



Assumption #3: US leadership is indispensable to the health of the global order

NOVEMBER 3, 2021

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SUMMARY

Experts often assume that US power is essential to global peace and prosperity. They believe that an international order dominated by a single state is more stable and secure than a multipolar order with many capable actors and tend to see the United States as ideally suited to be that single dominant power. However, such claims of US indispensability often overstate the United States' power and influence, while simultaneously undervaluing the contributions of others, including key US allies and partners. Although the United States did play a critical role in establishing many international institutions and defining acceptable norms of behavior since World War II, other global actors have helped to create a resilient international system that delivers tangible benefits to many. US policy should aim to strengthen and deepen that order in which the United States remains a very important actor, but no longer an indispensable one. A realistic assessment of the United States' power, and a realization that it will be impossible to restore the United States to its formerly dominant position, should inform how US policy makers exercise that influence globally. On balance, Americans should welcome and encourage others, especially US allies and partners, to play a more active role in regional and global affairs.

Several policy implications flow from this:

- The United States should restrain its impulse to wield its military and economic power in a coercive way and do so only when essential to advancing its security

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The **New American Engagement Initiative** challenges prevailing assumptions governing US foreign policy and helps policymakers manage risks, set priorities, and allocate resources wisely and efficiently. The United States confronts a range of national security challenges, but the marketplace of ideas defines these too expansively, fails to prioritize them effectively, and limits the range of options for addressing them. Unconventional thinking is needed to help Americans put dangers into perspective, and encourage them to embrace global engagement through diplomacy, trade, and mutually beneficial cultural exchange.

The New American Engagement Initiative's Assumptions Testing series explores some of the foundational beliefs that guide US foreign policy. By questioning the conventional wisdom, and exposing these assumptions to close scrutiny, the series aims to open a new seam in the policy debate and generate a more lively, fruitful, and effective strategic dialogue—one that is capable of producing a sustainable, nonpartisan strategy for US global engagement.

and prosperity. Restrictions on trade, in particular, are injurious to US prosperity, and inconsistent with US values of openness, and policy makers should, therefore, impose them only when necessary to safeguard US security.

- When addressing global or regional challenges, the United States should expect to have a seat at the table, but not always at the head of the table. Americans should not presume to be the primary actor in every region of the world.
- US power is finite, and strategic objectives must be aligned to available resources. US policy makers should prioritize, act with humility, take account of other states' legitimate interests, and be prepared to compromise.
- US officials should recommit themselves to upholding the principles and norms that are broadly conducive to global peace and prosperity—and expect to face resistance if they fail to do so.

INTRODUCTION

For several decades, policy makers have organized US foreign policy around the presumption that US leadership within a network of political, economic, financial, and security institutions is critical to global peace and prosperity.

In the cover letter to his 2015 National Security Strategy, then US president Barack Obama asserted: “Strong and sustained American leadership is essential to a rules-based international order that promotes global security and prosperity as well as the dignity and human rights of all peoples.”¹

In a rare moment of agreement, Obama's successor, Donald J. Trump, echoed these sentiments in his own National Security Strategy. “The whole world is lifted by America's renewal and the reemergence of American leadership,” Trump explained.²

As a candidate for the presidency, Joseph R. Biden, Jr., pledged to “once more harness [US] power and rally the free world to

meet the challenges facing the world today.” In an article in *Foreign Affairs*, he wrote: “It falls to the United States to lead the way. No other nation has that capacity. No other nation is built on that idea.”³

Once he won that highest office, Biden surrounded himself with people who agreed, including National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan. The United States had to find a way to restore itself as a dominant global actor, Sullivan had written in 2018, because “The United States is the only country with the sufficient reach and resolve, and...a historical willingness to trade short-term benefits for long-term influence.”⁴

And senior Biden administration officials have been equally clear in predicting what would occur if the United States were to adopt a different approach. “When the US pulls back, one of two things is likely to happen,” Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken explained. “Either another country tries to take our place, but not in a way that advances our interest and values or maybe just as bad, no one steps up and then we get chaos and all the dangers that creates.”⁵

Many other foreign policy elites agree. “The United States is uniquely positioned,” explain the Atlantic Council's Ash Jain and Matthew Kroenig, “to unite the democracies behind...an adapted rules-based system.”⁶

But what of other states, including key US allies and partners? To be sure, the United States played a critical role at several key junctures in the twentieth century, including at the end of World War II, and again after the collapse of the Soviet Union, as will be discussed below. At issue here is the extent to which US power remains essential to continuing relative peace and prosperity, and, more importantly, what plausible alternatives exist and could be implemented.

The United States is unquestionably a key player on the world stage, and wise policy making could maintain its place as a global leader. But the unipolar moment is over, and a single-minded effort to restore US military dominance could engender resentment among those, including US allies and partners, who

1 The White House, *National Security Strategy*, February 2015, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy_2.pdf.

2 The White House, *National Security Strategy*, December 2017, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

3 Joseph R. Biden, Jr., “Why America Must Lead Again: Rescuing U.S. Foreign Policy After Trump,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again>.

4 Jake Sullivan, “The World After Trump: How the System Can Endure,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2018-03-05/world-after-trump>.

5 U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, “A Foreign Policy for the American People,” speech at the State Department, Washington, D.C., March 3, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/a-foreign-policy-for-the-american-people/>.

6 Ash Jain and Matthew Kroenig, *Present at the re-creation: A global strategy for revitalizing, adapting, and defending a rules-based international system*, Atlantic Council, October 30, 2019, 33, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/present-at-the-re-creation/>.

are also working to maintain global peace and prosperity.⁷ Put differently, attempts to restore US primacy on the assumption that it is indispensable to global order could prove counterproductive.

Some foreign policy experts are mindful of these risks, and willing to consider a multilateral approach, so long as the United States retains its dominant position.⁸ Committed unilateralists are less concerned about possible resistance, believing that the sheer power imbalance will compel others to go along with US preferences.⁹ But both sides of this debate would agree with the core assertion by the Brookings Institution's Robert Kagan in a recent *Foreign Affairs* article. "The only hope for preserving liberalism at home and abroad is the maintenance of a world order conducive to liberalism," Kagan wrote, "and the only power capable of upholding such an order is the United States."¹⁰

THE ROOTS OF THE INDISPENSABILITY MYTH

To test Kagan's claim, it is necessary to briefly review the current order's roots, which extend as far back as the early 1940s, even before the United States entered World War II.¹¹ After the war, US officials moved quickly to establish a network of multilateral institutions that were open to all sovereign states that met each organization's criteria for membership (e.g., the United Nations, International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and the World Trade Organization), and US alliances with certain states formed mostly during the Cold

War, but retained after the Soviet Union's collapse (e.g., US-South Korea, US-Japan, Rio Pact), and, in the case of NATO, significantly expanded.

The alliances, in particular, depend upon the deterrent value of US military power—but US global dominance allegedly confers benefits even to those not formally ensconced within the US alliance network. Hegemonic stability theory holds that a world ordered around a single overpowering state will be more peaceful and prosperous than a world comprised of many nation-states possessing similar capabilities. By providing security in the regions, the global superpower convinces states to forego costly arms races or risky wars. This, in turn, generates trust among potential adversaries, allowing them to engage in mutually beneficial trade or to otherwise jointly address common problems.¹²

"Without alliances or other institutions helping provide reassurance," explains Princeton University's Robert O. Keohane, "uncertainty generates security dilemmas, with states eyeing one another suspiciously." By contrast, leadership can overcome the perennial collective action problem. Indeed, Keohane explains, such "leadership is...essential in order to promote cooperation, which is in turn necessary to solve global problems ranging from war to climate change."¹³

Hegemonic stability theory could apply to any state capable of dominating a major region or, even more rarely, the entire globe. The British Empire of the nineteenth century came closest. That particular hegemon was really only liberal in the economic

7 A Pew Research Center poll in 2017 found that respondents in thirty-eight countries viewed "US power and influence" as a greater threat than Russia or China's. See Jacob Poushter and Dorothy Manevich, "Globally, People Point to ISIS and Climate Change as Leading Security Threats," Pew Research Center, August 1, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2017/08/01/globally-people-point-to-isis-and-climate-change-as-leading-security-threats/>. A 2021 survey in more than fifty countries by Latana and the Alliance of Democracies revealed considerable concern about the threat posed to democracy by the United States. Such sentiment was particularly strong in Europe and among US allies. See Rob Schmitz, "Poll: Much of the World Sees the U.S. as a Threat to Democracy," NPR, May 5, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/05/05/993754397/poll-much-of-the-world-sees-the-u-s-as-a-threat-to-democracy>.

8 See, for example, Rebecca Lissner and Mira Rapp-Hooper, *An Open World: How America Can Win the Contest for Twenty-First Century Order* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020); Thomas J. Wright, *All Measures Short of War: The Contest for the Twenty-First Century and the Future of American Power* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020); Michael O'Hanlon, *The Art of War in an Age of Peace: US Grand Strategy and Resolute Restraint* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021).

9 Perhaps the most iconic statement along these lines came from the man who coined the phrase "unipolar moment." Charles Krauthammer dismissed Germany and Japan, for example, as "second-rank powers" which had "generally hidden under the table" at the first sign of trouble. See Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment," *Foreign Affairs*, 70:1 (1990/1991), 24. It is rare to find such openly expressed disdain for US allies and partners today, but many retain Krauthammer's skepticism of other countries' contributions to sustaining the global order. See, for example, H.R. McMaster, *Battlefields: The Fight to Defend the Free World* (HarperCollins, 2020); Colin Dueck, *Age of Iron: On Conservative Nationalism* (Oxford University Press, 2019); Hal Brands, *American Grand Strategy in the Age of Trump* (Brookings Institution Press, 2018).

10 Robert Kagan, "A Superpower, Like it or Not: Why Americans Must Accept Their Global Role," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-02-16/superpower-it-or-not>.

11 See, for example, Stephen Wertheim, *Tomorrow, the World: The Birth of U.S. Global Supremacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020).

12 For a useful short summary of hegemonic stability theory, especially as it pertains to economic openness, see Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, "The Nature and Sources of Liberal International Order," *Review of International Studies* 25 (2) (1999): 190, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210599001795>. See also Robert Gilpin, "The Politics of Transnational Economic Relations," *International Organization* 25 (3) (Summer 1971): 389–419, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300026229>; Charles P. Kindleberger, *The World in Depression: 1929-1939* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1973).

13 Robert O. Keohane, "Hegemony and After: Knowns and Unknowns in the Debate over Decline," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2012, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/review-essay/2012-07-01/hegemony-and-after>.

sense, however; it had little regard for the political rights of most non-British subjects, and frequently waged war against those who stepped out of line. The United States' uniquely liberal character is supposedly far more conducive to a truly *liberal* international order, one that respects human rights and self-determination, and that has a built-in presumption against the use of force.

Such an order is critically rules-based. Any hegemon will always be tempted by the Athenians' famous dictum ("The strong do what they will; the weak suffer what they must"), but a *liberal* hegemon is expected to hold itself to a higher standard, consciously limiting the use of its power, even if it anticipates little opposition. According to this assumption, a liberal hegemon within a liberal world order will privilege the system over self, whenever it is feasible to do so, and the order it creates will be open to all who abide by the rules.¹⁴

The magnanimous hegemon is also expected to be farsighted and wise, espying potential dangers even before they materialize, and generally trusted to have a suitable plan for addressing them if they do.¹⁵ The combination of compassion and competence is less likely to engender resistance from others, who will see the value in trusting the hegemon rather than defying it.

This interlocking set of assumptions about a liberal, rules-based order, and the US role within that order, help to explain the underlying logic of US foreign policy since the end of the Cold War. US officials have sought to block any potential challengers who failed to appreciate the benefits of the US-led order. The primary object of US foreign policy, as a famous Defense Department planning document explained in 1992, was to "prevent the re-emergence of a new rival" capable of

challenging US power in any vital area and thus discourage all others from "even aspiring to a larger regional or global role."¹⁶

Many US leaders, as well as the leaders of US allies, believe that the United States is ideally situated to play the role of the benevolent global hegemon, even if they occasionally concede that the hegemon will retain certain privileges for itself.¹⁷ However, all should know that orders dominated by a single state are neither purely hierarchical nor uniquely durable.¹⁸ They are sustained by a combination of bargains struck and compromises made, even by the most powerful actor in the system. And they depend upon strong domestic support. Indeed, the hegemon may create the very conditions that produce challengers to its rule, by enabling poor and weak countries to grow richer and stronger. This dynamic, in turn, may erode support within the dominant power's domestic base. As Keohane concedes, "leadership is costly and states other than the leader have incentives to shirk their responsibilities. This means that the burdens borne by the leader are likely to increase over time and that without efforts to encourage sharing of the load, leadership may not be sustainable."¹⁹

The lackluster support among Americans for very ambitious foreign policy aims has been apparent for some time. For now, however, most defenders of the status quo generally believe that US public opinion can be molded and shaped by effective and determined political leadership—or, if that fails, must simply be ignored. Americans, admits Kagan, "do not see themselves as the primary defender of a certain kind of world order; they have never embraced that 'indispensable' role." But it falls to the Biden administration, Kagan explains, "to tell Americans that there is no escape from global responsibility." According to Kagan, US officials cannot allow themselves to be distracted

14 On the characteristics of the liberal system, see especially Deudney and Ikenberry, "The Nature and Sources." For a recent critique, see Amitav Acharya, "Hegemony and Diversity in the 'Liberal International Order': Theory and Reality," *E-International Relations*, January 14, 2020, <https://www.e-ir.info/2020/01/14/hegemony-and-diversity-in-the-liberal-international-order-theory-and-reality/>.

15 As Madeleine K. Albright explained in 1998, Americans "stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future, and we see the danger here to all of us." See Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright's interview on NBC-TV's *The Today Show* with Matt Lauer, Columbus, Ohio, February 19, 1998, <https://1997-2001.state.gov/statements/1998/980219a.html>.

16 Quoted in Patrick E. Tyler, "U.S. Strategy Plan Calls for Insuring No Rivals Develop," *New York Times*, March 8, 1992, <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/03/08/world/us-strategy-plan-calls-for-insuring-no-rivals-develop.html>. See also *New York Times*, "Excerpts from Pentagon's Plan: 'Prevent the Re-Emergence of a New Rival,'" March 8, 1992, <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/03/08/world/excerpts-from-pentagon-s-plan-prevent-the-re-emergence-of-a-new-rival.html>. This document was unique in that it stated categorically what most US leaders preferred to leave unsaid. It likely was never intended for wide distribution, and the George H.W. Bush administration distanced itself from the report when it was made public. See James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 209–215; Christopher Preble, *The Power Problem: How American Military Dominance Makes Us Less Safe, Less Prosperous, and Less Free* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 28–30.

17 See Michael Mastanduno, "System Maker and Privilege Taker: US Power and the International Political Economy," *World Politics* 61 (1) (2009): 121–154, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887109000057>.

18 Some scholars, notably Nuno P. Monteiro, even disputed the claim that a system dominated by a single state is inherently peaceful. See Nuno P. Monteiro, "Unrest Assured: Why Unipolarity Is Not Peaceful," *International Security*, 36 (3) (Winter 2011/2012): 9–40, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00064.

19 Keohane, "Hegemony and After."

by domestic objections, given the United States' supposed centrality to global peace and prosperity.²⁰

THE PROBLEM WITH THE ASSUMPTION OF US INDISPENSABILITY

US role simultaneously overdetermined and underplayed

These several claims—especially that world order depends upon a single power to enforce the rules, and that the United States is ideally situated to perform this role, notwithstanding the American people's desire to focus more attention at home—deserve scrutiny. The structure and pattern of international relations—an order, if you will—is constructed and reconstructed by the behavior of many actors (e.g., large states and small states, and governments and the private sector). These interactions produce norms of behavior; at times the norms are formalized and codified. The United States has often been a leader in establishing and enforcing these norms. On some occasions, however, other actors have followed the order's key precepts more carefully than the United States.

And, as world orders go, the current one has been remarkably successful. The gains of the latter half of the twentieth century, and the first two decades of the twenty-first century, have been both substantial and far-reaching. Even the world's poorest are living longer, healthier, and more fulfilling lives. Some forms of violence have declined, human rights have improved, and more people today have a say over how they are governed, and even who governs them—though the erosion of political rights in recent years, even in established democracies, is a cause for concern.²¹

Most of these gains have endured. Even in the midst of the worst global pandemic in over a century, in which hundreds of millions were forced to shelter in place and entire industries struggled

to survive during the extended lockdown, the world did not witness a dramatic increase in violent conflict (as some warned it might).²² Nor was there a decisive turn against trade, in principle. Demand stalled as people feared for their lives and their livelihoods. Restrictions on the movement of people and goods to slow the spread of the disease led to sometimes protracted supply disruptions. Nevertheless, the volume of goods traded internationally remained quite high in 2020 and early 2021, and many analysts expect that global economic activity will rebound to pre-pandemic levels by the end of 2022.²³

The exception to these favorable trends might be rising illiberalism and the erosion of human rights. Freedom House in 2021, for example, reported that democracy has been in decline for fifteen consecutive years.²⁴ These circumstances loosely correlate to a period of the United States' declining relative power, but that does not mean that a rising United States would have averted them. Many factors gave rise to the growth of democracy in the post-World War II era, including decolonization, and the United States cannot create the conditions that allow democracy to flourish—those have to come from within societies.

The same thing can be said for the claim that US global dominance has *caused* the relative peace and prosperity since World War II. The whole notion of a single indispensable world leader often derives from unique historical moments; though these moments have defined expectations of how international relations should function in perpetuity, it was not realistic to think that the circumstances of the immediate post-World War II era, or even the decade after the end of the Cold War, would persist. To be sure, US power and influence was a factor, and likely the leading factor, in the earliest days of the order. But while more people around the world embrace nonviolence, favor expanded trade, and prefer dialogue over armed conflict than before the United States became the world's superpower,

20 Kagan, "A Superpower, Like It or Not."

21 HumanProgress, <https://www.humanprogress.org/>. The decline of violence includes very low incidences of intrastate war, and an associated decline in battle deaths. Some of this is attributable to dramatic improvements in medical care. See Tanisha M. Fazal, "Dead Wrong? Battle Deaths, Military Medicine, and Exaggerated Reports of War's Demise," *International Security*, 39 (1) (Summer 2014): 95–125, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00166. On the other hand, civil wars and nonstate violence is on the rise. See Uppsala Conflict Data Program, <https://ucdp.uu.se/>.

22 See Rachel Brown, Heather Hurlburt, and Alexandra Stark, "How the Coronavirus Sows Civil Conflict: Pandemics Don't Bring People Together—Sometimes, They Pull Societies Apart," *Foreign Affairs*, June 6, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2020-06-06/how-coronavirus-sows-civil-conflict>; David Kampf, "How COVID-19 Could Increase the Risk of War," *World Politics Review*, June 16, 2020, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/insights/28843/how-covid-19-could-increase-the-risk-of-war>; Colin H. Kahl and Ariana Berengaut, "Aftershocks: The Coronavirus Pandemic and the New World Disorder," *War on the Rocks*, April 10, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/04/aftershocks-the-coronavirus-pandemic-and-the-new-world-disorder/>. Others predicted that COVID-19 would lead to less war. See, for example, Barry R. Posen, "Do Pandemics Promote Peace?: Why Sickness Slows the March to War," *Foreign Affairs*, April 23, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2020-04-23/do-pandemics-promote-peace>. The short war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which occurred in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, does not appear to have been exacerbated by the disease.

23 Kosuke Takami, "China powers global trade boom but COVID still looms: WTO," *Nikkei Asia*, April 2, 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Economy/Trade/China-powers-global-trade-boom-but-COVID-still-looms-WTO>.

24 Sarah Repucci and Amy Slipowitz, *Freedom in the World 2021: Democracy Under Siege*, Freedom House, 2021, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2021/democracy-under-siege>. See also *Democracy Index 2020. In sickness and in health?* Economist Intelligence Unit, 2020, <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2020/>, 3–8.

many of those trends predated US dominance, and were buttressed by other developments that the United States did not—and does not—control.

Peace

There are multiple explanations for the absence of great-power war in the post-World War II era, and the mere fact that US dominance coincides with that period of relative peace does not by itself prove that the United States was the cause. Indeed, human beings have been turning away from violence for generations.

Skepticism toward organized violence and opposition to warfare dates to the late 1800s and accelerated after World War I.²⁵ The United States has sometimes been at the forefront of these efforts. The Washington Naval Conference, a gathering of the world's largest naval powers held between 1921 and 1922, for example, reined in the enormous expense of the weapons of mass destruction of that era. In a similar vein, US officials have helped broker an end to conflicts, ranging from the Russo-Japanese War to the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland. And Americans, either as individuals or in an official capacity, have often been recognized as advocates for peace. The Nobel Peace Prize has been awarded to twenty-one Americans.²⁶

But, on other occasions, the United States has engaged in military action that defied, either tacitly or explicitly, the norms of nonviolence enshrined in the United Nations (UN) Charter. Beyond the obvious cases of the wars in Vietnam and Iraq, other major operations, such as the bombing campaign against Serbia in 1999, were carried out without any UN Security Council (UNSC) authorization, while the regime-change operation in Libya in 2011 clearly exceeded the UNSC's mandate that was limited to halting attacks on civilians. The United States ignored an International Court of Justice ruling regarding its mining of Nicaragua's harbors in 1986 and has carried out numerous

extrajudicial killings over the twenty-years-long Global War on Terrorism.²⁷

But while the United States has sometimes waged war or violated others' sovereignty, most countries do not exhibit these same impulses. And norms alone cannot explain the decline in organized violence since the end of World War II. Nuclear weapons matter, too. Since the 1960s, when multiple states came into possession of deliverable thermonuclear devices, they and others have been compelled to consider the possibility that a conventional war could escalate into an earth-ending conflagration. By substantially raising the cost of conflict, nuclear weapons have made war less likely. We do not know how much less likely, but few have tested the proposition.²⁸

Deterrence, once thought to be fragile and delicate, might actually be quite robust and durable. States with a reliable nuclear force, one that is not in danger of being incapacitated during a surprise attack, are less fearful of conquest than those who lack such weapons. Indeed, North Korea's leaders claim that their possession of nuclear weapons has deterred the United States and others from attacking it, whereas Libya's decision to dismantle its nuclear program in the mid-2000s (admittedly in a very rudimentary state) left it with nothing to deter a US-led regime-change war less than a decade later.²⁹

The increased precision and lethality of conventional weapons, too, could also create an environment less conducive to war, to the extent that these technologies deter would-be aggressors from believing that they can secure major gains at an acceptable cost. And by privileging the defense over the offense, new technologies could act to preserve the relatively peaceful and prosperous status quo—if status quo states, including especially US allies and partners, adapt their defense doctrines accordingly.³⁰ Revisionist powers, including countries which seek to overturn political systems within given states, or disrupt long-established patterns of diplomacy and

25 See Oona A. Hathaway and Scott J. Shapiro, *The Internationalists: How a Radical Plan to Outlaw War Remade the World* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017); John Mueller, *The Stupidity of War: American Foreign Policy and the Case for Complacency* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 4–12.

26 Sarah Gibbens and *National Journal*, “Who Are the American Recipients of the Nobel Peace Prize?” October 9, 2015, *Atlantic*, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/10/who-are-the-american-recipients-of-the-nobel-peace-prize/447924/>.

27 Patrick Porter, *A World Imagined: Nostalgia and Liberal Order*, *Cato Institute*, Policy Analysis no. 843, June 5, 2018, <https://www.cato.org/policy-analysis/world-imagined-nostalgia-liberal-order#>.

28 Nuclear-armed states have attacked states that lacked such weapons. For example, Russia attacked Georgia and Ukraine, and the United States attacked Serbia, Iraq, and Libya. And nuclear-armed Pakistan and India have engaged in border skirmishes. The attack on nuclear-armed Israel by a coalition of Arab states led by Egypt and Syria in 1973 might be a special case. Israel has never formally acknowledged that it possesses nuclear weapons, and the secrecy surrounding its program—especially in its very early stages—may have reduced its deterrent value.

29 Elizabeth N. Saunders, “This is why North Korea reacted so strongly to Bolton's mention of the ‘Libya model,’” *Washington Post*, May 17, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/05/17/this-is-why-north-korea-reacted-so-strongly-to-boltons-mention-of-the-libya-model/>.

30 See, especially, Eugene Gholz, Benjamin Friedman, and Enea Gjoza, “Defensive Defense: A Better Way to Protect US Allies in Asia,” *Washington Quarterly*, 42 (4): 171–189, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2019.1693103>; T.X. Hammes, “Defending Europe: How Converging Technology Strengthens Small Powers,” *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies*, 2 (1): 20–29, <http://doi.org/10.31374/sjms.24>.

trade in particular regions, must contend with how these new technologies complicate their ambitions.

Other factors, independent of these important technological innovations, must also be considered to explain the key characteristics of the current international order. Since the end of World War II, US leaders have often celebrated the benefits of peace over war. But the trauma of both world wars could have produced a similar result.³¹

Indeed, scholars have traced the decline of all forms of violence over several centuries, and credit a range of factors, from Montesquieu's *doux commerce* (gentle commerce) to a growing appreciation for the rights of others, acquired through literature and the arts. The benefits of peace exceed those of war.³²

The norms enshrined in the UN Charter, including respect for the sovereign rights of others, and a prohibition on the use of force except in self-defense, are more widely adhered to than many people realize. The world reacts harshly to those who disobey, and generally does not need to be told to behave by a disapproving Uncle Sam. The Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan, Saddam Hussein's attempted annexation of Kuwait, and Vladimir Putin's seizure of Crimea, all elicited strong international condemnation—and even harsh punishment, ranging from economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation to retaliatory military action.

The United States sometimes helps to coordinate international responses to aggression and illegal annexation, but not consistently. The Trump administration, for example, granted *de facto* recognition of Morocco's claims to Western Sahara, a decision that the Biden administration has not yet reversed.³³ Other illegal annexations that the US government has allowed to stand include Turkey's seizure of lands in northern Cyprus and Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Golan Heights. But the rest of the world has not followed the US lead. The

European Court of Human Rights and UN High Commissioner for Human Rights have both handed down adverse rulings against Turkey, and numerous NGOs and international bodies have criticized Israel's mistreatment of Palestinians and failure to abide by international law.³⁴

The United States, too, has incurred the ire of global public opinion when it is seen as transgressing essential precepts of the modern rules-based international order. Favorable attitudes toward the United States declined during Trump's presidency—e.g., 31 percent favorable in France and 26 percent in Germany—but the Pew Research Center found that that was merely an acceleration of a downward-sloping trend going back more than two decades. The previous low point occurred in March 2003 at the onset of the US invasion of Iraq (34 percent in Italy, 31 percent in France, 25 percent in Germany, and a stunning 14 percent favorable rating for the United States in Spain).³⁵ Indeed, it would be hard to exaggerate the harmful effects that the US war in Iraq had on the nation's international reputation.

To be sure, public opinion ebbs and flows, but the long-term trend in many countries, including especially key US allies, shows that favorable attitudes toward the United States have mostly declined over time.³⁶ This has implications for another area where US policy once led the world, but where today it is often following the lead set by others: respect for democracy and human rights.

Democracy and Human Rights

As noted above, one of the more disappointing trends of the last fifteen years has been the apparent erosion of democracy and human rights. According to Freedom House, “nearly 75 percent of the world's population lived in a country that faced [democratic] deterioration” in 2021. These setbacks have even occurred in established democracies, and close US allies and partners, including Hungary, Mexico, and Turkey. Even the

31 And, tragically, the United States' own struggles in the wars that it has initiated over the last quarter century may now serve as an additional and useful warning to others.

32 See, for example, Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York: Viking, 2011).

33 Barak Ravid, “Scoop: Biden won't reverse Trump's Western Sahara move, U.S. tells Morocco,” *Axios*, April 30, 2021, <https://www.axios.com/biden-keep-trump-western-sahara-recognition-morocco-349f187f-bfe7-444b-a4e2-437045ae5dcf.html>.

34 In May 2021, for example, Ireland's parliament voted to condemn the “*de facto* annexation” of Palestinian lands. See Oliver Holmes, Rory Carroll, and Peter Beaumont, “Ireland condemns ‘*de facto* annexation’ of Palestinian land by Israel,” *Guardian*, May 27, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/26/ireland-israel-de-facto-annexation-palestinian-land>.

35 Richard Wike, Janell Fetterolf, and Mara Mordecai, “U.S. Image Plummets Internationally as Most Say Country Has Handled Coronavirus Badly,” Pew Research Center, September 15, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/09/15/us-image-plummets-internationally-as-most-say-country-has-handled-coronavirus-badly/>.

36 See Mark Hannah and Caroline Gray, *Democracy in Disarray: How the World Sees the U.S. and Its Example*, Eurasia Group Foundation, May 2021, <http://egfound.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Modeling-Democracy.pdf>; James Dobbins, Gabrielle Tarini, and Ali Wyne, *The Lost Generation in American Foreign Policy: How American Influence Has Declined, and What Can Be Done About It*, RAND Corporation, 2020, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA232-1.html>.

United States is counted among the twenty-five countries that suffered the largest decline in democracy from 2010 to 2020.³⁷

But it would be a mistake to blame US relative decline for the democratic backsliding of the last decade. After all, while the United States has often encouraged the spread of democracy globally, it has also occasionally thwarted it, either by overthrowing or undermining elected governments, or colluding with autocratic regimes to put down pro-democracy movements. Even US allies and partners have been subjected to US interventions, including everything from election interference to assassinations and coups d'état.³⁸

Such efforts often conflicted with the United States' supposed commitment to liberal values and respect for self-determination. In her study of covert regime-change operations during the Cold War, for example, political scientist Lindsey O'Rourke observes that forty-four of sixty-four, or more than two-thirds, supported authoritarian forces, "including at least six operations that sought to replace liberal democratic governments with illiberal authoritarian regimes."³⁹

Even as the United States was engaged in such behavior, however, democracy spread around the world. From 1945 to 1989, for example, the number of autocracies fell from 137 to 105 while democratic states rose from a mere twelve to fifty-one. By 2001, according to the Varieties of Democracy Project, the number of democracies equaled the number of autocracies (eighty-eight each).⁴⁰

The expansion of democracy globally from the late 1940s and into the 1990s produced several generations of men and women empowered and inclined to challenge leaders when they lie, mislead, or otherwise behave in ways contrary to the interests and wishes of their people. This has important implications for the global order, and the US role within it. At the height of its power, the United States might have been forgiven

for occasional hypocrisy when it talked about supporting democracy even as it subverted it. During the Cold War with the Soviet Union, for example, the US role was clearly seen as preferable to the alternative, or a "necessary evil" to thwart a presumably revisionist power.

In the present era, however, the United States is being held to account by its longtime allies and partners—and especially by the publics in these countries. The durability and resilience of the current order, including the ability to resist pressure and intimidation by dominant powers, could be made stronger by the continued growth of democracy.

Democratically elected governments that ignore their own citizens in order to maintain faith with a foreign patron risk being voted out of office. The general election in Spain in March 2004, for example, ousted the ruling People's Party (PP). Many factors explain the upset, including bloody terrorist attacks just days before the vote, but the PP had strongly supported the US war in Iraq, despite the war's unpopularity in Spain, and the winning Socialists pledged to remove Spain's troops from Iraq.⁴¹ And US officials have sometimes struggled to work with new democracies—even those that they had a hand in creating. In successive parliamentary elections since 2005, Iraqi voters have chosen representatives who did not support US policy objectives, with many elected officials openly hostile to the presence of US troops on Iraqi soil, and supportive of close ties with Iran. In the Maldives, meanwhile, challenger Ibrahim Mohamed Solih defeated President Adbulla Yameen in elections held in September 2018, on a promise to review all infrastructure deals negotiated with China.⁴²

While US elected officials from John Quincy Adams to George W. Bush have celebrated the growth of democracy around the world, the evidence does not support the claim that the United States has been a leading driver of such trends. And there is reason to believe that democracy can grow again, as it did in

37 Not everyone agrees that the picture is so bleak. Marian L. Tupy, editor of HumanProgress.org, observes: "In 1989, less than half of humanity lived under some form of democracy. By 2017, two thirds of people on Earth enjoyed the benefits of some form of representative government." See Marian L. Tupy, "The Reports of the Death of Democracy Are Exaggerated," HumanProgress.org, July 5, 2018, <https://www.humanprogress.org/the-reports-of-the-death-of-democracy-are-exaggerated/>. The Pew Research Center's Drew Desilver agrees. "The share of democracies among the world's governments," he reported in 2019, "has been on an upward trend since the mid-1970s, and now sits just shy of its post-World War II record (58% in 2016)." See Drew Desilver, "Despite global concerns about democracy, more than half of countries are democratic," Pew Research Center, May 14, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/05/14/more-than-half-of-countries-are-democratic/>.

38 Political scientist Dov H. Levin found that the United States involved itself in eighty-one democratic elections between 1946 and 2000, including through funding preferred candidates, technical campaign assistance, and even threats. See Kim Hjelmgaard, "The U.S. is the biggest election meddler of them all, new book claims," USA Today, September 4, 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2020/09/04/u-s-interferes-more-elections-than-russia-meddling-author-says/5700657002/>. See also Dov H. Levin, *Meddling in the Ballot Box: The Causes and Effects of Partisan Electoral Interventions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

39 Lindsey O'Rourke, *Covert Regime Change: America's Secret Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), 7.

40 See Max Roser, "Democracy," Our World in Data, <https://ourworldindata.org/democracy>, accessed July 13, 2021.

41 CNN, "Spain: Poll Triumph for Socialists," May 6, 2004, <https://www.cnn.com/2004/WORLD/europe/03/14/spain.blasts.election/>.

42 Mohamed Junayd, "Opposition victory in Maldives deals potential blow to China," Reuters, September 22, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-maldives-election/opposition-victory-in-maldives-deals-potential-blow-to-china-idUSKCN1M20VA>.

prior eras, so long as people around the world believe in its relative advantages over undemocratic alternatives.

Trade

Another characteristic of today's rules-based order is rising living standards facilitated by global trade. Governments have lowered tariffs and relaxed or removed barriers to foreign goods or foreign investment, producing enormous net benefits.

For most of its history, the US government attempted to manage trade, especially by protecting privileged and politically well-connected US industries from foreign competition. But, coming out of World War II, US officials took the lead in promoting trade liberalization. They helped to establish new institutions, including the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade and the World Trade Organization, that would make it easier for countries to trade with one another. The International Monetary Fund and the World Bank contributed as well, deepening countries' economic ties, and generating desperately needed liquidity during crises.

The United States also wielded its prodigious economic power unilaterally in the postwar years, especially the dollar's dominant role in the global economy—and often for foreign policy aims that had nothing to do with expanding global commerce. Even US partners and allies were targeted. Immediately after World War II, for example, the United States extracted concessions from the United Kingdom as it sought loans to put its fiscal house in order. And, not quite ten years later, when the United Kingdom, France, and Israel conspired to take back the Suez Canal from Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser, the Eisenhower administration compelled a humiliating retreat by threatening to sabotage the British pound. Such economic coercion would be far more difficult today.

More broadly, trade and globalization are driven by a growing appreciation of the economic benefits that they deliver to a widening circle of beneficiaries, not by the implicit threat of US coercive power being employed against those who might disagree. Indeed, the US government has practically abandoned the field when it comes to promoting greater trade liberalization, explains Adam S. Posen, president of the Peterson Institute for International Economics, by attempting to insulate the US “economy from foreign competition, while the rest of the world has continued to open up and integrate.”⁴³

The data bear this out. Trade's share of global GDP has been steadily rising for decades, from 39 percent in 1990 to 61 percent by the time of the financial crisis of 2008. That prolonged recession took a toll on global trade, which has now nearly returned to pre-crisis levels. In the United States, by contrast, trade as a share of US GDP grew much more slowly than the rest of the world—from 20 percent in 1990 to 30 percent in 2008. It then fell at the same rate as other major economies during the global great recession but has not yet recovered.

US policy is generally not driving the rest of the world to embrace liberal trade practices. Since 2000, Posen notes, the United States has negotiated a handful of free-trade agreements, but mostly with small economies, and not with an object of promoting greater economic engagement between Americans and others.

The United States has isolated itself economically in other ways as well. “A succession of nationalist policies that have increased the threat of arbitrary restrictions on technology transfer and foreign ownership,” Posen explains, have discouraged many foreign companies from making major investments or opening new businesses in the United States. Such “greenfield investment” totaled \$13 billion annually in 2000 but had fallen to \$4 billion by 2019. And foreign money is not the only thing that has been frightened away. Many people are also less interested in coming to the United States; net immigration has been declining for decades.⁴⁴

As noted, the global economy has mostly bucked these trends, embracing greater economic linkages even as Americans were cutting them. And the durability of the international economic order has proved itself in other ways. The types of major shocks that cast a pall over the global economy in the early 1970s (e.g., the Arab oil embargo) are less likely today because supplies are more plentiful and widely distributed, and consumers more adaptable. Meanwhile, the collapse of even major states or entire regions' financial networks very rarely spiral into a global contagion. The collapse of the residential real estate market in the United States in 2007-2008 might be the exception to this pattern, which again calls into question the notion of the United States as a uniquely stabilizing economic force, or responsible for sustaining the global economy.

On the whole, global trade does not depend on a single state connecting buyers and sellers; and supply chains have become considerably more diversified over the last half century. Major

43 Adam S. Posen, “The Price of Nostalgia: America's Self-Defeating Economic Retreat,” *Foreign Affairs*, 100 (3) (May/June 2021): 28.

44 *Ibid.*, 32.

disruptions to global trade are rare and almost always short-lived. The international economic order is surprisingly robust, and the occasional shocks are unlikely to be mitigated by coercive threats and shows of force.

In this context, US military power may be as destabilizing as it is stabilizing. Extremist groups, in particular, may seize upon feelings of resentment and humiliation caused by foreign domination to grow their ranks and draw support to their cause. And the wars in the Greater Middle East have devastated countries from Libya to Iraq to Syria to Yemen to Afghanistan and spread chaos far beyond the region as millions of migrants have fled the violence.

Political scientist Daniel Drezner concluded in 2013 that the United States' massive military power "plays a supporting role" in stabilizing the international economy but only when combined with the United States' economic primacy.⁴⁵ And that latter advantage, in particular, has been steadily eroding over time. According to the World Bank, the US share of global output, as measured by purchasing power parity, has fallen from 20.8 percent in 2000 to 15.8 percent in 2020.⁴⁶ A less economically dominant United States should not expect that its still-dominant military alone will allow it to wield the same level of influence as before.

In sum, while the US foreign policy establishment often imagines the United States to be at the center of the global rules-based order—the indispensable nation, as it were—a fair-minded reading of US policy reveals that the United States was not solely responsible for creating many of the favorable trends of the last half century. And, in several critical respects, US policy ran counter to, or actively undermined, global norms surrounding the use of force; respect for national sovereignty,

self-determination, and human rights; and noninterference in global trade. The United States has often championed the foundational pillars of the post-World War II rules-based international order, but it has also engaged in activities that erode or violate these principles.

EXPLAINING THE RULES-BASED ORDER'S SURPRISING RESILIENCE

The world has not descended into chaos—even as many knowledgeable observers have taken note of Americans' distaste for protracted foreign wars and unwillingness to spend more on the US military.⁴⁷ There has not been an explosion of new interstate violence, or a rush toward ruinous arms races. It does not appear, therefore, that US military dominance—and the expectation that this dominance would persist—was truly instrumental in stopping either of those things from happening.

We see a similar disconnect with respect to global trade. Trump famously walked away from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), and his signature trade deal, the US-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), produced only modest net liberalization. Trump's protectionist impulses manifested in countless other ways during his presidency, including an Oval Office outburst in which he berated his staff for refusing to bring him tariffs ("I want tariffs") to a bizarre "I am a Tariff Man" tweet in late 2018.⁴⁸ If global trade depends upon a single dominant player, and if that major player is the United States, we should have expected to see the rest of the world follow the United States away from liberalization, and toward greater protectionism.

But the opposite occurred. The European Union (EU) has mostly expanded its trade outside the eurozone, a process arguably

45 Daniel Drezner, "Military Primacy Doesn't Pay (Nearly as Much as You Think)," *International Security* 38 (1) (2013): 52–79, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00124.

46 Using real GDP, the US share during this same period (2000–2020) has fallen from 30 percent to 24 percent, while China's share has risen from 3 percent to 17 percent.

47 Polling by the Eurasia Group Foundation released in September 2021 found that "Twice as many Americans want to decrease the defense budget as increase it," and six in ten Americans "think the biggest lesson from the war in Afghanistan was that the United States should not be in the business of nation-building or that it should only send troops into harm's way if vital national interests are threatened." See Mark Hannah, Caroline Gray, and Lucas Robinson, *Inflection Point: Americans' Foreign Policy Views After Afghanistan*, Eurasia Group Foundation, September 2021, <https://egfound.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/2021-09-Inflection-Point.pdf>.

48 Jonathan Swan, "Exclusive: Trump vents in Oval Office, 'I want tariffs. Bring me some tariffs!'" *Axios*, August 27, 2017, <https://www.axios.com/exclusive-trump-vents-in-oval-office-i-want-tariffs-bring-me-some-tariffs-1513305111-5cba21a2-6438-429a-9377-30f6c4cf2e9e.html>; Jacob Pramuk, "I am a Tariff Man": Trump threatens to restart trade war if China talks fail," *CNBC*, December 4, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/12/04/trump-calls-himself-tariff-man-as-china-talks-restart-after-trade-war-truce.html>.

aided by Brexit. The EU now has major trade deals with Japan and South Korea, and reached additional agreements with Canada, Singapore, and Vietnam, all while Trump occupied the Oval Office. And a similar thing happened in Asia. Japan resurrected the left-for-dead TPP as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), and then further opened its economy to trade with South Korea and China when it joined the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Other major Asian economies, including Australia, New Zealand, and Singapore, have also signed onto both CPTPP and RCEP.⁴⁹

On balance, the Trump years are a further sign that the international order does not depend upon the power of a single state to enforce its rules, precisely because so many of the beneficiaries of this order appreciate its merits and are, therefore, committed to sustaining and extending it—even when the United States seems ambivalent. The RAND Corporation’s Michael J. Mazarr called these other actors “the core coalition supporting the order” and a “stabilizing center of gravity in world politics.”⁵⁰

At times, Biden administration officials have seemed so anxious to restore the United States to its dominant role in the international system that they barely paused to consider whether that object was either achievable or necessary. The fervent belief that the United States, in its self-proclaimed role as the world’s indispensable nation, is mostly responsible for the favorable global trends—but not the unpleasant ones—of the last three-quarters of a century has been tough to shake.

But while the United States will continue to be a major global actor capable of shaping the global future, it would be profoundly irresponsible for US leaders to claim that the United States will always be there to act as a supposedly stabilizing force. US policy makers and strategists should encourage and reward other actors when they take responsibility for sustaining global peace and security. The alternative approach entails hoping for the best while fearing the worst.

Consider, for example, the ruminations of Council on Foreign Relations President Richard Haass, who pondered in the late summer of 2020 what a Trump reelection would mean. “The world would become more Hobbesian, a struggle of all against all,” Haass predicted. “Conflict would become more common, and democracy less so. Proliferation would accelerate as alliances lost their ability to reassure friends and deter foes. Spheres of influence could arise.” In short, Haass concluded, “The global order that existed for 75 years would surely end.”⁵¹

As it happened, Trump was not reelected. Biden won the presidency, securing a record eighty-one million votes, seven million more than the incumbent. But the actual margin of victory was much narrower than that. Biden flipped three states that Trump won in 2016—Arizona, Georgia, and Wisconsin—by less than 45,000 votes combined.⁵²

If Haass was right, and if a second Trump administration would have spelled the end of an entire global order, we might have been but a few horrible moments away from that eventuality. That the world avoided this fate by a mere 45,000 votes—out of more than 150 million cast—surely cannot provide much comfort to those invested in continuing US global dominance indefinitely on the assumption that it is instrumental to global peace and prosperity.

The key lesson of the Trump years is not that a fragile system almost collapsed, but that a resilient system survived. That evolving order was already taking shape, mostly due to long-term trends that have resulted in a reduction of the United States’ relative power and influence. These trends predated the Trump administration and then accelerated during his four years in office. They are likely to continue in coming decades, and largely irrespective of the policies that the Biden administration and its successors adopt. US officials, therefore, should pursue policies that reinforce and deepen the existing global order, rather than trying to replace it with the old one.

49 Posen, “The Price of Nostalgia,” 31.

50 Michael J. Mazarr, *Summary of the Building a Sustainable International Order Project*, RAND Corporation, 2018, 6, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2397.html.

51 Richard Haass, “Present at the Disruption: How Trump Unmade U.S. Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-08-11/present-disruption>.

52 Dante Chinni, “Did Biden win by a little or a lot? The answer is ... yes,” NBC News, December 20, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/meet-the-press/did-biden-win-little-or-lot-answer-yes-n1251845>.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The elements of a durable international order comprised of sovereign states empowered and incentivized to secure themselves against threats are already present; US policy should aim to strengthen and elevate them. It can do so in four key ways.

First, restrain the impulse to use force and coercion.

Many Americans focus on military spending as the key indicator of national strength, or look upon Washington's willingness to use force or coercion as a mark of toughness and seriousness of purpose. But actors in the international system have a range of tools at their disposal to advance their interests. Indeed, they often wield these tools to good effect. Therefore, if Americans are reluctant to employ US military or economic power, and inclined to do so only when necessary to advance US security and prosperity, policy makers need not fear that a failure to act would lead to global catastrophe.

Indeed, greater restraint on the part of the United States should incentivize others to create a more resilient global order with more capable actors. For example, the EU has led the way in addressing a range of threats not conducive to military solutions—from enhancing data privacy to reversing the effects of climate change. And although it is customary to dismiss Europeans' attempts to fashion a cohesive security architecture—from the ill-fated European Defense Community of the 1950s to the stillborn European Security and Defense Policy of the 2000s—the latest drive for European strategic autonomy is building momentum.⁵³

Past efforts failed, in part, because US policy makers actively thwarted such moves.⁵⁴ In that context, it seems unreasonable for some Americans to complain when Europeans seem unwilling to use force more often. When chaos ensued in Libya after Muammar al-Qaddafi's overthrow in 2011, and some called for a large on-the-ground foreign presence to separate the

warring factions, the United States was only then beginning to extract itself from Afghanistan and would soon thereafter become bogged down again in Iraq fighting the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). As then US secretary of defense Robert Gates complained at the time: “can't we just finish the two wars we're already in?”⁵⁵

This and other episodes that reveal the limits of US power and reach are instructive. While US officials might have had reasons to be skeptical of self-help in an earlier era, they should welcome it today in the interest of building a durable order that can survive future shocks. Although the EU is struggling with a host of problems, both internally and in its near abroad, EU leaders continue to push for a larger global role. They are emboldened by their constituents' desire to maintain their deep linkages to the wider world, and the recognition that a substantial share of the European electorate has largely moved on from believing that the United States is the continent's savior.⁵⁶ They may also be paying heed to US polling data showing continued concern among Americans about free riding and inadequate burden sharing.⁵⁷

We see a similar dynamic playing out in Asia. Though there is no comparable move toward greater strategic autonomy, the leading nations there have deepened their ties with each other—and with a rising China—creating economic and diplomatic linkages that, they have concluded, enhance both prosperity and peace. And while anti-American sentiment does not approach levels seen in Europe or the Middle East, the people of this region generally wish to maintain good relations with *both* Beijing and Washington. They also, however, want a range of options that would allow them to protect their interests. US policy should not impede these impulses.

Second, when addressing global or regional challenges, US policy makers should expect that the United States will have a seat at the table, but not always at the head of the table.

Power is situational, and the international system is populated by many able actors who are often well-positioned to address the

53 Olivier-Rémy Bel, “What European strategic autonomy requires: smarter talk, more action,” *New Atlanticist*, Atlantic Council, January 7, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/what-european-strategic-autonomy-requires-smarter-talk-more-action/>; Barry R. Posen, “Europe Can Defend Itself,” *Survival*, 62 (6) (2020): 7–34, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2020.1851080>; “Forum: Can Europe Defend Itself?” *Survival*, 63 (1) (2021): 17–49.

54 Max Bergmann, James Lamond, and Siena Cicarelli, *The Case for EU Defense: A New Way Forward for Trans-Atlantic Security Relations*, Center for American Progress, June 1, 2021, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2021/06/01/500099/case-eu-defense/>. See also Justin Logan, “Make European Defense European,” *War on the Rocks*, June 10, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/06/make-european-defense-european/>.

55 NPR, “Transcript: Former Defense Secretary Robert Gates' Interview With NPR,” January 13, 2014, <https://www.npr.org/2014/01/11/261711869/transcript-former-defense-secretary-robert-gates-interview-with-npr>.

56 See, especially, Ivan Krastev and Mark Leonard, *The crisis of American power: How Europeans see Biden's America*, European Council on Foreign Relations, January 19, 2021, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-crisis-of-american-power-how-europeans-see-bidens-america/>.

57 David Brennan, “Half of Americans Don't Want to Defend NATO Allies if Spending Commitments Don't Increase,” *Newsweek*, July 19, 2018, <https://www.newsweek.com/half-americans-dont-want-defend-nato-allies-if-spending-commitments-dont-1032117>. More recent polling reveals a sharp partisan divide on these questions, with fewer than four in ten Republicans expressing support for NATO, whereas 60 percent of Democrats believe that the Alliance still serves an important role. See VOA News, “Survey Shows Less than Half of Americans Support NATO,” April 5, 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/a/survey-shows-less-than-half-of-americans-support-nato/4864481.html>.

challenges in their respective neighborhoods. Americans should not presume to be the primary actor in every region all of the time.

While some Americans might prefer a system that provides leverage over other countries when they adopt policies that run counter to US preferences, US foreign policy elites should remember their claims that the United States advances a rules-based order that respects the rights of others. An order based on liberal principles of self-determination would ensure that governments reflect the wishes of their people, not those of foreign powers. In other words, defenders of a truly liberal order should celebrate rather than lament the emergence of multiple capable actors. It was those same capable actors, including key US allies and partners such as France, Germany, and Japan after all, who might have prevented Trump's worst instincts from being translated into policies that would have undermined global peace and prosperity. A world dependent upon the United States would have been in no position to do so.

But while the world did not collapse during the four years of Trump's presidency, it needs to be able to survive an even more serious challenge in future years, for example, if a competent illiberal demagogue were to be elected president of the United States. Another plausible scenario might see a Chinese bid to create closed trading blocs that give unfair advantages to Chinese firms and consumers. The beneficiaries of the order, those who have the most to lose under either American or Chinese illiberal hegemony, should move expeditiously to preserve the order's essential elements, and US foreign policy elites should encourage such moves.

Third, recognizing that US power is finite, and that US strategic objectives must be aligned to available resources, policy makers should prioritize, act with humility, take account of other states' legitimate interests, and be prepared to compromise.

In a series of studies published in 2018, the RAND Corporation explored the key elements of a sustainable international order. Mazarr, the lead author, summarized the findings, concluding that "a strong international order is strongly beneficial for the United States" but counseling that "the US predominance so characteristic of the postwar order must give way to a more truly multilateral order." And Mazarr warned "if the United States clings too tightly to a particular vision...it is likely to accelerate the order's decay."⁵⁸

58 Mazarr, Summary of the Building, 2, 3.

59 The White House, *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, March 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>, 20.

60 See, for example, Ryan Hass, "China Is Not Ten Feet Tall: How Alarmism Undermines American Strategy," *Foreign Affairs*, March 3, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-03-03/china-not-ten-feet-tall>; Alastair Iain Johnston, "China in a World of Orders: Rethinking Compliance and Challenge in Beijing's International Relations," *International Security*, 44 (2) (Fall 2019): 9–60, doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00360.

The foreign policy community in the United States might be ready to listen. While the Biden administration's Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, issued in March 2021, argues that renewed US leadership on a global scale is necessary to offer a liberal alternative to Chinese-style authoritarianism, it acknowledges that the United States cannot do this alone. Such a new order, the Biden team observed, can only be built by "working alongside others to shape new global norms and agreements."⁵⁹

The international order has evolved since the end of the Cold War as US relative power and influence has waned. But a single dominant power is unlikely to replace it. China, the next most powerful nation-state in the system, faces a host of challenges of its own, and some longtime China watchers question whether Beijing even aspires to global domination.⁶⁰ Many foreign policy experts in the United States assume that there are only two possible futures: continued US unipolarity or a new Cold War defined by US-China bipolarity, with all other states choosing one side or the other. The more likely scenario, however, is one in which other countries take greater responsibility over their own affairs, and advance their political, economic, and security interests—sometimes in cooperation, and sometimes unilaterally. The United States can sometimes facilitate such cooperation, but US policy makers should no longer expect to be able to compel it, as sometimes happened at the height of US power.

Finally, US officials should recommit themselves to upholding the principles and norms that are broadly conducive to global peace and prosperity—and expect to face resistance if they fail to do so.

Those global norms should include the essential elements of the rules-based order established after World War II: sovereign equality, noninterference, and nonintervention, to preserve the peace; a commitment to free trade, to advance prosperity; and support for the free movement of peoples, the best guarantee of human rights.

But a changing world needs new rules, too. And, as the Biden administration explores what those might be, it needs to listen to US allies and partners, and be mindful of the interests of other states which wish to live in peace and prosper, but not necessarily under a system in which the rules are written for them by others. In short, a key to finding that resilient and adaptable order, one that affords due consideration to the rights and interests of others, is to revisit the assumption that the United States alone is responsible for sustaining it.

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