The Plot Against American Foreign Policy

Can the Liberal Order Survive?

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Is the world witnessing the demise of the U.S.-led liberal order? If so, this is not how it was supposed to happen. The great threats were supposed to come from hostile revisionist powers seeking to overturn the postwar order. The United States and Europe were supposed to stand shoulder to shoulder to protect the gains reaped from 70 years of cooperation. Instead, the world's most powerful state has begun to sabotage the order it created. A hostile revisionist power has indeed arrived on the scene, but it sits in the Oval Office, the beating heart of the free world. Across ancient and modern eras, orders built by great powers have come and gone—but they have usually ended in murder, not suicide.

U.S. President Donald Trump's every instinct runs counter to the ideas that have underpinned the postwar international system. Trade, alliances, international law, multilateralism, environmental protection, torture, and human rights—on all these core issues, Trump has made pronouncements that, if acted on, would bring to an end the United States' role as guarantor of the liberal world order. He has broken with 70 years of tradition by signaling the end of U.S. support for the European Union: endorsing Brexit and making common cause with right-wing European parties that seek to unravel the postwar European project. In his inaugural address, Trump declared, "From this moment on, it's going to be America first," and he announced his intention to rethink the central accomplishments of the U.S.-led order—the trade and alliance systems. Where previous presidents have invoked the country's past foreign policy triumphs, Trump describes "horrible deals" and allies that "aren't paying their bills." His is a vision of a dark and dangerous world in which the United States is besieged by Islamic terrorism, immigrants, and crime as its wealth and confidence fade. In his revisionist narrative, the era of Pax Americana—the period in which the United States wielded the most power on the world stage—is defined above all by national loss and decline.

Trump's challenge to the liberal order is all the more dangerous because it comes with a casual disrespect for the norms and values of liberal democracy itself. The president has questioned the legitimacy of federal judges, attacked the press, and shown little regard for the Constitution or the rule of law. Facts, evidence, scientific knowledge, due diligence, reasoned discourse—the essential elements of democratic political life—are disparaged daily. One must look long and hard to find any utterances by Trump about the virtues of the nation's political traditions, the genius of the Founding Fathers, or the great struggles and accomplishments of liberal democracy. This silence speaks loudly. And in February, when asked on Fox News

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why he respected Russian President Vladimir Putin even though he is "a killer," Trump dismissed 250 years of national ideals and the work of generations of Americans who have strived to reach the moral high ground, responding, "What, you think our country's so innocent?"

The profundity of this political moment is greater still because it occurs amid a wider crisis across the liberal democratic world. The centrist and progressive governing coalitions that built the postwar order have weakened. Liberal democracy itself appears fragile, vulnerable in particular to far-right populism. Some date these troubles to the global financial crisis of 2008, which widened economic inequality and fueled grievances across the advanced industrial democracies, the original patrons and beneficiaries of the order. In recent years, Western publics have increasingly come to regard the liberal international order not as a source of stability and solidarity among like-minded states but as a global playground for the rich and powerful. Trump is less a cause than a consequence of the failings of liberal democracy. But now that he is in office, his agenda promises to further undermine its foundations.

If the liberal international order is to survive, leaders and constituencies around the world that still support it will need to step up. Much will rest on the shoulders of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan and Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany, the only two leaders of consequence left standing who support it. Trump has abdicated responsibility for the world the United States built, and only time will tell the full extent of the damage he will wreak.

DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU GOT

Trump's dark narrative of national decline ignores the great American accomplishment of the twentieth century: the building of the liberal international order. Constructed in the years following World War II, the order is complex and sprawling, organized around economic openness, multilateral institutions, security cooperation, democratic solidarity, and internationalist ideals. For decades, the United States has served as the system's first citizen, providing leadership and public goods—anchoring the alliances, stabilizing the world economy, fostering cooperation, and championing the values of openness and liberal democracy. Europe and Japan helped build the order, tying their fortunes to multilateral organizations and enlightened U.S. leadership. The bilateral alliance with the United States is enshrined in Japan's constitution. NATO played a critical role in Germany's postwar rebirth and, half a century later, its peaceful reunification. Over time, more states signed up, attracted to the fair-minded rules and norms of the order. A system of alliances now stretches across the globe, linking the United States to Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East.

Compared with past orders—imperial and anarchic systems of various sorts, from the Greek and Chinese worlds of the classical era to the nineteenth-century European imperial system—the liberal order stands alone. Choose your metric. But in terms of wealth creation, the provision of physical security and economic stability, and the promotion of human rights and political protections, no other international order in history comes close. The liberal order may have its shortcomings—costly and ill-advised wars have been fought in its name, and

vast economic and social injustices remain—but it has empowered people across the world who seek a better life within a relatively open and rules-based global system.

When Trump sees the United States "losing" to other countries, then, he misses the bigger picture. As the most powerful state in the system, the United States has agreed to restrain itself and operate within an array of regional and global institutions. In 1945, at the meeting in San Francisco that established the UN, President Harry Truman declared, "We all have to recognize, no matter how great our strength, that we must deny ourselves the license to do always as we please." The United States became, in effect, a user-friendly superpower. Its power was loosely institutionalized, making it more predictable and approachable. The country may spend more on security than its partners, but they host and subsidize U.S. forces and offer political solidarity. Washington receives geopolitical access to Europe and East Asia, where it still wields unrivaled influence. It gives up a little of what Trump sees as unused leverage, but in return it gets a better deal: a world of friendly states willing to cooperate.

Trump's transactional view of international relations misses the larger, interdependent logic of the U.S.-led system. The United States remains the linchpin of this order, and if it withdraws, the architecture of bargains and commitments will give way. Countries that expected to live within this system will need to make other plans. On the campaign trail, Trump said that it might be time for Japan and South Korea to get their own nuclear weapons, and some European policymakers have begun to talk about building an EU nuclear weapons program. China, meanwhile, has already begun to step into the geopolitical vacuum Trump is creating: in January, for example, in a speech at the World Economic Forum, in Davos, Chinese President Xi Jinping launched Beijing's bid for leadership of the world economy. As the order unravels, Trump may succeed in bullying some U.S. partners into a slightly better deal on trade or defense burden-sharing, but he will squander a 70-year investment in a system that has made the United States more secure, more prosperous, and more influential.

DANGEROUS IDEAS

Trump's revisionism is dangerous precisely because it attacks the logic that undergirds the United States' global position. There are voices in the administration—Secretary of Defense James Mattis and National Security Adviser H. R. McMaster—that do not appear to share Trump's destructive instincts. But the worldview of the president and his base has long been clear, and it represents a frontal assault on the core convictions of the postwar U.S. global project.

The first is internationalism: the belief that the United States can best advance its economic, political, and security interests by leading the order and engaging deeply with the major regions of the world. This was the hard-earned lesson of the twentieth century. From the 1930s onward, the United States has faced the prospect of a world divided into competing empires, blocs, and spheres of influence controlled by hostile great powers. The building of the postwar order

was driven by a bipartisan aspiration to reject such a world.

Yet when Trump looks beyond U.S. borders, he does not appear to see an order—defined as a strategic environment with rules, institutions, partners, and relationships. Not surprisingly, therefore, he sees no larger significance in U.S. alliances. He has made it clear that the United States' commitment to allies and regions is contingent. It is a business proposition, and allies need to pay up.

The second fundamental conviction that Trump rejects is the U.S. commitment to open trade. This responsibility dates back to the 1934 Reciprocal Trade Agreements Act, which started the slow process of reopening the world economy after the Great Depression. Ever since, trade has played a central role in U.S. foreign policy. It has strengthened the U.S. economy and driven the postwar ascendancy of the liberal democratic world. As the historian Paul Johnson has argued, in the decades following World War II, the open trading system ushered in "the most rapid and prolonged economic expansion in world history." Since then, it has provided the economic glue that has bound Europe, East Asia, and the rest of the world together. The World Trade Organization, championed by the United States, has developed elaborate trade rules and dispute-settlement mechanisms that make the system fair and legitimate, and the organization has given the United States tools to defend itself in trade conflicts with countries such as China.

Every postwar president has regarded this open system as integral to the prosperity of the United States and to its larger geopolitical goals—until Trump. For decades, Trump has displayed a more mercantilist, or zero-sum, understanding of trade. In his view, trade is a game of winners and losers, not an exchange that generates mutual gains. Small wonder, then, that the new administration withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and has pledged to renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement. Even the European Union, according to Trump, represents merely a tool Germany uses to "beat the United States on trade," as he said in an interview in January.

A third conviction underpinning U.S. global leadership has been the United States' support for multilateral rules and institutions. This is what has made U.S. power so unique—and legitimate. After World War II, the United States proceeded to create a global web of institutions and regimes. As a result, other countries realized that they could benefit from U.S. ascendancy. Global institutions fostered cooperation and allowed Washington to attract allies, making its global presence more acceptable and durable. These institutions helped the international order solve common problems. And when the Cold War ended, no anti-American bloc formed. To the contrary, countries gravitated toward a global liberal internationalist system. The UN, the Bretton Woods monetary system, arms control regimes, environmental agreements, human rights conventions—these features of the order are easy to take for granted, but they would not exist without a persistent U.S. commitment.

Trump has shown little respect for this accomplishment. He has signaled that he is willing to rethink the United States' financial and political commitment to the UN. He disdains international law and endorses torture. Trump has yet

to grasp what past presidents learned, sometimes the hard way: that working through the UN and the U.S. alliance system leverages U.S. power. When the United States embraces multilateralism, it gains greater public acceptance in other countries, particularly in Western democracies, making it easier for their governments to support U.S. policy. An "America first" attitude toward global rules and cooperation will breed a generation of anti-Americanism—and it will take years to undo the damage.

Fourth, Trump disdains the multicultural and open character of American society. U.S. power is often denominated in units of GDP and military spending. But American society itself has been a sort of hidden asset. The United States is a nation of immigrants, and its openness has attracted people the world over. Racial, ethnic, and religious diversity makes the U.S. economy more dynamic, and countless familial and cultural linkages tie the United States to the rest of the world. Immigrants come to the United States to make their mark, but they do not entirely leave the old world behind, and the resulting networks boost U.S. influence in real, if intangible, ways.

This aspect of U.S. leadership is often forgotten, but it becomes visible when threatened, as it is today. The Trump administration's flagship policies on immigration—building a wall along the Mexican border, banning immigrants from six Muslim-majority countries, and temporarily barring all refugees—have sent an unmistakable message to the world. But more worrying than the specific policies themselves are the ethnonationalist, nativist ideas behind them. For some of his advisers, such as Steve Bannon and Stephen Miller, immigration not only threatens national security; it also poses a cultural danger, as it plants the seeds of multiculturalism and accelerates the decline of a white Christian society. What has made the U.S. experience with immigration work so well is the notion that the U.S. polity is based on civic nationalism, not ethnic nationalism—that the United States' political community is defined by the Constitution, by citizenship, and by shared values, not by ethnicity or religion. Trump's advisers speak the language of ethnic nationalism, and the world has taken note. Protests against the new administration's immigration policies have broken out in cities all over the world. The United States' great myth about itself—that it offers refuge to the tired, the poor, and the "huddled masses yearning to breathe free"—remains a powerful source of the United States' appeal abroad. But Trump is threatening to extinguish it.

Finally, every U.S. president from Woodrow Wilson to Barack Obama has maintained that an enduring community of liberal democracies exists, and that democracies possess a unique capacity to cooperate. During the Cold War, there was an authentic belief—felt in Washington but also in European and Asian capitals—that "the free world" was more than a temporary alliance to defend against the Soviet Union. In 1949, as he introduced the text of the treaty for the proposed Atlantic alliance in Washington, U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson argued that the world's democracies shared "fundamental" bonds—"the strongest kind of ties, because they are based on moral conviction, on acceptance of the same values in life." Initially, this community comprised only the United States, Western

Europe, and Japan, but since the end of the Cold War, it has expanded.

Trump disdains this vision of the order, refusing to distinguish between liberal democratic friends and autocratic rivals—in January, he said that he trusts Merkel and Putin equally. In response, some western Europeans now view the Trump administration—and therefore the United States—as a greater threat than Putin's Russia. In February, for example, an editorial in the German newsmagazine *Der Spiegel* called on Europe to "start planning its political and economic defenses. Against America's dangerous president."

IF NOT AMERICA . . .

If the liberal international order is to survive, leaders and citizens in the United States and elsewhere will need to defend its institutions, bargains, and accomplishments. Those seeking to defend it have one big advantage: more people, within the United States and abroad, stand to lose from its destruction than stand to win.

The defenders of the order should start by reclaiming the master narrative of the last 70 years. The era of U.S. leadership did not usher in the end of history, but it did set the stage for world-historical advances. Since the end of the Cold War, over a billion people have been raised out of poverty and hundreds of millions of children have been educated. The world has been spared great-power war, and a sense of common responsibility for the well-being of the planet has emerged. In trying to reclaim this narrative, politicians and public intellectuals should take their lead from U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. In 1941, the two leaders met in Newfoundland and signed the Atlantic Charter, a declaration of their shared commitment to building a better world after the war ended. They pledged to establish an international system based on the principles of openness, cooperative security, and social and economic advancement. Today, the leaders of the liberal democratic world should present a charter of their own, to renew their support for an open and rules-based order.

The United States' friends and allies need to make it tough for Trump to pursue an "America first" agenda. They need to show that they are indispensable partners, increasing their military spending and taking the lead on issues such as climate change, nuclear proliferation, trade cooperation, and sustainable development. Abe and Merkel, the new leaders of the free world, will have to sustain liberal internationalism for as long as Trump is in office. Abe should keep promoting liberal trade agreements, modeled on the TPP, and Merkel, as the leader of the country that perhaps most embodies the virtues and accomplishments of the postwar liberal order, is uniquely positioned to speak as the moral voice of the liberal democratic world. U.S. allies also need to engage in what the Japanese call *gaiatsu*—"foreign pressure." The French government had the right idea when it proposed placing a surtax on U.S. goods if the Trump administration pulled out of the Paris climate agreement. The United States needs allies in part because they will push back when it goes off track.

Those seeking to rebuild the world's troubled trading system will need to think about how it can once again strengthen national economies. Since World War II, policymakers have used trade agreements

to increase the flow of goods and investment. The Harvard economist Dani Rodrik has argued that governments should instead view trade agreements as exercises in which governments provide access to one another's "policy space" to manage open trade. The goal is not primarily to lower barriers to trade and investment; it is to cooperate to stabilize the flows, and in a way that protects the interests of workers and the middle class. In his last address to the UN General Assembly, in September, Obama hinted at this agenda, calling on countries to preserve the gains from global economic integration while cooperating in new ways to reduce the ravages of "soulless capitalism," combating inequality within countries and strengthening the position of workers. The challenge ahead is to build on these visions of how the open world economy might adapt to the deep economic insecurities across the advanced industrial world.

The liberal international order is in crisis for reasons that predate the Trump administration. It has lost something critical in the decades since its birth during the Cold War—namely, a shared sense that a community of liberal democracies exists and that it is made physically safer and economically more secure by staying united. Across the democratic world, the first generation of postwar policymakers and citizens understood that the liberal order provided the political and economic space in which countries could prosper in safety. The political scientist John Ruggie has described this order as "embedded liberalism": international agreements, embodied in the Bretton Woods system, gave governments discretion to regulate their economies, allowing them to reconcile free trade with economic stability and policies aimed at ensuring full employment. But with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the liberal order expanded across the globe, and sowed the seeds for today's crisis: it lost its embedded, protective qualities and was increasingly seen as a neoliberal project aimed at facilitating the transactions of globetrotting capitalists.

Today, the defenders of the order will need to recapture its essence as a security community, a grouping of countries bound together by common values, shared interests, and mutual vulnerabilities. Trump will do a lot of damage to this order, but the decisions of others—in the United States and abroad—will determine whether it is ultimately destroyed. "The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity," William Butler Yeats wrote in the aftermath of World War I. If the liberal democratic world is to survive, its champions will have to find their voice and act with more conviction.