Few foreign policy issues have attracted more recent attention than the fate of the post-war liberal international order. There is abundant evidence that its norms and institutions have helped stabilize world politics and promote U.S. interests,¹ but it appears to be under intense strain from multiple challenges.² Revisionist powers view it as unjust; U.S. willpower to enforce its norms may be waning; and a global reaction against the costs of trade and globalization is eating away at the order’s underlying ideology.³ Senator John McCain recently lauded the post-war generation who “believed in the value of a rules-based international order,” an order that McCain believes is “under assault” and “coming apart” due to revisionist powers and violent non-state actors.⁴ Those analyses emerged, moreover, before the advent of the Trump administration, which is now engaged in an active and at times critical review of policies that have underwritten the order.⁵ These developments have placed the survival of the post-war American-sponsored order, indeed of any ordering principles at all, in question.

To make the case for the post-war order, proponents typically point to the value of its distinct component parts such as the effects of trade treaties, the deterrent benefit of alliances, or the value of key norms. The default portrait of the order, in fact, is a collection of specific institutions—often equated with international organizations—and the only fully-developed academic literature on international order deals with the effects of such institutions. This perspective views the order as a conscious creation at a specific moment—the years after 1945—whose importance lies in these discrete elements. Its breakdown can be measured by their
unravelling, and U.S. policies in support of the order ought to focus on enforcing or reaffirming specific norms and institutions.

This essay argues that such an institutional focus—while important—is misplaced. The more important role of the post-1945 international order has been to consolidate a group of over 40 states, as well as an accompanying web of non-state actors, that have come to represent a stabilizing gravitational core of the international system. The institutions and norms of the order are important in their own right, but take on their most critical roles as the connective tissue, or binding agents, of this “guiding coalition” at the heart of world politics. In order to make that case, this essay first argues that an identifiable group of countries represents the gravitational core of the order, and points to the ways in which the post-war institutional order has been essential in unifying this core group. It then catalogues the ways in which such a guiding coalition, when gathered into a structured order, can affect the behavior and preferences of states both within the coalition and outside it. The essay concludes by suggesting specific U.S. policies that would strengthen the coalition.

The post-1945 international order has consolidated a “guiding coalition” at the heart of world politics.

The Emergence of a Guiding Coalition

The outstanding international trend since 1945 has been the rise, first within the West and then more generally, of a collection of states and associated non-state actors that form what can be called a guiding coalition of the international system. Its members are not linked in a unique organization or alliance, but they share a number of preferences and most view themselves as members of a de facto community. They are all deeply integrated into global trade networks, and have tied their national fate to the prosperity associated with such integration. They support the rule of law and good governance—even if some are still working toward those goals. They generally respect the norm of non-aggression and peaceful resolution of disputes, and none holds intense, unresolved grievances against the existing order. They participate actively, and invest financially and in other ways, in a broad set of international organizations, and accept the principle of collective security. They are relatively open to flows of information and are linked by an increasingly dense network of non-state actors, from multinational corporations with global reach like Wal-Mart or Exxon Mobil to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) ranging from Amnesty International to trade and professional associations.6
Having emerged as an informal group, the coalition has been formalized and regulated by the institutions and rules of the post-war order. The resulting combination—of a critical mass of like-minded states that form the center of gravity in international politics nested within the institutions, rules, and norms of the post-war order—has had a profound effect on world politics. It has, in particular, created a context far safer for the United States and its interests, and more amenable to the spread of its values.

**Engines of the Gravitational Core: Modernization, Democracy, and a Shared Fate**

The emergence of the guiding coalition is the product of three trends in particular: international development under the dominant neoliberal socioeconomic model; the growth of liberal democratic systems; and the recognition of shared interests in dealing with common threats and opportunities in an integrated global system. The post-war era has been one of astonishing growth in wealth: By 2015, over 100 countries had achieved per-capita GDPs of over $10,000 (calculated in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms). While it has hardly been uniform, since the 1980s this development has occurred under a largely shared sense of an economic ideology—the neoliberal philosophy of trade openness, economic reform, and the rule of law. Partly as a result, prosperity has become the chief goal and legitimating factor for governments—and critically, the emergence of an integrated global marketplace means that it cannot be achieved without participation in these shared markets. Moreover, nations that become prosperous tend to see similar shifts in values—rising individualism, tolerance, and concern for the environment. Modernization also kindles the growth of a thick network of sub-state actors, led by corporations and civil society organizations, which have added muscle to the connective tissue linking members of the coalition and reinforced the norms and habits of the order.

A second post-war trend has been the rise of liberal democracy. In Freedom House’s estimation, 34 percent of countries in the world were free in 1986, as compared to 34 percent partly free, and 32 percent not free. By 2016, after a slight dip over the prior decade, fully 45 percent of countries were free, with only 25 percent not free. Democratic systems are then empirically linked to a range of behaviors that shape the international system: less war-making against one another, appreciation for the rule of law, and cooperative resolution of disputes. Democracies also tend to produce thriving civil societies which spread beyond their borders, intensifying the process of non-state integration begun by modernization.

Finally, the third post-war trend critical to the emergence of a guiding coalition has been the rise of security issues that link the fate of nations and demand collective action. These include environmental health and security, global organized
crime, terrorism, piracy, and infectious disease. The result is a clear awareness on the part of governments and populaces alike that collaboration is essential to the security and prosperity of individual nations.

The argument here is thus not that globalization or interdependence has transcended power politics or national competition. Indeed the argument is only secondarily about interdependence per se. Instead, the evolving shape of world politics has increasingly constrained the way states must conceive of self-interest—accelerating that trend with the socialization of norms, and creating a crucial supportive framework in the form of the post-war order and its shared institutions. The result is the rise of a set of states, operating in an increasingly dense network of non-state actors, that have overlapping values as well as preferences and share three major commitments: territorial non-aggression; economic integration and a stable global market; and collective action in the name of shared interests. Most of these states share a fourth commitment—liberal values including democracy, human rights, and tolerance—but the level of that commitment, the way it is expressed, and the degree to which this factor has been a precondition for membership in the guiding coalition has shifted over time.

Determining Membership in the Guiding Coalition

No single international organization or roster of states reflects the resulting core group. It is not a formal alliance or even an informal assembly with defined membership like the G20. It is not strictly a “community of liberal democracies” as classically understood; while, as we will see, the vast majority of its members are democracies, the overall coalition comprises democracies and non-democracies, states and non-state actors. An obvious initial question, therefore, is whether an identifiable core group exists that is linked by meaningful preferences and characteristics—or whether, in fact, these are states with dramatically different goals and values only related by accidental and self-interested connections.

In order to establish an initial set of criteria to test that question, we should look for basic indicators of states that are—among other things—deeply integrated into global networks, participate extensively in international organizations and diplomatic processes, contribute in various forms to global governance, support a handful of key norms of the post-war order, and have no ambitions to upset that order. In sum, we are looking for states that can be described as order-
producing rather than order-consuming, and who reflect, or are working diligently to reflect, internal social, economic, and political characteristics that make them effective members of a modern global order. To get an initial snapshot, this analysis ranked countries according to a number of such criteria, listed in Table 1.

This list is not designed to be definitive or comprehensive. It is, for example, weighted to economic and institutional issues, though I test the results it produces against other possible criteria in areas of liberal values and security. In particular, this initial set of criteria reflects a snapshot of current membership and does not account for changes over time. Some of these states would not have made the list in 1975 or 1985; a possible criticism is that it thus only represents a moment in time rather than a directional trend—states could just as easily fall off the list as join it. In most cases, however, the patterns of behavior here reflect the accumulation of decades of engagement in international institutions and processes. And the basic contention of this argument is that a guiding coalition now exists, not that it always has. The question, then, given the nature of the criteria, was whether a coherent group of states emerged that reliably met them.

This initial ranking suggested that the answer was yes: About 45 countries consistently appear on all the major indices of order-producing states and comprise the core group of the guiding coalition. The pattern is fairly tight, without major outliers. Another fifteen states meet at least two or three of the leading criteria (as well as others noted below) and could be said to form an identifiable second tier of the coalition, though the boundaries of this group are much more subjective.

Table 1: Criteria for Inclusion in Guiding Coalition

- Leadership role at the United Nations—specifically, countries that are permanent members, or who have been elected three or more times as rotating members since 1970, of the UN Security Council
- The biggest trading states—the countries that rank in the top 50 of either global merchandise imports or exports
- Countries that belong to at least one major regional institution
- The top 30 countries as measured by total membership in international organizations
- Countries whose central banks are members of the Bank of International Settlements
- Top contributors to the IMF (over 3 million SDRs in allocations)
- The top 50 donor countries to the World Bank’s Financial Intermediary Fund
- The top 50 most globalized countries as measured in the KOF Globalization Index, which measures levels of integration in economics, society, and politics
- Countries in the top 20 global foreign assistance donors in terms of either total amount or total as a percentage of GDP
Figure 1 outlines the two broad layers of the resulting coalition. All of the states in the core met at least four of the nine criteria; the bolded states (19) met at least eight.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the resulting coalition reflects two key categories that have long been central to thinking about the post-war order: liberal democracies and countries in the “Western community” broadly defined (to include, for example, Japan, the Republic of Korea and Australia). As I will argue below, the nature of the coalition thus reinforces empirical evidence about the complementary nature of value-sharing democracies and international order. But the coalition includes some non-democracies, and even among the democracies there are significant disagreements over how the order should reflect those values. Yet, I would argue not to simply term this a “coalition of democracies,” for at least two reasons: The gravitational effects of these trends in world politics apply almost equally to democracies and others, and such a formulation would unnecessarily restrict U.S. flexibility in gathering more members into the group. The guiding coalition is (and probably must be) built around a set of value-sharing democracies, and it could never include viciously authoritarian states such as North Korea. But there is room in between for other states that respect key international rules and norms, that have a significant and improving degree
of rule of law at home, that rhetorically support key liberal values, and that are hopefully making progress in that direction.

The consistency and uniformity of the members of the guiding coalition—the existence, in other words, of an identifiable core group of the world community—is further strengthened by comparisons with other potential criteria. The core group includes all the top financial contributors to UN peacekeeping missions, all the top UN donors in general, and most of the top sources and destinations for foreign direct investment. It reflects leading producers of civil society: The Johns Hopkins Center for Civil Society Studies ranks a set of leading countries in terms of the significance of civil society organizations in the larger society. Of the top 36 countries they rate, 28 represent members of the core group, and two more are in the second tier.

We can further disaggregate the coalition according to indicators of liberal values. Of the 45 countries in the core, Freedom House categorizes 36 as “free.” Five more are partly free and indeed well-established emergent democracies: Colombia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mexico, and Singapore. (One—Turkey—has been a strong democracy, though its current trajectory is concerning.) Only three are rated as unfree: two leading Gulf states—Saudi Arabia and UAE—and Thailand, in the grip of military rule since 2014 but with the potential to return to democratic rule. If we look to economic freedom, the story is slightly more mixed but still shows impressive consistency. One leading index rates 40 of the 45 core countries as either free, mostly free, or moderately free in 2017. Five are in the “mostly unfree” category: Argentina, Brazil, Greece, India, and Slovenia; but all of these countries are determined to improve that ranking. They are heading further into the core, not away from it.

Finally, the countries of the guiding coalition are also the leading security providers in the international system, and demonstrably committed to norms of non-aggression. All the states in the core have signed up to the UN Charter and other, parallel non-aggression standards in regional charters. All U.S. alliance members are represented by the core, as are nearly all contributors to peace enforcement operations in the Balkans, Afghanistan, and the first Gulf War. Broadly, the states in the coalition tend to follow norms of non-aggression: The Correlates of War Project lists a dozen countries as initiators of Militarized Interstate Disputes (MIDs) from 1990 to 2010. Russia and the United States head the list; China, the United Kingdom, and France have prominent places, as do Israel and India. The other five countries that initiated MIDs are Turkey, Iran, Ethiopia, Myanmar, and North Korea. In other words, of the 45 core members of the coalition, 40 have not initiated any militarized disputes since 1990, and three...
others (the United States, United Kingdom, and France) have done so, at least in their minds, in order to enforce rather than violate norms of the order. These results are symptomatic of a broader reality, and an important additional criterion: The coalition is composed of status-quo countries. None has powerful unresolved territorial claims or ambitions that constitute a dominant focus of its foreign and national security policy. None is viewed as a militarily aggressive regional actor.

The coalition is composed of status-quo countries.

If the states of the guiding coalition adhere to key norms of world politics, another critical fact about this core group is that it represents an overwhelmingly predominant share of global military and economic power. Taken together, the two tiers represent thirteen of the top fifteen defense budgets (minus only China and Russia), well over 70 percent of world military expenditures, and something like 73 percent of global GDP. If they are roughly aligned, no aggressive state could directly challenge this gathering of power—a fact with huge benefits for the United States, as the global leader in economics and security. Simply put, the existence of a guiding coalition does a lot of deterrent and shaping work for the United States, at relatively little cost.

The manner in which power relations are set to change, however, gives some clue as to the reforms necessary to keep the coalition aligned. By the year 2050, according to the consulting firm PwC, measured in purchasing power parity terms, China will have overtaken the top spot in global GDP rankings—and the top ten will include states such as India, Indonesia, Brazil, and Nigeria. Important developing states in the coalition then, including its second tier, will gain ground in relative economic and thus military power. As these relative power balances shift, the decision-making authority within the guiding coalition must evolve along with it.

The Outliers: Russia and China

The role of Russia and China in relation to the coalition and the post-war order is complicated but not necessarily adversarial. The list of the guiding coalition does not include them for two reasons. First, each diverges from nearly all other members of the coalition in key metrics beyond the baseline set—in the rule of law, the use of force, and liberal values. Second, each has outsized regional ambitions and/or grievances with the current order that raise serious questions about whether they will be able to live within its constraints.

Yet, this exercise also raises an interesting fact whose implications should not be underestimated: Both Russia and China meet all nine of the criteria listed in Table 1. Both are heavily integrated into the world community and major investors in
the key institutions of the order. This is especially true of China, whose behavior over the last two decades—apart from its aggressive, sometimes bellicose promotion of sovereign claims in the South and East China Seas—has been increasingly supportive of many of the order’s norms and institutions in areas from peacekeeping to development to climate to counter-piracy. Although Russia has been edging closer to true outlier status, neither should be viewed as an antagonist of the current international order. While neither is willing to be simply absorbed into a U.S-led order, the leverage provided by the coalition, the institutional mechanisms of the order, and the desire at least on the part of China to be recognized as a leader of that order suggest the contours of a long-term strategy toward these two great powers, which will be briefly outlined below.

The Non-State Feedback Loop

Especially in the 21st century, the composition of the guiding coalition of world politics is not limited to states. As New America President Anne-Marie Slaughter has argued, the international order is increasingly a complex overlapping combination of states, intergovernmental organizations, corporations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), activist groups, and empowered individuals. She places particular emphasis on networks that link government officials in formal and informal ways. The power of global markets—corporations, investment managers, banks, and other non-state economic actors—is already immense, and tends to reinforce the coalition’s imperative on rule of law and stability. We should therefore conceive of the guiding coalition as a multi-tier phenomenon: States sit on top, but they reside on layers of sub-state entities including corporations, NGOs, membership networks and associations, and epistemic communities. The influence of all of these layers working together creates the sum total effect of the coalition.

While some non-state actors have been disruptive—terrorist groups, criminal organizations, hackers—most tend to reinforce the essential normative components of the post-war order. Global networks of activists, scholars, and officials play important roles in the dialogue and policy outcomes of a number of issues—from human rights to climate to cyber—in ways that generally amplify the signals and influences of the guiding coalition. Arguably, the most important effect of non-state actors comes from the economic leverage of capital markets and the foreign investment decisions of major corporations. Markets and firms exercise this influence largely independent of state choices, and thus reflect a strong independent amplifying factor of the gravitational forces at work constraining state preferences. States hoping to flourish outside the guiding coalition, or to engage in highly destabilizing behavior, might be able to convince some states to look the other way—but would still confront the verdict of markets.
The Embryo of an International Society

Merely because the member states of an emergent coalition appear on many similar lists does not mean that they will act as a group. Yet the states in the coalition do share significant preferences, grounded in the desire for stability in a shared global marketplace. And gradually, the implicit coordination among these states has become more formalized, in a thick web of associated rules, norms, habits, and institutions.

This trend points to the true role and importance of the post-war institutional order. It has played a critical role in providing structure, stability, and predictability to the growing networks of relations among the states of the coalition. Its economic institutions have steadied and advanced the process of economic integration that is the coalition’s most important connective tissue. The order offers dozens of institutional forums for members of the coalition (and others) to cooperate on issues of shared concern. The result has been to build habits of consultation that begin to affect state preferences, and to lock the states of the core into a web of increasingly sticky institutions. The order has played another crucial role: Fostering the shared normative standard against which members of this emerging international community are judged.

The gravitational effect of a guiding coalition thus joins with the sticky institutions and increasingly shared norms of a formal order to shape world politics.

The coalition, however, is the foundational influence. This is a reminder of a well-known historical truth about international orders: their institutions, norms, and rules are less important in their own right than as outgrowths of more fundamental geopolitical and ideological trends. The order has built a stabilizing framework for those trends, but it is a reflection or echo of them rather than an independent force. If the geopolitical consensus of the coalition were to break down, the institutions of the post-war order would collapse as well. Challenges to the order are thus more properly viewed as symptoms of deeper maladies in the geopolitical and ideological consensus of the guiding coalition, such as collapsing support for free trade and globalization. The United States could invest heavily in dozens of the order’s leading institutions—but if public and official backing dries up for the basic drivers of the coalition, it will mean little. The priority for U.S. policy must be to attend to the underlying trends first, using the elements of the order to shape that process.

The result has been incremental progress toward what can be called a community or society, at least among members of the coalition. An international society is
more than just a system, in which units are interacting with one another. It is a situation in which those units have “established by dialogue and consent common rules and institutions for the conduct of their relations, and recognize their common interest in maintaining these arrangements.”\textsuperscript{22} This describes the guiding coalition, especially inasmuch as it has been knitted together by the institutions and rules of the post-war order. The result is a loose, sometimes disagreeable, often slow-to-act community or society of states that reflect some consensus on main principles.

In his latest book, uber-realist Henry Kissinger acclaims the rise of an “inexorably expanding cooperative order of states observing common rules and norms, embracing common economic systems, forswearing territorial conquest, respecting national sovereignty, and adopting participatory and democratic systems of governance.”\textsuperscript{23} These are exactly the norms of the coalition, in more or less priority order. The question then becomes whether even a loose assembly of such states, as formalized and coordinated through an institutional order, can shape the preferences and behavior of the system.

### Mechanisms of Effects

The answer, from both theory and experience, is that this loose assembly of states can do so in at least four powerful ways: the pressures of material competition and the associated gravitational effect of a shared global economy; shaping the criteria by which states gain status and recognition; interaction with domestic interest groups; and long-term acculturation to shared values. These mechanisms create gravitational forces pulling other states into the orbit of the core, but also provide leverage when the guiding coalition, or some subset of it, seeks to enforce the norms of the order.

#### Material Competition

The existence of a core group that dominates the world’s export, capital and information markets, and sources of technology and expert labor creates implicit, and at times explicit, leverage over the behavior of others who need access to those markets and resources. In a globalizing system, states intent on recognition and prosperity cannot flourish outside this order. Beyond shaping behavior by threatening to expel states that violate key rules, this economic effect has also spurred reforms among states both within and seeking admission to the coalition in a series of specific areas: economic liberalization, lowering tariffs and quotas, and reducing corruption.\textsuperscript{24}
As the scholar Barry Buzan summarizes, “forces of socialization and competition” are at work, “pressuring units to adapt to the practices of the most successful (and powerful) by punishing those that did not with weakness, insecurity, and possible loss of independence.”

The result has been a shared wellspring of economic growth with powerful gravitational pull. States seeking prosperity, apart from a handful with access to massive natural resources or those happy to remain isolated, know that there is simply no game in town apart from the global economy dominated by this leading group of states. Many have undertaken painful reforms in order to comply with the economic policy demands of the order’s institutions and norms, whether IMF packages or WTO criteria. This shared economy dominated by the leading members of the coalition also provides the basis for direct coercion: economic sanctions have become a leading tool for the predominant group of economic powers to demand adherence to key norms in order to gain ongoing access to the sources of prosperity.

The scholar Quddus Snyder points out that this systemic effect need not presume a fundamental impulse to cooperate. In fact, its influence relies on competitive pressures. Access to a unified global marketplace has become essential for national competitiveness, for reasons including access to capital and technology and the beneficial competitive pressures of being globally integrated. There is therefore a “massive gravitational sphere” at the heart of the post-war order, based on materialist and self-interested motives.

**Granting Status, Legitimacy, and Prestige**

A second major source of leverage is that the guiding coalition defines the basis for status in the international system. In an international context, the concept of status refers to shared beliefs about a state’s relative position as measured by “valued attributes” such as wealth, military power, cultural influence, and diplomacy. It speaks to two things: “membership in a defined club of actors, and … relative standing within such a club.” Because status (and related goals such as prestige and reputation) is relative and driven by perceptions, states can best acquire it by becoming a member in good standing of the prevailing order. Most states tend to care deeply about their reputation and standing relative to others—some have even fought wars for the purpose.

This is, in a sense, the goal of an order: To create a single reference point, a closely-aligned coalition of core states sharing a set of norms and rules and participating in a core set of institutions that governs status, prestige, and legitimacy. One critical role of the post-war order is again to define what those requirements are. States can have massive military power but continue to suffer from a status deficit if they do not meet the normative requirements of the prevailing order.
This is one reason for the dissatisfaction of Russia and China: The prevailing order accentuates norms that they believe unfairly disadvantage their status claims. There are limits to this effect. States that care little for their international standing, such as North Korea, will be beyond the reach of social pressures. But at least for the time being, most states undertake their almost universal search for status and recognition by locating themselves within the concepts of the post-war order. A shared social reality creates assumed enforcement effects by threatening condemnation and loss of prestige for rule-breakers.

**Interaction with Domestic Interest Groups**

A third mechanism by which the guiding coalition wields influence is through its interaction with domestic interest groups. The habits and norms of an international order are strongest when they are integrated with and adopted by domestic actors in member states—but the process runs both ways, because domestic interests gain influence when their goals align with a prevailing international reference group. The existence of a dominant global coalition standing for certain principles empowers economic reformers, human rights activists, environmentalists and other national interest groups with arguments and sometimes directly with resources.

Human rights norms, for example, are useful not primarily as rules that can be enforced on states as much as global standards of conduct around which rights-promoting domestic interest groups can rally. U.S. trade negotiators speak of the critical role of WTO standards in providing arguments for economic reformers in key countries seeking membership. Another example is the rise of anticorruption standards, which are now tracked and enforced by an elaborate set of global nongovernmental and quasi-governmental organizations such as Transparency International and the World Bank. These standards have become an increasingly powerful norm, even overriding centuries-old traditions in many cultures. The existence of a core group within an order provides the sort of collective expression of values that makes such a positive-sum interaction possible, by providing shared global standards and conventions that domestic interests groups can use to press their case.

**Long-Term Acculturation and Socialization**

Fourth and finally, over the longer term, the existence of a dominant global coalition of states and non-state actors becomes the engine of a deeper acculturation process by which societies come to accept and abide by certain norms. Even an informal coalition can create a “social environment” in which peoples’ motives and behavior are conditioned by their participation in social groups—the perceived pressures, obligations and opportunities of their social context. Just as is the case with status claims, one important basis for acculturation is a clearly-
established “reference group,” some accepted set of leading individuals or organizations that sets the standards for behavior and generates pressures to conform. This is exactly the role of the guiding coalition, as expressed through the institutions and norms of the post-war order—to provide the reference against which other states align their thinking. Eventually, societies come to internalize certain norms and become mostly locked in to a set of preferences.

There is ample evidence that, through these four mechanisms as well as related effects, the existence of the guiding coalition has influenced the preferences and behavior of states in identifiable ways. I will offer just one illustrative example—the broad pattern of economic liberalization that has emerged since the 1970s. This has been reflected in hundreds of specific policy changes and reforms undertaken by states anxious to join the order’s key economic (and sometimes security) institutions, as well as the rise of a thick global network of non-state actors dedicated to these norms. Markets enforce the same norms through their choice of where to invest. The practical effects can be seen in the trajectory of liberalization throughout Eastern Europe, Latin America, and Southeast Asia, and in China’s long process of partial but remarkable liberalization. This effect reflects all four categories of influence working together: competitive pressures at the level of material progress, concern for material and non-material measures of status, the role of domestic interest groups advocating for reforms, and the progress of all of this under a long-term acculturation process.

U.S. Policy toward the International Order

This essay has argued that the post-war order’s most important effect has been to formalize and give institutional coherence to a dominant global coalition of state and non-state actors committed to a handful of foundational norms. The emergence of a guiding coalition and its organizing structure, the post-war order, have created a world far less threatening to the United States and far more amenable to its values. A reversal of that trend, the breakdown of the guiding coalition into multiple competing groupings, would threaten U.S. interests in dramatic ways. If a fairly coherent gravitational core group linked by a shared order gives way to hostile regional coalitions—fired by nationalism and xenophobia, collecting local friends and allies into opposing alliances, practicing mercantilist trade policies—the international economy would sustain grievous blows, the gravitational pull of the guiding coalition would dissipate, and the stage would be set for a return to major-power conflict. Combined with the mounting availability of “gray zone” and non-attributable tools of statecraft—from cyber attacks to political manipulation to more extreme measures like engineered biological agents—such a future would promise persistent conflict and vulnerability.
This risk is very real, because as notable as the emergence of a guiding coalition has been, that trend is not self-sustaining. It relies on the belief that a shared international community produces prosperity—and so a series of economic crises could fatally undermine that perception. It demands an admission among prideful states that they can best satisfy their national ambitions within such a community—but China and Russia could wrench the coalition apart in order to open the way for their geopolitical ambitions. Powerful reactions to the modernizing and globalizing elements of the process have generated grievance-fueled nationalist movements that threaten the deeper assumptions of the guiding coalition. Sustaining a coherent guiding coalition and its institutional framework will require powerful effort.

The importance of a guiding coalition and its associated institutional order points to several policy directions. The first is that the priority for U.S. diplomacy and military relationships is to sustain and where possible deepen the coherence of the guiding coalition. This means U.S. reaffirmation of its commitment to core alliances as well as partnerships with the value-sharing democracies that represent the coalition’s most dynamic members. It means persistent training, exercising, developing operational planning capabilities, and other steps to affirm the health of those alliances as well as a broader set of partnerships. This reinforces, for example, the value of the U.S. Army’s new advise-and-assist brigade units, but it also means bolder outreach campaigns to members of the coalition with growing regional and global importance—including but not limited to Argentina, Brazil, Chile, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Mexico. These countries are not interested in being recruited as American allies, and each values its policy independence, but the United States can still seek to build ever-stronger bilateral ties and to promote their role as leaders of the coalition.

This can take a number of forms. The context for cooperation can be set by mutual statements of strategic intent that affirm key norms of the order, a good example being the 2015 U.S.–India “Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia–Pacific and Indian Ocean Region.” Washington can also work to promote useful bilateral relations among these leading coalition members—between Japan and India, for example, or Brazil and France or Indonesia and Australia. It can offer robust assistance to rising coalition members encountering economic or political headwinds, as in the case of Brazil and South Africa today. It can invest in cooperative or consultative networks among members of the coalition, whether non-state (as in conferences and dialogue processes between scholars) or state-based (such as parliamentary exchanges or military-to-military exchanges—superb examples being the U.S. Army’s Pacific Pathways and the U.S. Navy’s ongoing maritime
exercises). The United States should also be willing to compromise with members of the coalition on particular issues. The next time members such as Brazil and Turkey develop a diplomatic initiative on nonproliferation, for example, Washington should welcome the step rather than punish it.

Second, even as it seeks to strengthen the coalition, the United States should develop concepts for a more complex, multi-layered and shared international order. If the guiding coalition is to be preserved, the shifting balance of real and perceived power among its members dictates a gradual but inevitable shift toward a more multipolar future. It is not only China and Russia that resent the inequities built into the current order: Countries such as Brazil, South Africa, and India, as well as many global intergovernmental organizations (INGOs) and NGOs, have called for greater sharing of the rule-making roles. The United States can develop concepts for a variable geometry order and identify issues on which these countries can take the global lead. In the process, the United States should also take positive steps to make clear that it is also willing to live by the rules of the order; one powerful example would be a new effort to ratify the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

These first two principles highlight a clear message of this analysis: The role of a cohesive guiding coalition is more vital to long-term U.S. interests than the rigid enforcement of any one norm or treaty. The most important geopolitical and ideological work is being done by the alignment of the core states. If a U.S. ally or friend disrespects the margins of a trade deal, or chooses to express its identity in a more culturally conservative way, or if China presses the boundaries of freedom of navigation rights—these variances can be weathered, as long as they remain within certain bounds and as long as the members of the coalition continue to deepen their commitment to the lion’s share of its indicators. One rule of thumb for U.S. strategy is therefore that seeking perfection in the enforcement of rules at the risk of fracturing relations with key members of the coalition is generally self-defeating. Deciding where that tipping point lies on each issue—just how much protectionism defeats the purpose of a treaty, or how much Chinese belligerence against the fishing fleets of regional states is unacceptable—will be a persistent challenge for the architects of U.S. national security strategy.

Third, given its foundational role in justifying both the guiding coalition and the order, the United States should prioritize efforts to stabilize the institutions of a globally integrated economy. Rushing into elaborate new trade agreements is not necessary to preserve the coalition, but continued U.S. respect for existing trade treaties...
and processes is essential to a larger strategy of order. Yet, the economic foundations of the coalition are under unprecedented post-war threat today, given rising skepticism about trade in many countries and the rise of populist parties who broadly agree on more nationalistic, mercantilist approaches to trade. Sustaining some degree of consensus requires, more than anything, new ideas—ways to deal with frustration over the costs of trade and globalization, innovations to fill the space between classic trade liberalization and either stagnation or rising mercantilism and protectionism. What is needed now is U.S. leadership to hold the line on existing trade accords, avoid backsliding, strengthen habits and rules designed to avoid financial crises—and begin a dialogue on the shape of a new phase of global economic cooperation.

Fourth, sustaining the guiding coalition will demand backing off the most extreme manifestations of liberal value promotion. It is not only Russia and China that are concerned with armed liberal interventionism, whether stabilization operations or slow-motion regime change. Card-carrying liberal members of the coalition such as Brazil, India, and South Africa all take a more restrained view of the best way to promote the values of democracy and human rights. Moreover, in a more multipolar era, the United States will have little choice but to be more patient when dealing with some coalition states that are less than full democracies but otherwise supportive of its objectives and norms. In fact, the skeptics have a point: While the United States can and should speak to the long-term prospects for liberal values, Washington cannot head a sustainable, shared order built on the principle that some of its leading members are actively trying to subvert the governing systems of others. A quite energetic agenda of liberal value promotion is available that would fulfill U.S. national values without creating unnecessary tensions with others.

Fifth, the United States should recognize and invest in the role of non-state actors in strengthening the coalition and its associated order. It is easy to dismiss the significance of U.S. support for international NGOs, conferences, dialogues among scholars and officials, corporate exchanges, and other forms of non-state interactions. But given the growing role of non-state components of a multi-tier guiding coalition, their importance should not be underestimated. The United States can support a wide range of such groups and processes through direct financial means, by using its convening power, or as an active participant. Indeed, there is much room for innovation in this area—sponsoring powerful, wide-ranging, new public-private endeavors to bring the growing muscle of non-state actors to bear in a more coordinated and urgent way on key issues, such as a corporate/NGO/government alliance on renewable energy technology. Anne-Marie Slaughter has defined a number of specific types of networks—resilience, task, and scale—and provided examples of how the United States might work to catalyze efforts.
Six basic elements of a U.S. grand strategy for the coming decade and beyond follow.

in each category. Such investments can play a critical role in strengthening the burgeoning non-state connective tissue of the coalition and wider order.

Sixth and finally, the United States should use the coalition and order as the foundation for its approach to two major potential outliers—Russia and China. Both of these countries deserve a detailed treatment that will not be possible here. Yet, it is the relative unity of the guiding coalition that provides the United States with essential leverage in dealing with both. In a more multi-speed, variable-geometry world, the concept no longer has to be one in which China, for example, simply “joins” a U.S.-led order. But the fundamental U.S. strategy could be a by-product of emphasizing the coalition and its accompanying institutional order. It would engage China productively in every possible shared norm and effort of that group—indeed, the United States ought to hold out to China the prospect of co-leadership of the gravitational center of world politics. But because of the uncertainties in China’s future direction, it can also work closely with the core group members to signal the boundaries China must respect to gain such a position.

These six basic elements can reflect the fundamental components of a U.S. grand strategy for the coming decade and beyond. It would seek to shore up the guiding coalition that has stabilized world politics, continue investing in the international order that has helped formalize that community, be willing to step back from the occasional liberal overreach of the last two decades, and work patiently to shape China’s role relative to the order’s norms and values. Such an agenda ought to make clear the continued importance of U.S. leadership: It is the motive force for many key policy directions, and it can still serve as the “partner of choice” for most, if not all, members of the gravitational core group. Absent U.S. leadership, the coherence of the guiding coalition is likely to ebb away. An America slashing support for the United Nations, foreign aid, trade agreements, NGOs, environmental treaties, or other institutions of the post-war order will have less ability to shape the direction of a world community increasingly linked by such institutions and processes.

Indeed, the existence of something like a guiding coalition provides yet more evidence that U.S. investments in the post-war order have been a tremendous geopolitical bargain. U.S. support for the order has helped solidify the guiding coalition and enhanced its coercive power, and has legitimized U.S. leadership in the eyes of others. The result is to gain incalculable global advantage through the predominant influence of the coalition. Yet, this advantage cannot be taken for granted: If the combination of U.S. power and leadership and the informal mechanisms of the guiding coalition were to weaken, the result might easily be
a fragmentation of the international system and resulting instability and conflict that would cost the United States far more than its modest contributions to the international order.

This, then, is the United States’ fundamental choice today—whether, and in what form, to continue paying a price on behalf of a stable and prosperous international order. Nothing less than the future shape of world politics may be at stake.

Notes


6. The idea of a “core versus periphery” in world politics is not new. In recent times, it was a major focus of Thomas Barnett’s argument in The Pentagon’s New Map (New York: Putnam, 2004). It was a grounding theme of Immanuel Wallerstein’s world systems theory; see The Modern World System I (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011). But Wallerstein’s argument was largely economic, a quasi-Marxist account of the extractive role of core capitalist economies.


9. The choice of 1970 as the dividing line for UN Security Council leadership was chosen because, looking at the list of countries elected to temporary UNSC membership (see
United Nations Security Council, “Countries Elected Members of the Security Council,” http://www.un.org/en/sc/members/elected.asp), that date seemed to effectively divide states who may have had several early Cold War affiliations from those who are more recent and significant roles.

10. Venezuela meets four of the conditions and would in theory qualify for membership; however given its current political system and socioeconomic practices, I have left it off the list for now. It could easily join the core group, however, with changes in geopolitical direction.

11. The Baltic states pose a challenge. None of the three—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—meets four distinct criteria. But each appears on many other lists of countries at the core of a globalizing system, in areas such as rule of law, economic freedom, and economic integration. In their basic character and outlook, they are very much aligned with the direction of the guiding coalition. For this analysis, I have left them in the second tier, but they could easily be considered part of the core.


13. One key rating is the civil society workforce as a percentage of national workforce. See their 36-country data tables at Center for Civil Society Studies, Comparative Data Table (2004), http://ccss.jhu.edu/publications-findings/?did=308.


16. This data is derived from the Correlates of War MID database, http://www.correlatesofwar.org/data-sets/MIDs. The author is grateful to his colleague Bryan Frederick for assistance in accessing this data.

17. The defense spending figures are derived from the SIPRI Military Expenditure Database; the GDP figures come from the World Bank’s World Development Indicators Database, 2015.


20. For a definition and discussion of the order, see Michael J. Mazarr, Miranda Friehe, Andrew Radin, and Astrid Cevallos, Understanding the Current International Order (Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, 2016).