matrix quadrants in full.

Quadrant I: Important and Urgent

Quadrant I contains items that require attention (urgent) and that contribute to the vision or carry other significance (importance). Covey refers to these as "crises" or "problems" (1989, p. 152). The US response to the September 11 attacks could be used to illustrate this quadrant. The attacks were framed as urgent and existentially important. Decision-makers faced short time windows, incomplete information, and overwhelming public attention. Pressure for an immediate response dominated the policy agenda and media landscape.

Because Quadrant I often responds to loud issues, it is the quadrant marked by attention capture. The risk of functioning for too long in Quadrant I is that urgency becomes the metric of importance. Overuse of Quadrant I can also lead to sunk costs, in which policy makers and politicians continue to follow through on actions taken in the immediate aftermath of urgency and fail to question the longer-term effectiveness of action and resource distribution. At the government level, as items compete for attention and resources, triage must be established to identify, organise, and respond to the most urgent of the urgent. Such a triage system would need resources to establish and weigh the constraints of time, money, public opinion, and elite pressure against vision. In this compressed timeline, opportunities arise for actors to further insert their own interests. Further, the stakes are raised in a crisis, as public or internal government attention is fixated on the issue. In the current age of social media and the Internet, this crisis cycle is exacerbated and relentless. It allows less space to contemplate a vision and plan forward-focused actions.

It is necessary to spend time in Quadrant I occasionally by truly unforeseen or critical items, but in the longer-term, it can lead to burnout, instability, and poor management of resources. In the individual context, Covey warns that people can become consumed by tiny problems that feel important but expand to consume a disproportionate set of resources. Actors might feel tempted to spend a lot of time in Quadrant I, and many do, because it feels satisfying and has the illusion of effectiveness. But if everything is important and urgent, then nothing is.

Quadrant II: Important and Not Urgent

Quadrant II is where the most effective and deep work occurs. Covey lists the tasks within Quadrant II from a personal management perspective, including "building relationships, writing a personal mission statement, long-range planning, exercising, preventive maintenance, preparation" (1989, p. 154). He argues that people who spend most of their time in Quadrant II are effective and are "opportunity-minded" instead of "problem-minded" and that "[t]hey think preventatively" (ibid., p. 154). As a result, Covey contends, such people have fewer crises that require high, inefficient allocation of resources, and they are equipped to deal with emergencies in Quadrant I quickly and move smoothly back to Quadrant II. Such focus and consistency provide the ability to leverage competence.

Within Quadrant II, the US could manoeuvre to spend its resources on pre-emptive or anticipatory actions that underpin the vision of the US. This could mean delegating tasks to allies or intergovernmental organisations, continuing to work to diversify supply chains, or ensuring continuity of defence manufacturing.

Quadrant III: Urgent but Not Important

A corollary to the first two quadrants is that the US ought to spend as few resources as possible in any quadrant that is categorised as unimportant. So Quadrant III begins with a question: How does one decide what is not important? According to whom? Is there a set of objective principles, goals, or norms that can be pointed to? A non-important item would fail to align with broader visions, goals, and objectives – but who defines those? For the individual outlook, Covey (1989) says:

> *There are other people who spend a great deal of time in "urgent, but not important" Quadrant III, thinking they're in Quadrant I. They spend most of their time reacting to things that are urgent, assuming they are also important. But the reality is that the urgency of these matters is often based on the priorities and expectations of others. (p. 152)*

It is useful to pause on this point in the context of the application of the matrix to US government prioritisation. This quadrant requires clarity of vision and objectives to determine what is, in fact, not important. This requires time spent deciding what is important – as in Quadrant II. Because of the prerequisite for a consistent vision, this quadrant is susceptible to interest group influence and infighting.

It is also this quadrant that could serve as a stumbling block for US allies. Building relationships with countries, including allies, could be considered an objective among stakeholders in the US government. But ultimately, the US acts for its citizens and itself first. This might put allies in a difficult position, in which they reason that what is an important (and perhaps also urgent) issue for them ought to, by extension of partnership and alliance, be an issue of importance (and urgency) for the United States. But this is not always true in conceptual or practical application.

Certainly, there are consequences for situations in which the US might ignore or de-prioritise issues deemed "important" by allies. The response to such consequences, including diplomatic fallout, cooling, or divisions, can be categorised into the necessary quadrant depending on the second- and third-order effects. But just as Covey warns in the individual context that "the urgency of these matters is often based on the priorities and expectations of others" (1989, p. 152), so too might the US government be wary of falling into the trap of allowing others' priorities or visions to surpass its own, especially when responding to those priorities and visions consumes finite resources. The practical application is that the US might not share a vision with allies and therefore disagree on categorisation and choose to act differently.

Quadrant IV: Not Important and Not Urgent

This quadrant is a black hole of resource waste. In Covey's model, an actor ought to spend as few resources here as possible to avoid being mired. Applied to the US as a descriptive tool, the difficulty is its practical application, in which differences of opinion – driven by diverse motivations or visions – surface. Stakeholders, including elites, policymakers, or interest groups, can argue for their interpretation or try to sabotage and downgrade competing visions. Entire lobbying firms and political action committees have arisen to pursue these goals and impress upon decision makers precisely why their topic is important and the topics of others are not worth the resource expenditure.

Another difficulty in interpreting Quadrant IV is that while there must be topics that are neither important nor urgent, when asked to name one, reasoning patterns, assumptions, and normative goals emerge, muddling the assertion. This exemplifies contestation over the vision. Numerous personalities have made names (and books) for themselves detailing what they consider to be useless spending. From 2011 to 2014, US Senator Tom Coburn, of Oklahoma, published an annual "Wastebook", which

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were reports that highlighted what he considered to be frivolous government spending; in other words, by his estimation, spending not important and not urgent (DeHaven, 2011). Examples include a National Institutes of Health study on why chimpanzees throw faeces; funding for the National Science Foundation to study mountain lions walking on a treadmill; and a promotional tour for the Alabama Watermelon Queen. The monkeys were studied as a part of motor development and social skills, including communication, language development, and possibly intelligence (Hopkins, Russell and Schaeffer, 2012). The mountain lions were observed walking on a treadmill to better understand their gait, hunting patterns, and energy expenditure in an effort to help with conservation efforts of carnivores, avoid human-animal conflicts and protect pets and livestock (Williams, 2014). The expenses of the Watermelon Queen came out of the US Department of Agriculture's Specialty Crop Block Grant program and were awarded to the Alabama Watermelon Association to promote healthy eating habits, especially in impoverished areas, and promote an important Alabama state crop. One can imagine this was a particularly important initiative for policymakers from Alabama.

These are not hypothetical scenarios: they are real discussions by policy and media personalities that elevate certain expenditures as scandalous or frivolous and shape public perception before a fuller context can emerge. This has consequences for public opinion and allocation of funds. Once a narrative of 'waste' takes hold, it can be politically costly to defend – even if the cited program serves long-term or less visible objectives. And while, with time, explanations can be found, as in the above cases, the attention economy makes it hard to unseat a status quo narrative.

Can one reason that a topic or issue is important because resources have been allocated to it? Or can one assume that some things are objectively not important but are funded anyway through the intervention of interest groups, the need to allocate leftover funds, or for other reasons? Quadrant IV is politically charged and highly contested.

More conceptual development: US allocation of finite resources

A best allocation" of US government resources does exist. But pinning it down is similar to the exercise that there is a way to approach a task like grocery shopping in a total rational spending-to-nutrition manner: the shopper must simply consider the amount of money they have, for example, US$150 (a constraint) and undertake the thankless task of weighing the benefits and trade-offs of every item in the grocery store based on price and nutrition and arrive at the best possible allocation of their US$150. As secondary factors, the hapless shopper might bring into consideration utility, pleasure, and preference. But – oh dear – by the time this is done, the grocery store has long since closed for the day, because to arrive at such a rational division is an impossible task. The perfect allocation is conceptually imaginable but practically unattainable.

The same holds for a perfect US policy prioritisation and resource allocation. Even if an optimal distribution of resources exists in theory, the best that can be done is for it to be approximated despite incomplete information and amidst competing visions. To complicate this, political leaders, bureaucratic actors, interest groups, voters, and external stakeholders may put forward overlapping or competing objectives – sometimes openly, and other times strategically hidden. They can advance arguments to advocate for why their priorities are important, urgent, or both. The matrix is analytically useful because it helps structure how these categorisations are constructed and could be defended, regardless of whether underlying visions diverge or align.

On the foreign policy stage, the "important and urgent" quadrant often appears as a manifestation of US power. These are moments when immediate action is expected because the core interests of the

US or allies are directly threatened. Such moments might come from miscalculations, neglect of long-term developments, or unforeseen adversarial action. These moments also reveal how prior judgments about what was "not urgent" or "not important" can prove to be miscalculations over time. Here, the US must be wary of entrenched interests, preconceived notions and assumptions about where to place resources to hedge and counter truly "important and urgent" crises. Failing to properly interrogate or update outdated models can lead to oversight. Such oversight can result in events that happen off the radar of resource allocation.

By contrast, the "important but not urgent" Quadrant II reflects preparation and hedging. This involves taking actions that work to prevent urgency later. Strategic planning helps the US to achieve domestic and foreign policy goals. Such work is a combination of planning, alliance maintenance, institutional coordination, and communication designed to prevent crises from emerging. This work is quieter, less visible, and at times more technical, but it is the foundation of long-term stability. Yet, from a public opinion and attention economy perspective, a failure to account for communication – whether within the political and bureaucratic spheres, or with the domestic public, or world leaders, or the global public at large – can have negative consequences. While the quiet work of non-urgent policy might be essential to realising the US's visions and goals, poor communication of this work and its strategic importance might leave public opinion floundering. This gives an opening for opponents (ranging from domestic political opposition to global adversaries) to take control of the narrative and recast diligent work as frivolous. In an attention economy, sustained preventive action can be difficult for a non-expert to understand; it can be easily recast as inactivity or waste or it can be sacrificed for political gain.

The remaining Quadrant III, urgent but not important, and Quadrant IV, neither urgent nor important, are particularly contested. What appears unimportant to one administration, electorate, or elite group might be central to another. Issues can move between categories as narratives shift, information evolves, or external actors apply pressure. No one wants their topic to be relegated to being unimportant. The difference between the two final quadrants is the question of urgency. An issue or event has urgency when – despite being deemed "not important" to the US – it is at risk of becoming too urgent to ignore. At times, the US, through its political leaders and policymakers, might downplay or ignore developments that are seemingly "unimportant" or "not urgent" but that carry a risk of escalation. This introduces questions of information flow, internal communication, and the ability to be candid. It also involves questions about whether policymakers have access to good, trustworthy information, and whether they care to maintain or establish such access. Relatedly, policymakers and political leaders must have the courage and integrity to maintain a position or own up to a mistake and change course with new information or context. On foreign policy interactions, there are parts of the world that onlookers might argue the US has deprioritised at its own peril.

Additional elements to consider: Pressure of the constraints

Given the nature of human error and the difficult process of striking a balance right between vision, policy, and action, it is probable that with all the time, money, and public goodwill in the world, well-intentioned, diligent policymakers might not arrive at a perfect allocation. Even a well-intentioned allocation might not be followed in practice. Mistakes are made, information is misinterpreted, individual actions weigh in, or chance intervenes.

But there are times of particular pressure that make the stakes higher. Electoral cycles and the attention economy shape prioritisation and bring together constraining factors quite clearly. During an election cycle, candidates are highly impacted by how the public sees an issue. This includes where the public ranks that issue on their priority list and whether they see (individual and aggregate) that issue as

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plausible to contribute to an enduring vision of the US. Public perception and reaction to developments, which can be amplified through intense media coverage, can cause topics or actions to shift relative to others. In addition to this, social media personalities, commentators, and digital influencers actively construct narratives about what voters ought to care about. This can bring heightened attention to issues deemed "urgent" and can lead to voters, vis-à-vis media personalities, assigning importance to specific issues. This means that unknown – even highly niche – issues can be cast as a crisis or shortcoming. Political leaders and elites are aware of this dynamic. If the media fixates on an issue, a certain domestic audience will fixate on that issue, and the voters will expect action from their leaders. It can also work the other way around, in which voters push an issue to the forefront of the media cycle and causes it to have media publicity and therefore widens the attention paid by voters and then the expected attention from political leaders. This can bring voters and policymakers to hold up or discard issues regardless of any objective strategic importance. Some use it to their advantage, and others flail, or try to ignore it.

Furthermore, a change in administration might bring significant changes to priorities, but the underlying logic of prioritisation remains as leaders continue to operate within finite time, money, and political capital of the popular opinion and elite tolerance. That is because while qualifiers of "important" (or "not important") and "urgent" (or "not urgent") might shift and would need to be updated, the reasoning process itself would remain the same. Those in power would continue to assess how to allocate finite resources to assure to US of its domestic position and global standing in line with larger priorities. In an extreme scenario, the guiding value and principle might change, which could result in a substantial shift, but the basic system of reasoning would remain the same. This article has stuck to domestic constraints, but there are certainly additional forces that exist outside the US, like global economic trends, alliance dynamics, transnational media flows, and shifting expectations of US leadership. These second-order constraints interact with domestic pressures and constraints and complicate prioritisation.

Conclusion

There is value in setting forth a conceptual tool to consider the ways in which the US assesses prioritisation of issues across importance and urgency under conditions of constraint, and whether this sticks to a consistent vision or if it changes. If there are changes, it is important to ferret out the source of the shift and whether it is a response to constraints, location of power, or something else. In doing so, the matrix shows the political, institutional, and communication elements that interact with US policy. It allows observers to trace policy and reflect on its position within the matrix based on the actor.

When a particular US policy choice occurs – especially one that appears costly or controversial – its very occurrence shows that it was treated as important within the prevailing allocation structure, at least by those in power. Even if observers disagree with the action, placing it within the paradigm encourages a useful set of questions: What or whose broader objective/interests does this serve? Is it operationalising a longer-term strategy? Hindering it? Does it reflect electoral incentives, management of alliances, bureaucratic needs, or a shifting threat perception?

Rather than beginning from a normative judgment, the framework invites analytical inquiry as to why an issue came to occupy its position within the matrix, and who is aligning with or contesting the action, its resource allocation, and underlying vision. Methods to establish importance could rely on observation of who controls which policies (domestic and foreign policy), who is appointed where; allocation of funds; political will in the legislative or executive branches; and topics mentioned in party platforms or conventions (compared with action).

This article and the matrix do not presume to prescribe what the US should prioritise; instead, they help clarify how prioritisation happens. The matrix provides a structure for helping observers to reflect on how action or inaction might be categorised and explained with respect to change in vision, response to constraints, influence, and attention dynamics – to make order from what can sometimes feel like chaos.

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