

# The Day after Trump: American Strategy for a New International Order

Foreign policy elites have reached a near-consensus that the liberal international order led by the United States since World War II is fraying; unsustainable by inertia alone, its only hope of success is shrewd American statecraft. Confronted by global power shifts, regional challengers, rapid technological innovation, and the return of great-power rivalry, the task of revitalizing a 70-year old set of norms, laws, alliances, and international institutions would have challenged whichever candidate moved into the White House on January 20, 2017. With Donald Trump's ascendance to the presidency on a platform of unpredictability, the future of international politics, and the role of American leadership therein, entered a state of flux.

Trump, less as an architect than as an avatar, represents a serious challenge to the bipartisan consensus that has long underpinned the U.S.-led order. Long-term socioeconomic shifts in the United States have heightened the attraction of populist appeals like Trump's. Regardless of whether Trump supporters voted for or despite his foreign policy positions, the "America First" vision, with its defiant nationalism and ruthless transactionalism, is a decidedly radical departure from the strategic mainstream. Indeed, it explicitly repudiates the core tenets of liberal internationalism and implicitly rejects the United States' position atop the liberal international order.

The first year of the Trump administration revealed a team too riddled with chaos to execute any grand-strategic vision, whether one advanced by the

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president's more conservative advisers or the radical America First partisans in the White House. Instead, insofar as there is a demonstrable Trump foreign policy doctrine, it has been characterized by a tactical-transactional approach that sporadically asserts American military power.<sup>1</sup> Thus far, it has failed to reckon with the challenges posed—and opportunities presented—by structural trends.

Regardless of the specific trajectory of U.S. foreign policy under this administration, the broad arc is already clear. The world his successor inherits will differ profoundly from the international environment the United States has faced

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since the end of the Cold War and, in many ways, since World War II. At best, the next president stands to inherit a liberal international order on life support, with some pieces—like the global free-trade system—significantly weakened, and others—like U.S. alliances—damaged but not defunct. At worst, Trump will deliver his successor an order beyond resuscitation. In either event, come 2020 or 2024, we will not be able to revert to old concepts of “international order.”

Rather than reflexively defend the liberal international order against each apparent assault, international affairs thinkers must acknowledge this as a moment for serious strategic reckoning. The instinct to protect the postwar order is understandable in the face of destructive “America First” impulses and obstreperous implementation, but defending the order as an end unto itself would be a mistake. Instead, foreign policy strategists must seize the present opportunity to assess which elements remain relevant in the twenty-first century, and identify where changes are appropriate and necessary. Only by looking beyond the cacophony of daily White House drama to examine the structural forces that challenge the order, both from within and without, can we begin to craft a new grand strategy for America.

### **What Is the “Liberal International Order”?**

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The “liberal international order” is an often rhapsodized, but rarely scrutinized term. The act of defining it requires us to begin by characterizing “international order” in general. International order refers to the governing arrangements among states that establish fundamental rules, principles, and institutions.<sup>2</sup> International order is the basic framework that creates rules and settles expectations among states.<sup>3</sup> It can be highly institutionalized, meaning organized (usually on the basis of state consent) into formal regimes, rules, and routines. It can also be less so, and exist simply on the basis of a convergence of state interests, or, alternatively, on top-down hegemonic coercion.

In any given era, international order is constituted when states create these basic organizing arrangements for the system. Because they are constructed by sovereign states, however, these arrangements are by definition transitory. They can be neglected, contested, upended, and dismantled. Throughout modern history, international order has most commonly broken down through major wars, and novel orders been established after their settlement, as states seek to create new rules based on new power configurations.<sup>4</sup> International relations scholars therefore associate major changes to the international order with violence between great powers. Modern examples of postwar international order include the Peace of Westphalia following the Eighty Years War (1568-1648), which formally organized state relations based on sovereignty for the first time. Another was the Congress of Vienna, which reorganized territorial and political boundaries following the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815), and ushered in a great-power order based on the balance of power in Europe.

The “liberal international order” is thus one particular type of order, but hardly the only one that is possible. Its foundational principles are largely Anglo-American in their origins and were drawn from Woodrow Wilson and his vision for order following the First World War.<sup>5</sup> Liberal internationalism emphasizes the pacifying role of global trade, seeks interstate arrangements to prevent the use of force, and holds that democracies are aptly suited to lead and operate within this type of system. It promotes an international system based on cooperation for mutual gain, and relies on institutions to reinforce cooperation over time.<sup>6</sup> The world’s first efforts at twentieth century liberal international order were underwhelming, in no small part due to the limits of its primary governing body, the League of Nations. The League, founded in 1920, was designed to prevent international conflict through collective security, but had no real enforcement mechanisms and suffered from the lack of American participation and leadership. The gaps in this first attempt at liberal order ultimately gave way to the Second World War.

With World War II still blazing, the United States and Great Britain set about to remake the Wilsonian order, preserving its animating principles while innovating an institutional design that placed greater emphasis on the leadership of great powers. Farther reaching than its post-World War I predecessor, this new conception of liberal internationalism comprised security, economic, and political issues, and much of it was formalized after 1945 by the victorious Allied Powers. These treaties and institutions were not simply the spoils of victory, but painstakingly premeditated efforts to restore prosperity and prevent future conflict for a decimated globe. Seared by the abject failure of Wilson’s original vision, the sponsoring Allies hoped to avert a return to relative autarky and the geopolitical spheres of influence that had left millions dead. As the only Allied country to have avoided the destruction of total war, the United States quickly became the operator of this order.

The primary political governing body of this new liberal order was the United Nations, which like the League of Nations before it, was established to keep peace among states. It was organized on the principle of state sovereign equality, but recognizes five states—the victorious World War II powers—as permanent Security Council members and, implicitly, leaders. The Bretton Woods system was formed to govern monetary, commercial, and financial relations, and established the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the body that would eventually become the World Trade Organization (WTO). Over time, layers were added to the international order as necessity dictated. One such example is the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, which sought to fix the number of recognized nuclear powers at five, lest this devastating technology continue to spread. These intricate arrangements were not conjured at once, but created over many years, through intertwined agreements, organizations, and laws. Despite the fact that the Cold War began to emerge before peace had been formalized, the Soviet Union was a part of many of these governing institutions. But as early Cold War animus intensified, the United States crafted its defensive alliance system in Europe and East Asia between 1948 and 1954, and the Soviet Union responded with its own in the Warsaw Pact. And as the British declined from their great power status, they passed the mantle of leadership of the democratic order to the United States.

### **The Evolution of the Postwar Order**

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The post-World War II liberal system did not bring order to all corners of the globe simultaneously or in equal measure. Wilson's initial vision and its midcentury implementation were decidedly Western in their origins. While the United Nations was open to all sovereign states, much of the world remained under colonial rule and was not immediately eligible; at its creation, the institution included only 51 member states, as compared with 193 today.

**The post-World War II liberal system was originally decidedly Western.**

The Bretton Woods monetary system, while formally international, comprised the United States and its allies in Western Europe, Canada, Australia, and Japan. The Soviet Union attended the initial conference, but opted out of the formal institutions. Moreover,

for its first decade, Bretton Woods rules were expressly used to rehabilitate Western Europe and Japan.<sup>7</sup> Eventually, these foundational liberal institutions helped to seed more diverse forms of regional order. After decolonization in the 1960s in Asia, for example, Southeast Asian states formed the Association of

Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to prevent hostilities among members, and the Asia Development Bank (ADB) was founded to support regional growth based on a World Bank model.

As the decades passed, the order experienced its share of crises. In the late 1960s and 1970s in particular, the international monetary system languished amidst a crisis of faith in its American guarantor. Saddled with a significant balance of payments deficit, dwindling international reserves, and the burden of maintaining pegged exchange rates, the United States was no longer able to sustain the gold standard. American political stagnation, discontent, and growing public debt led the world to question its faith in the dollar and in the United States more broadly.<sup>8</sup> Postwar institutions limped along, were repurposed, and ultimately rebounded.

Despite the fact that these institutions and rules consolidated across the decades, they did not fuse into a single entity, but remained an eclectic amalgamation of agreements and conventions, sustained by the will and interests of their members. Proliferating rules and regimes came to govern the political, economic, and security domains, and to focus on the protection of some basic principles. Political institutions relied on sovereignty as their organizing concept, but made no secret of their preference for western, liberal democracy as the ideal type of state. Security institutions were also organized around the principle of sovereignty, proscribed the use of force except for reasons of self-defense, and grew to limit nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons proliferation. Economic rules and regimes generally favored open markets, depended on the dollar as the dominant currency, aspired to increasingly free trade over time, and sought positive growth trajectories and positive-sum prosperity.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, American-led institutions and regimes remained. They were rejiggered somewhat in preparation for an age of American unipolarity, or unrivaled hegemony, leading prominent political scientist Francis Fukuyama to proclaim an “end of history.”<sup>9</sup> In this era of uncontested American primacy, there were fewer limits than ever before on the potential reach of international institutions and the manner in which their rules could be invoked. The UN General Assembly, for example, embraced the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine, asserting an obligation to prevent egregious violations of human rights, and implicitly circumscribing state sovereignty. The United States began to anticipate national security threats before they arose, briefly invoking a doctrine of “preemption” that exceeded any rights enshrined in the UN Charter. And it appeared ever-more likely that democracy was, in fact, an inevitable political tendency, on which most states in the world would converge over time. Free trade and market economics were practically uncontested.<sup>10</sup> Today, when contemporary U.S. strategists lament an international order increasingly under assault, they often take this post-Cold War apotheosis as their reference point. Dusk has

fallen on the age of unbridled, omnipotent, American-led institutions and their inexorable march toward liberal universalism.

**The post-1945 liberal international order was never monolithic nor ubiquitous.**

The post-1945 liberal international order, however, was never a monolithic nor crystalline structure with ubiquitous reach. It was conjured as a largely Western vision, was initially concerned with post-World War II rehabilitation, flourished during the Cold War, diffused into Asia, Africa, and Latin America following decolonization, cracked and listed in the 1970s, and claimed universalism only with its competitors' demise in the 1990s. In many ways, the

term "liberal international order" has always been a shorthand for U.S. global leadership—a relatively benign sort of hegemony that has persisted because it provided considerable economic, political, and security gains to other countries, and predictability in their interstate interactions.

### **Pressure from Without**

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The liberal international order thus fundamentally reflects American power, principles, and preferences. As a global hegemon, the United States has been able to progressively extend and enforce the rules of the geopolitical game for more than 70 years—while also preserving the right to periodically flout them. Its security umbrella attenuated inter-state competition, especially in historical tinderboxes like Europe, and helped cooperation flourish. Yet the erosion of American military, economic, and political power—in relative if not absolute terms—challenges the order's foundation.

In the quarter century since the end of the Cold War, global power shifts have diminished the United States' margin of economic and military preponderance. Whereas the U.S. share of global GDP was 50 percent at the end of the Second World War, it is 24 percent today.<sup>11</sup> By comparison, China's share of the global economy has grown from less than 2 percent in 1990 to nearly 15 percent over the same period, overtaking the United States by some measures.<sup>12</sup> These statistics reflect broader West-to-East shifts in economic dynamism over the past two-and-a-half decades: while the European Union's collective portion of the global economy has fallen by 12 percent since the end of the Cold War, East Asia's share grew by 8 percent.

Despite this changing economic landscape, American defense outlays continue to dwarf all other nations', and the U.S. military remains far and away the world's most capable fighting force. Even so, increasingly, there are vital regions—some

proximate to U.S. allies—where other states are developing capabilities that could deny the United States local military primacy. Both China and Russia have modernized their militaries, developing capabilities designed to degrade the United States' ability to operate in the Western Pacific and along NATO's eastern flank in the Baltics, respectively. Moreover, China and Russia have creatively employed so-called "grey-zone" activities to advance their regional ambitions while avoiding U.S. military intervention by intentionally remaining below the traditional conflict threshold.<sup>13</sup> These efforts reflect strategies to overcome American military superiority in the concentrated area of greatest consequence to Beijing's and Moscow's national interests, thereby complicating the U.S. decision to use force in defense of its regional allies and partners (not to mention for more offensive aims).

As American hegemony has eroded, so too has the willingness of the United States' near-peer competitors to tolerate a liberal international order which reflects a distribution of benefits that decreasingly resembles the global distribution of economic and military power. Russia and China have begun to chip away at the elements of it that do not suit them, asserting their dominance over limited areas without challenging the liberal international order wholesale. Russia is decidedly a power in decline, yet has come to define its national interests in opposition to the post-Cold War European security order.<sup>14</sup> Long opposed to the expansion of NATO, Russia challenged foundational sovereignty norms through the 2014 annexation of Crimea and invasion of Eastern Ukraine and brazenly deployed active measures to subvert 2016-17 democratic elections in the United States, Germany, and France, all while diminishing its exposure to economic reprisal through an autarkic policy of "economic sovereignty."<sup>15</sup>

China is a different case, but no less challenging. Since the 1970s, U.S. policymakers have held out hope that a rising China would become a "responsible stakeholder" in the global order, because it had been a great beneficiary of its markets and institutions.<sup>16</sup> It is now clear that China is pursuing a mixed strategy, opening its markets without liberalizing politically.<sup>17</sup> Near its shores and with respect to its core security interests, China flouts laws and regimes like the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. In Greater Asia, it has engaged in institutional entrepreneurship, seeking to substitute Bretton Woods-era economic institutions with its own, notably the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). On major global issues like climate change, however, China has emerged as a constructive partner and even a leader. As time goes on and particularly under President Xi Jinping, however, it is increasingly clear that a risen China may only become more authoritarian, and will seek to secure its interests as Beijing defines them—not as Washington hopes.

This trend itself is a fundamental challenge to analytic and policy premises of how the liberal international order itself should function. For much of the postwar era and certainly since the end of the Cold War, scholars and stewards of the international order have imputed to it a liberalizing power that transcends any particular institution or treaty. By joining that order, signing onto its international rules, and benefiting from its advantages, they supposed, illiberal states would eventually become more open. This was an almost-teleological optimism based on the assumption that the order's principles are truly universal and transcend American influence. But rather than liberalizing themselves in the order's image, as many post-Cold War optimists had hoped,<sup>18</sup> Russia and China are demanding a modified order that better accommodates the ambitions and appetites of their illiberal domestic regimes.

Historically, such revisionist challenges have been all-too-frequent antecedents to conflict, particularly when coincident with a power transition that creates increasing incentives for a dissatisfied rising power to overthrow the existing system by force.<sup>19</sup> In today's world of interconnectivity, however, conditions of mutually assured destruction—nuclear and economic—are likely to restrain war between the United States and its near-peer competitors. Positive-sum gains from cooperation further disincentivize conflict. Yet these stabilizing forces are not sufficient to sustain the totality of the order. Instead, dissatisfied illiberal powers will continue to challenge existing forms of international organization, creating pressure on the liberal international order to fragment into spheres or merely to drift toward an entropic state of disarray.

**A disordered world would be ill-equipped to confront central transnational challenges.**

A fractured or disordered world would be ill-equipped to confront the central transnational challenges of the next century—challenges unique in their defiance of clean, state-based solutions. Any genuine steps to address climate change will require an approach that vertically integrates policy from the global to the local level, and the international climate regime is embryonic. Innovations in robotics and artificial intelligence are moving so quickly that norms are more likely to emerge from industry than through top-down

national—not to mention international—regulations. Terrorism remains a scourge and is increasingly enabled by the diffusion of information and technology. Neither states nor non-state actors require sophisticated militaries to make trouble in cyberspace, and there are few rules that govern cyber transgressions, let alone a clear definition of cyberwar.<sup>20</sup> Many of these newer threats are not immediately existential and do not directly threaten sovereign state territory, making aggression

harder to define and anticipate. Moreover, much of this activity is taking place in domains where relatively few rules and norms exist, making it all the more difficult for states to react collectively or effectively. If these challenges are to be managed, new regimes will have to be crafted; even a vital liberal international order offers few ready-made solutions.

### **Pressure from Within**

Alongside these considerable external stressors, the U.S.-led order must also contend with pressure from within. Since the mid-twentieth century, liberal internationalism has been the lodestar of American foreign policy. From the early 1990s onward, unshackled from the constraints of Cold War competition, successive presidential administrations embraced the mantle of global leadership, and leveraged this position to spread democracy and free markets around the globe. Washington elites have frequently diverged on the optimal means for advancing this project, but they generally agreed on the soundness of the endeavor. Although Trump himself is largely an avatar for broader political, economic, and cultural forces, his rise represents a fundamental challenge to American leadership of the liberal international order—and indeed to the very premises of American internationalism.

Long-term socioeconomic trends now threaten political support for liberalism at home and abroad. Globalization has brought several decades of progressively freer trade, succeeding in raising living standards in developing countries and decreasing the price of consumer goods in advanced economies. Yet, the movement of low-skilled jobs overseas combined with automation and digitization has left many Americans with diminished economic prospects. Massive leaps in efficiency have resulted in more productivity with less labor. Meanwhile, stagnant household wages and the lingering effects of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis have hollowed out the American lower-middle class.<sup>21</sup> Over 12 million Americans presently hold jobs in the manufacturing sector, but five million additional such jobs have disappeared from the country since 2000. Whereas nearly one in four Americans held a manufacturing job at the height of the Cold War, just eight percent of working people do now.<sup>22</sup> The majority of the American public continues to support global trade, but there is nonetheless intense skepticism toward new trade deals, as evidenced by bipartisan attacks on the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) during the 2016 campaign and President Trump's ultimate withdrawal. Unalloyed domestic support for ever-more-open markets can no longer be presumed.<sup>23</sup>

Technological change is the most powerful and inexorable of these trends, but the hallmarks of liberal internationalism—especially open economies and borders—are far juicier political targets. Changing demographics in the United States compound the sense of economic and cultural anxiety experienced by Americans

who face dimmed prospects for prosperity—immigrants and their U.S.-born children are growing as a proportion of the work force, and by 2055, the United States will not have a single majority racial or ethnic group.<sup>24</sup> The frightening specter of terrorism only enhances concern about risks to personal security posed by the permeability of national borders. Against this backdrop, appeals to exclusive forms of identity—whether national, racial, or ethnic—have become more salient, and Americans have become increasingly skeptical about the ability of democratic government to rise to the host of challenges.<sup>25</sup> This cynicism has translated to a growing preference for strong leadership over the electoral trappings of democracy, especially among millennials.<sup>26</sup> These conditions sow fertile ground for populism, nativism, and nationalism to flourish—political movements that threaten to erode the very liberal-democratic roots of U.S. leadership of the postwar order. What is more, populism’s ascendance is evident not only in the United States, but throughout the West, as Europe, the United States’ most steadfast liberal partner, faces similar challenges.

These fractures have foreboding implications for the West’s leadership of the international order, and for the cohesion of the liberal-democratic bloc itself. If existing domestic structures cannot address the manifold economic, security, and political anxieties within states, the international order that seeks to regulate interactions between them is unlikely to endure. This fact is not lost on autocratic adversaries: popular fissures create openings for the intrusion of threats from without, and Russia continues to hone the playbook for how best to exploit internal divisions to undermine the West from within. As controversies surrounding Russian meddling in the 2016 election continue to engulf Washington, Russian government-linked social media accounts fan the flames of domestic unrest well beyond the Beltway by amplifying the grievances of preexisting movements on the far right and left.

Absent a strong consensus on the threats America faces abroad and how these relate to its considerable domestic agenda, the country is likely to display more tepid, mercurial support for liberal internationalism.<sup>27</sup> The future of American foreign policy and the institutions it supports requires stable domestic foundations. Twenty-first century American internationalism must acknowledge and address the roots of contemporary nationalism if it is to survive.

## Meeting the “America First” Challenge

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Amidst wavering support for internationalism, there is an understandable temptation to characterize the failure as one of explanation. If only the American people could better comprehend the benefits they accrued from open trade, open borders, and open societies—exemplified by the United States at home and policed by the

United States abroad—they would surely embrace the same geopolitical tenets that many elites hold dear. And, indeed, the liberal international order has a rather fantastic record to recommend it. It has, after all, offered unprecedented security, freedom, and prosperity around the world for more than 70 years—a marked departure from “most of prior human history,” which, as international affairs commentator Fareed Zakaria rightly points out, “is a tale of economic mercantilism, political conflict, and repeated war.”<sup>28</sup> This historic achievement would seem to suggest, as Stephen Hadley recently told the Council on Foreign Relations, that the order’s founding principles remain essentially sound, even as a modernization of the order itself might be necessary.<sup>29</sup>

To simply restate the case for a liberal-internationalist grand strategy, however, would be to underestimate the depths of the challenge from within as well as without. Taken at face value, the “America First” doctrine Trump articulated over the course of the 2016 campaign is little more than a collection of the president’s own instincts. Yet the resonance of his message was not simply a matter of salesmanship akin to the successful hawking of steak, beauty pageants, or hotels. Rather, these ideas exemplify what the president does most brilliantly: rebranding old wine in shiny Trump bottles. The America First vision gained traction precisely because it echoes long-standing traditions in U.S.

**To simply restate the case for a liberal-internationalist grand strategy underestimates the challenge.**

foreign policy: those of rowdy Jacksonian populism and lone-cowboy unilateralism. America First is, at its core, a message animated by nationalism and nativism. Its “economic nationalist” creed seeks to reassert domestic control over the economy by pulling back from international trade, unshackling from multilateral regimes, and stemming immigrant flows.<sup>30</sup> In so doing, the argument goes, the United States can regain sovereignty while cultivating a purer national identity and improving the lot of average Americans.<sup>31</sup> Economic nationalism has clear antecedents in what Walter Russell Mead, a scholar of American foreign policy, called the Jacksonian school of American foreign policy—an association gleefully embraced by Trump himself.<sup>32</sup>

This swashbuckling ethos infuses the America First project of rebuilding foreign relations on the basis of ruthless unilateralism and narrowly defined pursuit of the national interest. By retreating from multilateral agreements that require comity and compromise, the United States will pursue better bilateral relationships—especially more favorable trade deals—as well as fit-for-purpose partnerships designed to defend the West against the paramount threat of Islamic terrorism.<sup>33</sup> In rejecting institutionalized and multilateral cooperation, Trump evokes the storied school of American unilateralism—a mode of thought that stretches

back to the early days of the Republic, when George Washington and Thomas Jefferson warned against permanent alliances, which would endanger the national interest by compromising the United States' sovereignty and freedom of action.<sup>34</sup> While unilateralism can manifest as isolationism, in Trump's case it is not: rather, America First implies a selective and unpredictable pattern of American global engagement, not a wholesale retrenchment from the world so much as a jolting abdication of leadership.

Viewed through this lens, America First must be seen as a full-throated rebuke of liberal internationalism and the antecedent of an alternative grand strategic vision for the United States. By winning the presidency, Trump has succeeded where his predecessors have failed, in leading his populist-nationalist charge all the way to the White House. Of course, there are myriad caveats. Trump's Electoral College victory is not tantamount to the wholesale embrace of his foreign policy principles by the American public.<sup>35</sup> The 2016 campaign was not won or lost on issues of foreign policy, and most of the population continues to support U.S. global leadership, including alliances and its membership in international institutions and agreements.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, the disconnect between Trump and the comparatively mainstream views of his senior-most national security advisers creates the temptation to dismiss the America First proto-doctrine out of hand, as it surely does not serve as a reliable guide to policy.

But to ignore it, or to celebrate its foundering in early encounters with the realities of governance, would be to miss how pressures that threaten the liberal international order from within amplify long-standing traditions in U.S. foreign

policy—a confluence that suggests the challenge to American internationalism will not evaporate with Trump's departure from the Oval Office. Trump's success signals there is political space—and perhaps political advantage—in a foreign policy platform that rejects U.S. leadership of the liberal international order. For all the pomp and pettiness of Trump himself, the challenge he embodies is a serious one, and it demands a compelling response.

**C**ontemporary international threats indicate a need for the U.S. to advance new forms of order.

A reflexive return to liberal-internationalist orthodoxy will not be a sufficient riposte: the dizzying array of challenges facing the extant order are simply not manageable within the pre-existing intellectual framework. Even if persistent public support for internationalism subdues the America First challenge within three years' time, the nature of contemporary international threats indicates a need for the United States to advance new forms of order.

Internationalists must thus resist the urge to become absolute defenders of the pre-Trump status quo: such a Manichean approach fails to reckon with the realities of a post-Trump world, transformed by deeply rooted structural forces, not just the flagrant unpredictability of the president's tenure. Retreating to a defensive crouch further risks stifling productive pluralism within the internationalist camp, wherein unity against Trump is not tantamount to agreement on a singular vision for international order. Instead, the paramount priority must be a fresh grand-strategic vision that learns from the successes and failures of an order that has served the United States exceptionally well since 1945, while acknowledging that the next 70 years will not resemble the last.

### **Toward a Next-Generation Grand Strategy**

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As much of the foreign policy community stands on the sidelines of the Trump administration—dislodged from power and diminished in influence—it is natural (and necessary) for leading thinkers to denounce order-imperiling foreign policy errors where they see them. With Trump's penchant for renegeing on international agreements and issuing incredible policy pronouncements, American leadership already declined acutely during the administration's first year. Over four years' time, the damage will only accrue, as global challenges from Russia and China mount, and climate change, terrorism, cyber risks, and technological diffusion continue. The order will suffer from without and within in new and consequential ways.

The generation of foreign policy officials and thinkers that follows Trump is therefore unlikely to have the option of simply reverting to post-World War II structures or power configurations. And yet, in the next few decades, no other country will become *more* powerful on the global stage than the United States. Assuming China's economy does not stall, its influence in Asia will continue to grow; Moscow's malfeasance will not ultimately abate Russian decline. The United States will remain globally preponderant. No other superpower capable of crafting a new form of global order will emerge.

Amidst these dynamics, international affairs experts cannot resign themselves to simply critiquing the seared remains of the liberal international order. Instead, they must recognize that novel order-building projects have often followed dark epochs including the Napoleonic Wars, World War I, and World War II. The most fruitful order-building effort in modern history—the post-World War II institutions, ultimately led by the United States—began well before wartime darkness had broken. This close association between war and order building is part of why the most ardent defenders of the liberal international order are so trenchant: they associate major international change with war and destruction.<sup>37</sup> Yet, the system need not buckle in global conflict for us to recognize

the prior order is damaged—indeed, peaceful management of ongoing power shifts is itself the epochal challenge, particularly in the nuclear age. In service of that goal, the present effort, like its twentieth century predecessors, must look over the horizon at the world to come.

**Three elemental assumptions of the extant international order must be reassessed.**

The task at hand is formidable: a twenty-first century vision of international order, advanced through an American strategy that properly couples foreign policy objectives with material and political resources. In crafting that vision, international relations thinkers must take care to build on sound intellectual foundations: principles that reflect the world as it is and will become, rather than the world as it was or ideally should be. A necessary first step,

therefore, is a thorough interrogation of the assumptions underlying the extant international order, to determine whether they are robust to growing pressures from within and without. Such critical analysis should center on three elemental issues.

First, the refashioned order must cope with the broad political and economic implications of a return to great power politics with autocratic competitors. Challenges from China and Russia demonstrate that post-Cold War ambitions to universalize liberal values alongside U.S.-led institutions remain unrealized. Economic openness has yielded positive-sum gains and significant interdependencies, yet it has also supercharged the growth of China as the United States' primary prospective adversary. The challenge of illiberal competitors raises a suite of questions: Should the United States pursue a vision of international order that is predicated on sustained cooperation with autocratic regimes? Can an international order be economically and politically open if its leading states are not liberal? If not, what does that portend for the organizing principles of order, and if so, how might a mixed-regime order be constructed? What aspects of the prevailing liberal international order are likely to be revised—and where should the United States resist those changes?

Second, security institutions must be modernized to address the changing character of violent conflict. The emergence of new domains of warfare has challenged long-standing concepts of deterrence and lowered the barriers for intrusions upon state sovereignty. This includes sub-conventional and paramilitary warfare, which relies on fairly traditional means and which China and Russia have used in very different ways in their peripheries. It also includes cyber warfare, which is a novel conflict domain and is not governed by international laws or institutions. What norms should guide the legitimate use of force—whether by individual states or collective defense organizations—and how should those norms be

enforced? How should states identify and respond to uses of force that fall short of traditional conflict? To what extent can instruments of global order attenuate new modes of security competition—and where will the United States require independent means of defense?

Third, the growing dangers posed by cyber threats, climate change, information and technological diffusion, terrorism, and pandemics necessitate a global order that facilitates cooperation in these under-governed spaces. To what extent should state sovereignty remain sacrosanct in light of these transnational challenges? More fundamentally, can and should states remain the primary unit of organization in constructing a new vision of global order—and, if not, which actors should replace states and on which issues? Though by no means exhaustive, these questions are indicative of a generational research agenda—one that must be complemented by an associated effort to revitalize the promises of prosperity proffered by liberal domestic-political orders.

### **Diagnosis, Design, and Defense**

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As international affairs thinkers approach their charge, they would be wise to contemplate the methods that guided postwar strategists with their task 70 years ago. The scholars and statesmen of the mid-twentieth century began by diagnosing the strategic challenge before them. They saw a war-ravaged world in abject need of rehabilitation, and a newly powerful United States, which could not turn inward if it was to guarantee its own security that new era. They proceeded to design anchoring institutions centered on the United Nations that could address contemporary challenges while also bearing the load of additional layers of order to come. And, finally, they recognized the limits of institutionalized international cooperation, identified where zero-sum competition would still exist, and took care to defend U.S. interests in those areas. The American alliance system, for example, was an acknowledgment that the UN could not cure all ills, and that the United States would have to take some unilateral measures to ensure its own survival. Throughout this effort, order-builders took note of post-World War I failures, and maintained a fundamental realism about what institutions and collective action can accomplish.

A twenty-first century international order audit should be guided by a similar method. First, it must diagnose which international forces are causing the liberal international order to fray and the domestic constraints that prevent the United States from simply repairing the damage wherever it arises. It must determine what vital national interests the United States can reasonably protect and how international institutions and regimes can serve these goals.

Second, as they contemplate the principles that should guide institutional design, foreign policy strategists will no doubt find that many existing structures remain relevant and useful, and that others require modest renovations but are basically sound. Beyond the institutional edifice, any redesign must also consider the order's foundational values—and whether the United States' longstanding commitment to embedded Western-style political and economic liberalism can and should remain. Strategists will also need to contemplate how new layers of order can be added onto existing frameworks—and how any new institution can become the cornerstone for future construction.

Finally, strategists must define the limits of this order and prepare to defend U.S. interests outside of its scope. They should consider the optimal design of the American military for its deterrence and defense missions, as well as the conditions under which Washington should prepare to enforce the order's rules through discretionary uses of force. An evaluation of the U.S. alliance systems in Europe and Asia should attend to the need for modernization, as well as allies' contributions to forward defense and burden sharing.

The purpose of this endeavor is, of course, not to attempt to conjure a new order from nothing—many prevailing institutional structures will survive the Trump years intact even if they are tattered. But their mere endurance does not necessarily mean they are aptly suited to twenty-first century tasks. The object of this undertaking is to identify where existing order does not meet twenty-first century needs and to assess how American strategy can be crafted to help implement it. The next generation of policymakers will not face the burden of rebuilding a decimated international order from the ground up, but should not cling to it simply out of a sense of historical inertia. Through this type of analysis, international affairs thinkers can assemble a representation of the world they will soon confront, and begin to contemplate an American approach that will prevent the order from being upended through more violent means later.

**Thoughtful plans for rebuilding new and needed forms of order will require advanced preparation.**

Envisioning American strategy for a new form of international order is an intellectual exercise, but it is also an essential enterprise. As prevailing trends and a dissonant presidency continue to jolt domestic and international politics alike, havoc is all but assured. Thoughtful plans for rebuilding new and needed forms of order will require advanced preparation.

If foreign policy thinkers do not actively anticipate the forces that will shape the international system and assess these as drivers of America's global role, they will find themselves

four or eight years on with a crystallized set of foreign policy expectations and a

transformed world that does not conform to them. If, instead, they take up the charge of envisioning an international system and an American strategy that befits the world as it will be, international affairs thinkers will once again be prepared to bring new order when the chaos breaks.

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