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

NOVEMBER 3, 2021  CHRISTOPHER PREBLE

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.

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.”

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.

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.”

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.”

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.”

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.”

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

---

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

---


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, Battlegrounds: 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).


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


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

---


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.


19 Keohane, “Hegemony and After.”
ASSUMPTION #3: US LEADERSHIP IS INDISPENSABLE TO THE HEALTH OF THE GLOBAL ORDER

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 10, 2020, https://warontherocks.com/2020/04/aftershocks-the-coronavirus-pandemic-and-the-new-world-disorder/. Others predicted that COVID-19 would cause more people to embrace nonviolence, favor expanded trade, and prefer dialogue over armed conflict than before the United States became the world’s superpower, 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

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.”
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. 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.

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.

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.

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.

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 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. Revisionist powers, including countries which seek to overturn political systems within given states, or disrupt long-established patterns of diplomacy and

---


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.


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.


United States is counted among the twenty-five countries that suffered the largest decline in democracy from 2010 to 2020. 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. 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 Abdulla Yameen in elections held in September 2018, on a promise to review all infrastructure deals negotiated with China.

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

---


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.”

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.

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
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. 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. 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. 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. 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

---

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.
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.

ASSUMPTION #3: US LEADERSHIP IS INDISPENSABLE TO THE HEALTH OF THE GLOBAL ORDER

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


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 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.”

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.”

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. 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.

58 Mazarr, Summary of the Building, 2, 3.
Christopher Preble serves as co-director of the New American Engagement Initiative in the Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security. In addition to his work at the Atlantic Council, Preble co-hosts the Net Assessment podcast in the War on the Rocks network, and he teaches the US foreign policy elective at the University of California, Washington Center. He is a life member of the Council on Foreign Relations. Preble is the author of four books, and his work has also appeared in major publications, including the New York Times, the Washington Post, Survival, Foreign Policy, and National Review. He earned a BA in history from George Washington University in 1989 and a PhD in history from Temple University in 2002.
ASSUMPTION #3: US LEADERSHIP IS INDISPENSABLE TO THE HEALTH OF THE GLOBAL ORDER

Atlantic Council Board of Directors

CHAIRMAN
*John F.W. Rogers

EXECUTIVE CHAIRMAN EMERITUS
*James L. Jones

PRESIDENT AND CEO
*Frederick Kempe

EXECUTIVE VICE CHAIRS
*Adrienne Arsht
*Stephen J. Hadley

VICE CHAIRS
*Robert J. Abernethy
*Richard W. Edelman
*C. Boyden Gray
*Alexander V. Mirtchev
*John J. Studzinski

TREASURER
*George Lund

DIRECTORS
Stéphane Abrial
Todd Achilles
*Peter Ackerman
Timothy D. Adams
*Michael Andersson
David D. Aufhauser
Barbara Barrett
Colleen Bell
Stephen Biegun
*Rafic A. Bizri
*Linden P. Blue
Adam Boehler
Philip M. Breedlove
Myron Brilliant
*Esther Brimmer
R. Nicholas Burns
*Richard R. Burt
Teresa Carlson
James E. Cartwright
John E. Chapoton
Ahmed Charai
Melanie Chen
Michael Chertoff
*George Chopivsky
Wesley K. Clark
*Helima Croft
Ralph D. Crosby, Jr.
*Ankit N. Desai
Dario Deste
*Paula J. Dobriansky
Joseph F. Dunford, Jr.
Thomas J. Egan, Jr.
Stuart E. Eizenstat
Thomas R. Eldridge
Mark T. Esper
*Alan H. Fleischmann
Jendayi E. Frazer
Courtney Geduldig
Meg Gentle
Thomas H. Glocer
John B. Goodman
*Sherri W. Goodman
Murathan Günal
Amir A. Handjani
Frank Haun
Michael V. Hayden
Tim Holt
*Karl V. Hopkins
Andrew Hove
Mary L. Howell
Ian Ihnatowycz
Mark Isakowitz
Wolfgang F. Ischinger
Deborah Lee James
Joia M. Johnson
*Maria Pica Karp
Andre Kelleners
Henry A. Kissinger
*C. Jeffrey Knittel
Franklin D. Kramer
Laura Lane
Jan M. Lodal
Douglas Lute
Jane Holl Lute
William J. Lynn
Mark Machin
Mian M. Mansha
Marco Margheri
Michael Margolis
Chris Marlin
William Marron
Gerardo Mato
Timothy McBride
Eriq McGrain
John M. McHugh
Eric D.K. Melby
*Judith A. Miller
Dariusz Mioduski
*Michael J. Morell
*Richard Morningstar
Georgette Mosbacher
Dambisa F. Moyo
Virginia A. Mulberger
Mary Claire Murphy
Edward J. Newberry
Thomas R. Nides
Franco Nuschese
Joseph S. Nye
Ahmet M. Ören
Sally A. Painter
Ana I. Palacio
*Kostas Pantazopoulos
Alan Pellegrini
David H. Petraeus
W. DeVier Pierson
Lisa Pollina
Daniel B. Poneman
*Dina H. Powell McCormick
Ashraf Qazi
Robert Rangel
Thomas J. Ridge
Gary Rieschel
Lawrence Di Rita
Michael J. Rogers
Charles O. Rossotti
Harry Sachinis
C. Michael Scarparrotti
Ivan A. Schlager
Rajiv Shah
Gregg Sherrill
Ali Jehangir Siddiqui
Kris Singh
Walter Slocombe
Christopher Smith
Clifford M. Sobel
James G. Stavridis
Michael S. Steele
Richard J.A. Steele
Mary Streett
*Frances M. Townsend
Clyde C. Tuggle
Mellanie Verveer
Charles F. Wald
Michael F. Walsh
Ronald Weiser
Olin Wethington
Maciej Witucki
Neal S. Wolin
*Jenny Wood
Guang Yang
Mary C. Yates
Dov S. Zakheim

HONORARY DIRECTORS
James A. Baker, III
Ashton B. Carter
Robert M. Gates
James N. Mattis
Michael G. Mullen
Leon E. Panetta
William J. Perry
Condoleezza Rice
Horst Teltschik
William H. Webster

*Executive Committee Members

List as of October 27 2021