FOREIGN ANALYSIS

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2026



A Divided America
A Divided World

The Domestic Roots of American Decline
KELSEY AMELIA JACKMAN

The Rise and Fall of the Post-1945 Consensus
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From Overstretch to Self-Defeating Retrenchment
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A New American Internationalism
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The Domestic Roots of American Decline

Why Internal Fragmentation Now Shapes Global Politics

KELSEY AMELIA JACKMAN

Can a world dependent on American leadership find stability without it? The United States sits at a crossroads in global leadership. No longer is the domestic political landscape such that the country is a reliable global leader and partner. Political instability and fractures have spread beyond the physical and metaphorical borders of the country, pushing domestic instability into the global arena, undermining international security. Since World War II, America has deliberately crafted an international system dependent on both its leadership and participation. This dependence was no accident. Such a system suited America's need for hegemonic control but has left the rest of the world exposed at any hint of American withdrawal. That moment is here. The United States is a superpower divided against itself.

KELSEY AMELIA JACKMAN is an MA graduate in National Security and Statecraft from The Institute of World Politics. Her research interests include national security, modern fascist movements, and finding blindspots in U.S. foreign policy.



Illustration by Artificial Intelligence

Polarization, inequality, cultural conflict, and institutional distrust have eroded America's world standing from within. Inequality blamed on internationalism has left the electorate feeling fatigued and forgotten. An empire faces true peril from external forces only when its internal structures are weakened. Internal disunity allows others' chaos to take hold, allowing them to exponentially increase global instability for their gain. The most perilous threat to the American way of life is not autocracy or terrorism; it's its own inattention, leaving room for bad actors to weaponize internal fractures. This results in an electorate turning inward and suspicious of both each other and the world it has worked to shape. So stands the current global crisis of legitimacy surrounding America. If America's power comes from its people, and if one truly rises out of many, then when the many are divided, the one lacks a base of power.

This devolution allows politicians to triumph over public servants. They blame domestic problems on simplified foreign issues to mobilize the electorate around one point. And when politicians garner success by blaming global instability, which itself stems from domestic instability, they have no incentive to fix the issues. How did the current disunity of American politics, and therefore the fracturing of alliances that maintain the international order, come to be? How, when leading international relations theorists no less than 30 years ago posited that the end of history had arrived? The electorate believed them. When they were promised that liberalism and democracy were the natural order of things, they grew apathetic. The internet made trivial things feel as weighty as matters of true importance, causing polarization to trump compromise.

American grand strategy is a fickle concept to define. However, its clarity is directly tied to a feeling of national unity and commitment to democracy (as messy as it may be). Domestic cohesion means having the consensus needed to act under the American political system. As the country faces greater polarization within its system, as it seeps into daily life and pits neighbor against neighbor, the core of American grand strategy—democratic resilience—is at risk. The great American democratic undertaking faces structural erosion from within. If American society rests strongly on the pillars of economic growth, institutional trust, and middle-class stability, domestic disputes need not wade into international waters. While America's influence abroad may be controversial at times, it has maintained longevity through balance: by famously walking softly and carrying a big stick (or nuclear triad), and by offering a carrot first, even when the stick is inevitable. The United States took the reins of global leadership after World War II, based on the American political model of equality and monetary prosperity. Over the next seventy years, America not only championed this ideal but also accepted its role as the leader of the free world, a position American foreign policy had previously been wary of taking.

A world ravaged by war, seeking a stable form of government, brought on the dawn of Pax Americana, a period of relative peace following World War II in which major powers took on the American way of governance, American Dream and all. Such influence was not granted overnight, but action by action, the United States proved itself to be a friend and ally to the growth of

democracy, building a global network of democratic and economic institutions. The world had been burning, and America, rather than return to its pre-WWII relative isolationist stance, stepped up to the plate. America's power then stemmed not only from the military might it proved in the war, but from ideological soft power.

The history of America is a history of beating back those who oppose democracy. This is not the first time, nor will it be the last, that antidemocratic forces seek to undermine the stability of the American Experiment. The domestic American political and social landscape during the Cold War was anything but harmonious. However, even amid the Civil Rights Movement and widespread protest of America's role in Vietnam, the United States was able to maintain durability when it came to foreign policy. The threat posed by the USSR, one which endangered the very American way of life, was great enough not to overshadow domestic disunity, but to ensure it operated under a commitment to internationalism. The shared understanding of a need for a strong foreign policy was so great that domestic disagreements stayed away from harming institutional credibility.

THE DREAM THAT ALREADY MADE AMERICA GREAT

Once, the American Dream sold itself: work hard, get ahead, and trust that what you want will be yours. Now, drive an hour outside any city and find shuttered factories, empty storefronts, and dilapidated schools—the dream is now a fairy tale. The middle class shrinks, the wealth gap widens, and America's global influence fades. During its growth on the world stage, people clamored to America's shores, and its middle class was the envy of the world —a living advertisement for democracy. America needn't monopolize its energy shouting its values; the steady stream of immigrants did just that. Actions overpower the abstract.

The American Dream was anything but abstract; it was a living, breathing middle class. Democracy spread because it promised prosperity for all people, not just the few. The ideological power that validates the use of American military might stems directly from the national emphasis on human goals rather than militaristic ones. No longer is that the case. America can no longer hold the same role if its claims reek of hypocrisy. A shrinking middle class has turned that promise more into a fairy tale than a life path. With the top 10% holding two-thirds of total wealth and wage growth lagging behind prices, the American Dream's promise of prosperity rings hollow for many. Yes, the uber-wealthy harnessed that dream. But if the American Dream of the few causes the American Dream of the many to die while politicians seem to be in their pockets, the ideological weight lending legitimacy to America's soft power erodes from within.

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Postwar American leadership relied on stability and the American Dream, a concept so universal that democracy felt contagious, and other civilian populations did everything in their power to make it so. Allies could count on the U.S. to defend democracy, not just with troops and aid but with soft power, preaching the promise that this system can work for everyone. That promise is now in question. The current fragmentation of American society did not happen overnight. Empires, autocracies, and every other form of government throughout history did not fall without first eroding—but why now?

A COUNTRY DIVIDED

And they were rewarded for their endurance. The end of the Cold War brought the promise of democracy vanquishing communism and autocracy. However, the legacy of communism soon came home to roost, promises aside. Wars in the Middle East found their way to American soil not only in the form of military body counts, but civilian ones in the September 11th attacks. Regime wars in Central and South America and famines in Africa spelled humanitarian crises and immigration waves. A prolonged war in Afghanistan brought on war fatigue. Americans had been promised that democracy was now the natural way of things, so why was their economy flailing and their loved ones dying at the hands of antidemocratic forces?

As evidenced by the ability of domestic disunity not to overshadow foreign policy, it is not necessary for politicians to weaponize foreign policy to mobilize the voter. The Cold War, the same period with the greatest growth in the middle class, had incredibly similar conditions to today (such as years of conflict, divided race relations, and waves of immigrants). Yet, the same downward spiral did not occur. America's global security leadership mattered more than whatever political credibility could be earned at home by using foreign policy to pit voter against voter. And the economic abundance brought on by devotion to capitalism and democracy meant the United States had the resources to maintain a large global presence through military bases and humanitarian programs. Democratic transparency made America's actions relatively predictable, and common democratic values meant allies could trust that America had a vested interest in their success. Their success meant American success. A system of intersecting alliances crisscrossed the world so that allies could rely on America in times of need, and enemies knew threats were not hollow.



A YOUNG ATTENDEE HOLDS A US FLAG DURING A "TAKE BACK TEXAS" CAMPAIGN EVENT WITH STATE REPRESENTATIVE JAMES TALARICO, A DEMOCRAT FROM TEXAS AND US SENATE CANDIDATE, NOT PICTURED, AT STABLE HALL IN SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS, US, ON SUNDAY, MARCH 1, 2026. TALARICO IS LOCKED IN A TIGHT RACE WITH US REPRESENTATIVE JASMINE CROCKETT TO BE THE DEMOCRATIC STANDARD BEARER IN NOVEMBER. PHOTOGRAPHER: CHRISTOPHER LEE/BLOOMBERG VIA GETTY IMAGES

At the turn of the century, the greater threat that unified Americans during the Cold War was no longer intangible. Rather, these threats crept into daily life via inflation, the Dover Test, TSA, and a feeling that this new, bright, promised world was more dangerous for democracy. When a single large threat no longer dominates the narrative, threats can be around any corner. The American people were, and remain, exhausted. They understandably seek a single factor to blame rather than grapple with the fact that life is complex. When the members of a system no longer feel it works for them, they look for other avenues of advancement. Across the board, Americans no longer trust the system. Reasons vary, but one point of consensus across groups is that the system is broken. There may not be a clear solution, but the breakdown of the international system spells a major national security threat for America, as foreign actors take hold through economic and ideological influence.

Globalization has a political cost. An interconnected world creates wealth and spreads democracy, fact. However, it also means explaining creative destruction for economic evolution and voting to send troops and money abroad, all while one's constituents feel the pain. It is completely understandable to want to believe in the politician who promises to save your job and keep your children off the front lines. People have grown skeptical of the success rate of nation-building and internationalism. Politicians then make domestic promises with global impacts. There is a middle way where compromise and consensus on foreign policy lie. But the middle, agreement, is not what stirs people to the polls or goes viral. There is little incentive today for those in power to do anything but what will get them noticed. To the apathetic voter looking for someone to blame for their troubles, measured fiscal policy and creative destruction aren't as optically advantageous as blaming their neighbor for the fact they are paying more for less. Post-Cold War globalization left the country fatigued. Trumpism and MAGA arose by offering simple solutions to complex problems, constructing a narrative where these complex problems were simple so long as there was someone to blame, placing priority on being right rather than correct.

For most of history, government has existed to tackle complex problems, so the average individual need not. When trust in government erodes, whether this distrust is valid or manufactured to prey on their minds and votes, no longer is that burden trusted to be shouldered. Rather, every day

must be spent worrying both about the larger questions of national security and democratic resilience and what you want to make for dinner. It's exhausting. If the 2016 election of President Trump was the first blatantly obvious indicator of this fatigue coming to a head, the end of his first term made clear just how far dueling narratives on reality have divided the country. The January 6th insurrection, fueled by a belief in a stolen election, showed not that democratic backsliding and the propaganda machine were taking hold of America, but that they had long ago captured the electorate. The United States seemed to be becoming akin to one of the countries it would take it upon itself to make safe for democracy.

The electorate, gripped by dueling narratives of reality, no longer disagrees on policy, but on factual truth. The effect on international security began to increase at a rate that even the subsequent democratic transition of power could not slow. As this continues to fracture, identity has devolved into politick. Affiliations are no longer something to bridge gaps; they are principles to stand upon unwaveringly. Those with the privilege of not being affected by this shift, often classified as the "detached elite," become something for anti-establishment individuals to rally against, even as the rallies themselves are held by members of the same class they organize against. Politicians call for distrust in the same sectors of government they run. A Spring 2026 Gallup poll showed a record high 90% of U.S. adults believe in rampant corruption of the U.S. government, the highest in the past two decades. America has the highest distrust of its institutions by its own people among advanced economies. If a country's own people publicly distrust their institutions, the same can be reasonably expected of allies.

A shrinking middle class and declining institutional trust are causing Americans to lose faith in their democracy—and the world is noticing. Democracy spreads through good faith, through foreign civilian populations wanting a share in the prosperity. No prosperity, no global faith. The pitch for democracy is drowned out by unfulfilled promises. As a result, America faces a crisis of legitimacy. If the government gets its power from the people, and the people no longer trust their government, from where does its legitimacy stem? The last decade has been a knockout, drag-out fight over the evolving foundation of American grand strategy between liberal internationalism and the America First mentality. The United States is a country divided against itself, and it is splitting the world.

THE CRISIS OF AMERICAN CREDIBILITY

As America grows ever inward, its withdrawal is coupled with a seeming emphasis on unilateral military action abroad. This contradiction leaves old alliances wavering and strengthens antidemocratic forces. America's leaders are no longer reliable on the international stage due to the aforementioned crisis of legitimacy, causing the international system America built to depend on its leadership to lack a unifying force. Anti-democratic actors take hold of the distracted superpower, and U.S. domestic turmoil only worsens from international instability. So long as political infighting remains the status quo, this cycle will continue to feed upon itself.

The postwar world order still leans on American leadership, but America's word isn't what it used to be.

While there has rarely, if ever, been a time when America hasn't put itself first, there was a greater understanding that the "America First" mentality meant American ideals, not the blatant self-interest and monetary advantage for those at the wheel that it has come to mean. When the Trump administration began striking Iran in early 2026, actions were taken under the guise of supporting the people's wish for regime change. However, this narrative rapidly devolved in the face of evidence of transactional economic objectives. Trade policy became not a way to spread democracy and expand markets, but rather a way to target and vilify other economies and isolate America. Isolationism was pursued not only through immigration and diplomatic policy, but also through sweeping measures against foreign powers, friend or foe. Even NATO, a core pillar of postwar stability, has been targeted and vilified. It is true, and criticized, that the United States carries a lot of weight in the international order, but it's an international order it crafted.

But the structure of the American electoral cycle, both the four- or eight-year turnover in leadership and the distrust by the electorate, fuels instability that has left global actors incapable of predicting American long-term behavior. Politicians are finding success in vilifying international commitments, leaning instead towards rhetoric of withdrawal, tit-for-tat diplomacy, and independent military action. A leader lacking credibility is a leader looking for something to prove, giving small disputes among rivals the potential to become unnecessary flashpoints. This leaves the United States unreliable to the former and dangerously unstable to the latter.

THE COST OF UNRELIABILITY

Historically, American Grand Strategy, ambiguous as it may be, offered a promise: a steady hand to stoke democracy even when domestic politics got messy. As this backbone of American grand strategy diminishes, strategic continuity across administrations ceases to exist. This is both a symptom and a cause of domestic conflict bleeding into the downward cycle of international security. Allies are no longer willing to wait, no longer willing to trust that the next cycle will bring back their long-term ally. The postwar world order

order still leans on American leadership, but America's word isn't what it used to be. Allies watch the U.S. election cycle with anxiety, knowing promises may evaporate with the next inauguration; but enemies watch with bated breath, knowing threats may as well. Abrupt policy changes create volatile conditions for strategic planning. Global chaos grows under America's domestic preoccupation, no longer the first priority of American grand strategy. America's allies face a well-deserved crisis of confidence.

In Europe, allies worry they no longer have a strong partner against Russian encroachment. The American public makes known its hesitance about longstanding alliances and commitments. Rather, they have opted to diversify their allies and bolster defense capabilities. The European market made up over 21% of global spending on defense in 2025, a 4% increase since 2022 (IISS). A part of this comes from the Trump Administration's push for NATO allies to increase their share of NATO spending while decreasing the American military footprint in Europe, but not all. European countries were able to rebuild their cities and economic status post-WWII and the Cold War by being able to prioritize spending on social and industrial infrastructure.

As such, many citizens of European countries have grown accustomed to a level of state social support that will face funding cuts amid a projected continued rise in defense spending. This creates similar conditions in Europe for a disgruntled populace that allowed polarization and fatigue to take over America. And it is. Influential European Union member Germany has seen varying levels of support for far-right party Alternative für Deutschland over the past decade, but recent elections see a surge in support for the isolationist party. Giorgia Meloni's conservative (historically considered far-right) Fratelli d'Italia has held onto power in Italy for nearly four years. Marine Le Pen, having mainstreamed the National Rally, is poised as a frontrunner in next year's French presidential elections. While domestic disunity within Europe may stem from American turmoil, a lean towards parties in want of wide-sweeping powers has already taken root.

In Asia, democratic powers worry whether their defenses are strong enough to hold alone against China. They are left to set a strategic heading by diversifying avenues of egress, building up military might and diplomatic back channels. A recent announcement that the U.S. will no longer conduct joint marine drills due to military constraints caused by deployment in Iran has left Asian democracies reeling under concerns that while the U.S. may say it is still committed to Taiwan, it will not be able to act if China decides to stage an incursion. This concern spreads to other small Pacific democracies that rely on the American defense umbrella. Japan and Australia have signed new economic and military pacts, South Korea and Japan have signed new cooperation agreements with the EU, and Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, and India are implementing surges in defense spending across the board. Asia-Pacific allies are not implementing these posture shifts out of a wish to distance themselves from the U.S., but out of necessity as they find themselves faced with an unpredictable ally. Allies rightfully fear that standing agreements will not hold, no longer assured by administrative continuity. Good grand strategy requires reliability. Great grand strategy holds its course even without it. The grand strategy of antidemocratic actors relies on

America's unreliability. It thrives on it. The grand strategy of America's allies relies on American predictability. Only one side is getting their wish.

THE AUTHORITARIAN OPPORTUNITY

The American government knows better than most the power of propaganda and disinformation. The same actors who watched and waited for their time to strike, who took Fukuyama's promise of democracy as a challenge rather than as hope, are the ones now weaponizing American-style influence campaigns. The threats domestic polarization poses are greater than ever before. Powers vying to fill the void left by America's withdrawal (which they also helped to precipitate), Russia and China, along with their proxies, craft a national security threat that they can overshadow by stoking domestic tension. The Brennan Center for Justice reports that China, Russia, and Iran aim to maintain campaigns in the 2026 midterm elections. This is done both through influence campaigns directly targeting voters and open monetary contributions (to the tune of $14.3 million in 2022 and 2023). They take the electorate's attention away from the issues that matter and instead turn them against each other, giving them space to increase their hold on the world. The Cold War did not end great power competition. A globalized world is a good thing, but it also means enemies are closer than ever before.

No single power has proven capable of filling the growing gap left by America's retreat. Rather, revisionist powers and those who prey on Western instability all vie for a piece of the void, bringing back a multipower world not seen this century. More so, democratic institutions such as the United Nations and World Trade Organization, crafted to push back against this encroachment, are weakened by vilifying American dialogue. Soft power that fuels American leadership and goodwill is faltering. Its reputation—once built on stability and prosperity—is now undermined by domestic chaos and self-interest. The leader of Western democracy is no longer an exemplar case study, harming democratic movements everywhere.

This feeds directly into narratives crafted by authoritarian governments which frame democracy as something weak and chaotic. That if a country trusts its population more than a select few, it will be vulnerable to the unpredictable nature of compromise. That they will suffer without a strong leader with sweeping powers. These same powers weaponize democratic backsliding within the United States, asking why it is so wrong when they do controversial things if America did them first. This increasingly normalizes illiberalism, backsliding, and populism as part of a valid democratic system. America's enemies offer authoritarianism as a capable, dependable alternative.

THE POWER TO LEAD BEGINS AT HOME

Domestic cohesion and global stability in an evolving world are directly linked. While disunity does not exactly spell isolationism, it does spell inaction. Inaction in a world whose stability has come to depend on American action. The United States built an international world reliant on its

participation. Being a democratic republic, when some voters no longer viewed this system as advantageous, they pushed their elected officials to begin to creep back from this role. Politicians took note of this interest and amplified these voices in order to stoke fear and drive supporters to the polls. This slide into domestic disorder happened because of, and to the delight of, antidemocratic actors who then sowed dissent among the American people and distrust by both the American people of the world and the world of the American people. Such a timeline brings us to the current moment: domestic turmoil stokes isolationist sentiment, U.S. enemies capitalize on the moment to increase global influence, the international security landscape spirals, Americans fear a dangerous world, isolationist sentiment further increases and institutional trust erodes, and the malcontent cycle continues.

Those who argue that this slide toward global autocracy over democracy is inevitable are wrong. Just as those who argued that democracy was the inevitable, natural way of things following the end of the Cold War were wrong. Its backsliding is not inevitable. Its existence is not inevitable. A cycle can be stopped. Democracy takes commitment to its ideals and an understanding that contradictory forces will always exist. Just as democracy is not permanent without commitment to its furtherance, current levels of polarization need not be structural. Yes, current domestic instability does stem from structural issues. Yes, social media has weaponized algorithms to funnel feeds that support opinions to keep you scrolling and engaged. Yes, dueling narratives of reality make it difficult to agree on the facts. Yes, the same shared national identity, underpinned by commitment to democratic resilience and the ideals that made the American Experiment such a pragmatically grand undertaking, seems to be eroding.

Accepting the reality of a situation need not be pessimistic. American decline cannot be tied to a single moment; rather, it is a convergence of economic, political, and defense trends working in tandem to undermine the international order by way of domestic disunity. A multipronged problem requires a multipronged solution, and this undertaking will be trifold: rebuilding institutional trust and political accountability, advancing economic inclusion, and rediscovering a commitment to civic responsibility and a shared vision for the role of the United States. Politicians must remember they are first public servants. Restoring cohesion will require the right person with the right message. One that places America back in its ideals of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Who remembers the middle-class backbone and economic inclusion. Electoral reforms, institutional trust, and political accountability must be the name of the game. Not to vilify others, but as factors that must be rebuilt. Realism must be realistic. International security is crippling because of the blind spot that arises from ignoring the effect of domestic tranquility. A core pillar of the American identity is a belief that it is a truly unique country. However, the Great American Experiment remains so proud of this individuality that it fails to remember that everything that will happen already has, and those who fail to learn from history are doomed to watch it repeat. This time under a 24/7 news cycle.

A weak America begets a weak world. Criticizing governmental actions does not make one an unpatriotic citizen. The ability to voice dissent is

Americans have fought for over the past 250 years. Amid the chaos, much of America has lost sight of the fact that one can be patriotic and understand that their country needs to change. If anything, patriotism means fighting for the betterment of your country. However, maintaining this principle means being able to differentiate between true dissent and the narratives of those seeking to undermine American power and promote global instability. Only by reinvesting in a culture of civic responsibility and a commitment to democratic principles will the United States be able to take the reins of the international order once again. The future of democracy relies on it.

The Rise and Fall of the Post-1945 Consensus

How America's Liberal Order Lost Its Domestic Foundation

GABRIELLE FOURNIER

Since the end of World War II, the United States has acted as the implicit landlord of the global order, setting the terms of tenancy, drawing rent from compliance, and deciding who gets a seat at the table it built. America emerged from World War Two militarily and economically triumphant and ideologically unified, and it moved quickly to demonstrate its ability to lead worldwide. However, military and economic power alone were insufficient to sustain the leadership needed to guide the emerging world order. It was a bipartisan national ideological consensus, the shared belief that American-led liberal internationalism was the most favorable strategy for world order, that breathed life into American primacy and gave rise to the Liberal International Order (LIO). The post-1945 consensus succeeded due to domestic coherence, and it is now unraveling for precisely the same reason it once thrived.

GABRIELLE FOURNIER is a graduate student in International Relations at American University School of International Service. Her work explores questions of U.S. foreign policy, diplomacy, international order, and the evolving relationship between domestic politics and American engagement abroad.



Illustration by Artificial Intelligence

Liberal internationalism, broadly, was the belief that American power should be used to build and defend a world of democracies, open markets, and cooperative institutions, rather than simply dominate. This belief took hold across many facets of American society—liberals, conservatives, Democrats, Republicans, free-market internationalists, elites, and other groups and forces within civil society rallied around the idea that the United States would carry the world into a new era. Because the American liberal state was accessible and articulate, civilian support for America's foreign policy vision increased; as support grew, global diplomatic efforts intensified, multilateral institutions were established, collective security agreements were forged, and support for democracy, human rights, and expansion of global markets gave meaning to the internationalist project writ large.

Today, the liberal international order has experienced gradual fragmentation. This is demonstrated by a staggering underlying truth: the post-1945 bipartisan consensus has weakened and lost legitimacy over time, eroding the international system as we have known it since the late 1940s. The gradual rupture of the domestic consensus arose from a series of contentious policies, political figures, and cultural upheavals. Thus, the crisis of American leadership within the LIO is not sudden, but the product of a gradual erosion of the domestic consensus that has historically sustained it.

THE POSTWAR CONSENSUS

World War II made one thing clear: every effort must be made to prevent such a catastrophe from happening again. To prevent democratic backsliding into a power vacuum, proper action must be taken to ensure the rise of benevolent actors. This marked a deliberate break from the past. Great powers could no longer retreat into isolationism and would need to take tangible and sustained action to prevent a recurrence of the conditions that made global war possible. Out of this newfound conviction emerged a grand strategy: one aimed at restoring relative peace, wealth, freedom, order, and democracy to states across the globe.

A mission this ambitious could not rest on U.S. leadership alone; it required endorsement and support from allies and countries worldwide to establish a set of shared views, values, and goals for world order that would bolster liberal internationalism. Political scientist G. John Ikenberry notes in his work that the American-led global order has a distinctively liberal form due to its cooperative and integrative features, which enabled power to be dispersed among allies and participants rather than concentrated and confined. This, he suggests, is precisely what enhanced the strength and legitimacy of U.S. leadership: a supporting transnational network that gave other states a stake in the order rather than merely subjecting them to it. This meant the project also demanded a more inclusive and consensual approach to international relations on a grand scale, one built not through unilateral command, but through institutions.

The creation of bodies such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the United Nations, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization formed the backbone of the economic, diplomatic, and alliance architecture that sustained the rise of American leadership on the global stage. These

sustained the rise of American leadership on the global stage. These institutions and democratic networks expanded trade, underwrote reconstruction, and gave the Western world a sense of ideological unity. It was the connection of these successes with American leadership, more than the successes themselves, that cemented the bipartisan, near-ubiquitous agreement that American primacy was worth preserving at nearly any cost.

A truly significant notion that molded the post-1945 consensus was ideological solidarity against a common existential threat that would erode a liberal world order: the face of that threat being the illiberal communist world order. Bolstering an anti-communist national framework was imperative to uniting all facets of the political spectrum so that the liberal internationalist project could rally support and, more importantly, foster allyship and collective security frameworks with Western Europe, Japan, and other democratic states—centered on deterrence against Soviet expansion. Both the American left and right converged on strategies that enabled alliance-building success and international engagement with the larger Western liberal philosophy.

This ideological convergence was not merely rhetorical—it was reinforced by tangible economic gains that made the liberal internationalist project feel self-evidently correct to the American public. Within this timeframe, U.S. economic output reached new heights: the nation produced half of the global economy's manufactured goods, became the world's largest exporter, and held an outsized share of global wealth and credit. Economic success on this scale cemented America's primacy on the world stage. As relative domestic prosperity rose, so did the belief—naive in hindsight—that this prosperity would translate into broader international engagement and support for the liberal internationalist project.

These economic laurels fortified American industry, and by 1950, the minimum wage had risen, labor unions strengthened, the American workforce expanded, and social mobility became more tangible. Increased wealth, greater resources, indulgent comfort, and widespread satisfaction with America's newfound economic disposition inculcated society with the notion of the American dream. Material success encouraged the continuation of American hegemonic leadership as a strategy for an international and domestic social contract, which boosted the vitality of the liberal international project.

THE COSTS OF VICTORY

The consensus was never seamless: Vietnam split the Democratic Party, Congress moved to rein in the executive, détente drew backlash from both the right and the left, social movements altered political landscapes, and the economic circumstances fluctuated. Yet the disagreements were mostly over how to lead, not whether to. The Soviet rivalry kept both parties inside that frame, which is why the consensus bent without breaking. It took the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s to deliver liberal internationalism's quintessential triumph, and to remove the pressure that had held the frame in place. The Soviet collapse ushered in an era of post-Cold War triumphalism,



BORIS YELTSIN, LEFT, FACED DOWN THE ATTEMPTED COUP IN 1991, BUT HIS FIRST FOREIGN MINISTER SAYS HE FAILED TO CONTROL THE ECONOMIC CHAOS THAT FOLLOWED THE COLLAPSE OF THE SOVIET UNION. PHOTO: AP

History gave these ideas some backing. Alliance networks enlarged and formalized—NATO in the West, a web of bilateral security pacts across Asia—while trade, finance, and supply chains knit economies together at a pace and scale the world had never seen. Living standards rose in step: postwar reconstruction gave way to sustained growth, rising incomes, and expanding middle classes across much of the industrialized world. With these developments came a spike of confidence in the United States and its liberalist policies as the pioneer. Yet, as globalization's cost materialized and the Soviet threat disappeared, the United States entered a period of domestic dislocation. Once the fear was gone, the burdens of leadership had to be justified on their own merits, at exactly the moment those burdens began falling unevenly at home.

Nowhere was this breakdown more visible than in the deindustrialization of the American heartland during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Ironically, the industrial base that had made America's postwar economy so formidable became one of the first casualties of the global order it helped build. As U.S. GDP climbed and trade interconnectivity deepened, outsourcing manufacturing abroad, particularly to Mexico and China, grew steadily cheaper and more efficient than producing at home, not because these economies had discovered some manufacturing advantage, but because a widening international wealth gap, falling shipping costs, and trade policies favorable to corporate interests made it far more profitable to draw on labor the Global South had little power to price fairly.

The result of this was a hollowing-out of the domestic industrial base, and with it, the careers and economic stability of millions of American workers. What had once been framed as a mutually beneficial system increasingly felt like a zero-sum game: global economic integration was producing clear winners and clear losers,

and the losers were concentrated in the same communities that had once anchored American economic strength. Amid these unfolding economic tensions and stressors, many American citizens began to feel the carpet being pulled out from under them. They sensed that a larger, elite-driven geopolitical agenda was overwriting their voices and needs. Consequential economic pressures such as corporate downsizing, new regional trade agreements like the North American Free Trade Agreement, and the steady uptick in labor outsourcing left millions of working-class Americans feeling jilted by both traditional Democrats and Republicans. This economic anxiety, compounded by elite indifference, elicited feelings of institutional distrust and triggered a deepening dissonance between the American elite and the working class—one that manifested in party polarization, socioeconomic stratification, and racial tensions.

That distrust found an amplifier. Media fragmented into bias-affirming echo chambers, wedging the political parties further apart and catalyzing a growing movement of identity politics. One result was hardened cultural polarization that weakened the country's sense of patriotic unity and undermined the national consensus surrounding America's role in the world, as citizens further delegitimized foreign policy actions they believed came at the expense of their well-being at home.

FROM CONSENSUS TO CULTURE WAR

The events of the late 1990s and early 2000s tested the durability of the post-1945 consensus in a new way: they took foreign policy, long a domain of relative bipartisan accord, and folded it into the domestic culture wars. What began as strategic disagreement over America's role abroad hardened over the following two decades into a proxy battle for identity, ideology, and party allegiance at home. The outset of this shift occurred during the transition from the Cold War to the Global War on Terror. The Cold War's end in 1991 removed the threat that underwrote the need for American leadership, and the Global War on Terror proved too contested to replace it. As drawn-out wars in Iraq and Afghanistan dragged on, public confidence in the foreign policy establishment wore down. Citizens at home and abroad began to view American power as imperial in nature, and strategic fatigue set in—the expectations placed on the liberal international order began to buckle under their own weight, producing more instability than order.

This erosion of confidence—among both U.S. citizens and allies alike—revealed a defect in the LIO's multi-stakeholder promise: a framework designed to distribute power and voice among allies and constituents, but one the United States ultimately steered unilaterally, retaining the wheel it claimed to be sharing. Americans, despite burgeoning party lines, feared an economy drained by endless conflict, a rise in global insurgency, and foreign policy actions that would further destabilize both domestic and global prosperity. Trepidation informed a deeper skepticism about overseas commitments and policies, characterized by a genuine disconnect between foreign policy goals and American identity and society.

As global conflicts persisted, namely the Global War on Terrorism, and U.S. foreign policy clung desperately to interventionist measures, American

citizens felt increasingly disconnected from the liberal internationalist agenda that had once been acclaimed as the foundation of the American-led LIO's success. This disjunction fed a new era of populist politics. Influential international relations scholar John Mearsheimer has been particularly convincing on this point, describing why and how foreign policy elites are more invested in pursuing liberal internationalist goals abroad than in safeguarding the interests of their own broader public, deepening the divide between ordinary citizens and the institutions meant to represent them. This growing sentiment did not stay abstract for long; it demanded a name, a movement, and eventually, a political home.

Trump's America First movement challenged the postwar consensus underpinning liberal internationalism's legitimacy.

This political home was found in Donald Trump's "America First" movement, which rose to prominence in the mid-2010s and began to wreak havoc on the post-1945 consensus that had served as the strong, legitimizing base of the liberal internationalist project. This era ushered in a pervasive sense of pessimism and domestic disunity, driven in part by rising polarization. Foreign policy discourse shifted accordingly: institutional distrust curdled into a pessimism toward globalism, deep state skepticism gained mainstream traction, and economic nationalism and isolationism reemerged as viable, even popular, alternatives to the internationalist consensus that had defined the postwar decades.

With the rise of America First ideology and the declining resonance of liberal internationalist foreign policy, the world stage entered a period of trade wars, alliance skepticism, and hostility toward various elements of globalization such as growing technological interconnectedness. One explicit sentiment that underscores these views toward foreign policy is that the liberal internationalist agenda benefits the wealthy and the elite, which further accelerated the acceptance of populist ideals and rhetoric, creating a prominent rift between the political left and right.

Due to this divergence, foreign policy, once a domain of relative bipartisan consensus, has become an extension of the domestic culture wars. Fundamental decisions and goals surrounding alliances, trade, and the role of U.S. leadership in foreign affairs have

lost cross-party consensus. This erosion is producing a kind of paralysis in the American polity: a rejection of liberal internationalism that leaves no clear alternative in its place, only deeper polarization. Yet, this same rejection reveals a counterpart of this cultural rift; it galvanized shared identity among the political factions of the right, tore apart the vision of the left, and subsequently fractured the national consensus. Now, as global partners and adversaries alike are forced to confront the United States' shifting attitudes, strategies, and posture, the strategic inconsistency born of a divided America and a crumbled post-1945 consensus leaves many unsettled by the road ahead.

AMERICA'S CRISIS OF CREDIBILITY

For eighty years, the rules of the international order bore an unmistakably American signature. Now, that signature is fading—and no one, least of all Washington, seems fully in control of what replaces it. The United States still maintains one of the highest levels of influence and power globally; that is irrefutable. China's rise and the natural shift in relative power since 1945 are real pressures on American primacy. But they are pressures a confident, unified power could have managed, and the greater vulnerability lies at home. Unless the United States can resolve and repair its fragmented domestic consensus, no amount of military or economic strength will be enough to sustain its leadership on the world stage.

The old consensus let allies plan around American policy for decades. That confidence has thinned. Washington's 2018 and 2025 tariffs, along with the withdrawal from the Paris Agreement and the Iran nuclear deal, and pressure on NATO to increase defense spending, have strained relations with allies. Allies now doubt that Washington will uphold its end of the bargain. This has led some allies to express keen interest in strategic autonomy, or in decoupling from certain U.S. industries, such as energy and technology, to achieve a new level of independence.

Ruffled alliances and continued domestic polarization have exposed weaknesses in the liberal internationalist project and created space for adversaries such as Russia and China to exploit them. Adversarial tactics—such as ideological, rhetorical, and industrial exploitation—demand increasing attention as the world order experiences a broad shift from uncontested American primacy towards managed multipolarity. Russia has leaned into disinformation campaigns and influence operations designed to deepen America's existing social and political fractures. China, meanwhile, has pursued a quieter, more structural approach, expanding its economic footprint through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative and positioning itself as a more stable, reliable alternative to an erratic American partner. Together, these strategies reflect a recalibration among adversarial powers: rather than directly challenging American military primacy, they have opted to erode the ideological and institutional legitimacy that has long underpinned U.S. leadership.

The LIO appears to be reaching the limits of its capacity for effective leadership, forcing not only the United States but also its allies and stakeholders to confront alternatives and conceptualize new ways of

renewing their vested interest in liberal internationalism. Though the world stage still bears many characteristics of singular hegemonic power, the diminishing LIO and the shifting roles of various states and actors suggest a future defined by multiple predominant powers and competing spheres of influence. The post-1945 consensus was never only about power. It was an agreement, among parties, elites, and a public that mostly trusted its institutions, that leading the world was worth its cost. That agreement rested on conditions that no longer hold, and it is impossible to ignore that the very forces that built the order also wore it down. Economic openness fueled American growth, then hollowed out the communities that had powered it. Interventionist zeal that once legitimized America's role as guarantor of the liberal order gradually developed into war-weariness and public disillusionment, as citizens increasingly questioned the costs and consequences of maintaining primacy.

That leaves questions the old consensus never had to answer. Is it something to restore, or something to replace? Can a country that no longer agrees on why it leads agree on whether it should? Will allies build their futures around a partner whose commitments may change with each election? And if American power was once sustained by the belief that it served ordinary citizens, what would have to be true for that belief to return? The landlord built a global system assuming his own household would back him. Now the tenants abroad are hedging, and the family at home is unsure it wants the property.

From Overstretch to Self-Defeating Withdrawal

The Swing of U.S. Strategy

MARIE HANDY

The end of the Cold War was one of those rare moments in history when the future seemed to open all at once. In 1989, the Berlin Wall fell, and in 1991 the Soviet Union collapsed. For many people in the West, this looked like the end of an age of danger and the beginning of a more rational world. The great ideological contest of the 20th century had been settled, or so it appeared, and the democratic capitalist model of the United States and its allies seemed to have won by default. It was tempting to believe that the old struggles between empire and revolution, East and West, dictatorship and democracy, had finally been resolved in favor of the progressive West.

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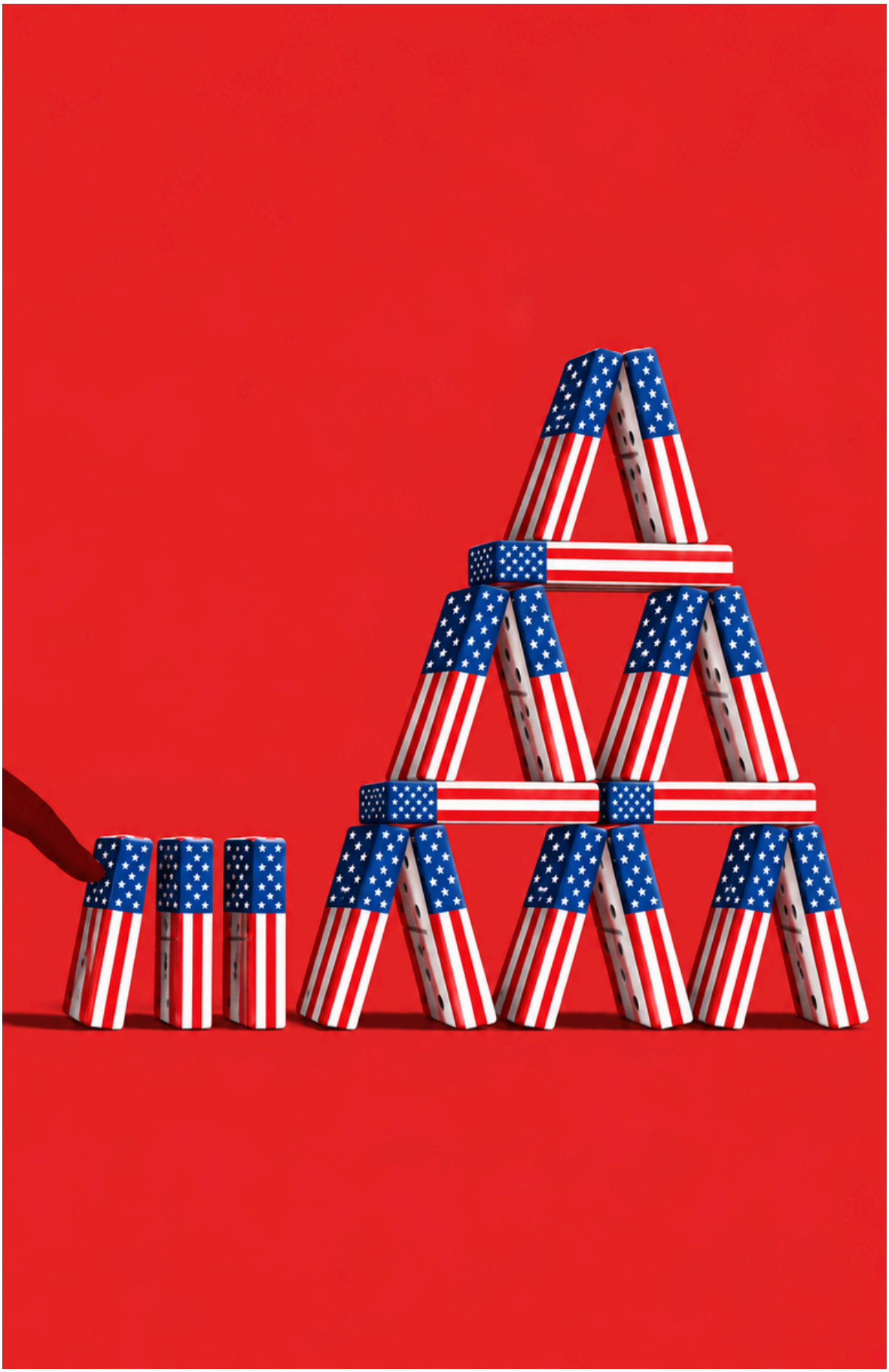


Illustration by Artificial Intelligence

That belief was understandable, but it was too neat for the world as it turned out to be. The Cold War had been a rigid order, and its rigidity had given politics form. Once it ended, the hoped-for progress turned out to be messier than expected. The old bipolar system had threatened catastrophe, but it also imposed limits on behavior. Once it was gone, those limits weakened, resulting in not a single new order, but in rising uncertainty and conflict. In the decades following the dissolution of the USSR, world events were dominated by the expansion of NATO, the economic rise of China, events in the Middle East, trends in technology and globalization, and arguably a slow rise in anarchy. Because of its relative decrease in power, the United States no longer dominated, but continued to shape events. In practice, this meant that American power was still central, but no longer easy to convert into decisive outcomes. The gap between military strength and political success became more visible over time. As commitments widened, the costs of leadership also became harder to ignore. This helped prepare the ground for later skepticism about intervention and global responsibility.

The great illusion of the 1990s was the apparent dominance of the United States and the West in contrast with rising trends mentioned above. Chinese economic expansion and the disruptions to the Western vision of progress resulted in a very different world than many leaders had expected in 1989 versus how events played out just a few decades after the demise of the Soviet Union. The Gulf War of 1991 showed how impressive American military power had become. The later wars in Iraq and Afghanistan showed how limited it still was when it came to political reconstruction. The United States could still project force around the world and pressure governments, but could not determine the internal character of other societies or guarantee that its victories would lead to stable political outcomes. The United States could remove a regime, but it could not easily manufacture legitimacy.

The collapse of the Soviet Union also left a vacuum in Russia itself, and from that vacuum came one of the central figures of the new era, Vladimir Putin. Russia in the 1990s was a wounded great power. It had lost empire, prestige and confidence. The post-Soviet years were marked by economic collapse, political disorder and a humiliating sense that the country had been cast down from the rank it believed was naturally its own. Like many Russians, Putin felt deep concern for Russia's losses and felt NATO's expansion to the east made a mockery of Western leaders' protestations of good intent. His actions showed that he believed Russia had to draw a line somewhere, and Russian support for his rule repeated an old tendency to turn to a strong leader in such times. He restored central authority, revived Russian nationalism and presented himself as the man who would end chaos and recover lost standing. Russia no longer exported communism, but Putin was trying to regain status. That made it, in some ways, a more flexible and therefore more dangerous actor.

The nuclear balance changed too. In the years immediately after 1989, the U.S. and Russia both saw the sense in a massive reduction and consolidation of nuclear arsenals, resulting in a decrease of 50% in the total number of nuclear weapons in the world. In contrast, Iran has slowly raised tensions as it appeared to seek a nuclear enrichment capability. The American and Western

response to this has been debated and criticized, but there's no question that the threat posed by a nuclear-armed Iran could well greatly destabilize the Middle East and even lead to the use of nuclear weapons in conflict. The vision of a world free of nuclear weapons has receded in the face of the new geopolitical stress and conflict in the Middle East and Ukraine, as well as concerns that Russia may give in to the temptation to use tactical nukes in Ukraine. For the United States, this meant that victory in the Cold War had not ended insecurity. The U.S. was still the dominant military power and in many ways still leading the world economy, but it was also more exposed to asymmetric threats, irregular war and the political burdens of a global leadership that verged on imperial overstretch.

The attacks of September 11, 2001, underlined that the bipolar struggle of the USSR was being eclipsed in some ways by a new war labeled by some a war on terror, others a conflict of faiths and others a simple battle for homeland security. This new struggle in some ways reflected the Cold War (bipolar West versus Islam), but was heavily influenced by the Arab-Israeli conflict and affected by the relative decrease in U.S. power vis-à-vis the rest of the world. A key factor then and now was the internal struggle facing Islam. Essentially, Islam has struggled with the challenge of the West for centuries, beginning with the Ottoman defeat at Vienna in 1683, and accelerating in the 19th and early 20th centuries as Europeans carved up many Muslim lands as they built colonial empires. Though Muslims have largely reclaimed most of the land they lost, major challenges remained in 2000: Israel remained a key concern; sectarian and national divisions were not overcome; Western ideas and the Western challenge in the form of economic and military strength remained threats.

September 11 also altered the way Americans saw their country. They had not suffered a direct attack on that scale in living memory. The event had a psychological force far beyond its immediate physical damage. The complacency of the 1990s came to an end; there was a new sense of vulnerability and a closer engagement with the Middle East, where Israel remained at the center of chronic and occasionally intense conflict. The broader region, already under stress from dictatorship, poverty and weak institutions, became more unstable still after the American determination to take the fight from New York to the Middle East, and American invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. The Arab Spring of 2011 reflected widespread discontent in the area. The rise of China was a key structural change of the period. In the years after 1989, China moved from the margin of the world economy toward its center.

It did so quietly, deliberately and patiently. Western leaders often believed that economic integration would gradually make China look more like the West. Instead, the opposite occurred in important respects. China used trade, investment and access to global markets to strengthen its own power while preserving the political control of the Communist Party. It did not liberalize in the way many had hoped. It modernized under tight political discipline. The rise of Xi Jinping reflected a continued and even increased focus on the centralized one-party state of the Chinese Communist Party. The Taiwan problem remained contentious and continues to be one of the greatest global hotspots of concern.

The rise of China showed that globalization did not necessarily mean convergence. Goods, capital, information and supply chains crossed borders more freely than before, but political systems did not necessarily become more alike. China became rich without becoming democratic. That fact changed assumptions across the world. The change in economic balance has had a deep geopolitical impact. Manufacturing shifted eastward. American and European industrial regions weakened. Consumers benefited from cheap imports and efficient supply chains, but many workers experienced the process as loss, not gain. Globalization enriched the system as a whole, but it resulted in a very different balance of economic power that began to have political effects as well. However, the economic trends unfolded roughly as many did expect.

Technology accelerated the change, but did so in a less predictable way. The impact of the internet, social media and communications has been profound for societies around the world. The new connectivity allowed news to move more quickly, but also stimulated a significant rise in disinformation and rumor. The old gatekeepers of information lost much of their authority. Governments, academic institutions and the legacy media could no longer shape public understanding as firmly as before. News stories, public discussion and politics went into more immediate and more emotional cycles. The consequences were both good and bad, and public life became less stable. People no longer received one common account of events. They received a flood of competing evidence and rumors. Stories became reinforced and confused within and between communities. Information overload and struggles for public attention became more prominent.



PEOPLE USE THEIR SMARTPHONES TO TAKE PHOTOS OF THE L'OREAL FASHION SHOW ON CHAMPS ELYSEES AVENUE DURING A PUBLIC EVENT, PART OF PARIS FASHION WEEK, IN FRANCE, ON OCTOBER 1, 2017

World events did not unfold along the smooth lines of progress many expected in the early 1990s. American decision makers contended with the new Russia and China, but the contests were

different from what was expected. Economic and technological trends changed the world, but not as predictably as expected. The U.S. lost relative power, but not as much and as fast as some had expected. Capitalism was the dominant force as expected, but democracy and Western-style governance did not progress as much as expected. The 2008 financial crisis came in 2008 and hurt public confidence that had already been under pressure. Fatigue over the extended wars in Iraq and Afghanistan combined with this to create a demand for change. Barack Obama's election in 2008 signaled a desire for change. For many, his election was a hopeful expression. Dissatisfaction with progress combined with continued belief that major change was necessary led to a move in a very different direction—the election of Donald Trump in 2016. A gentle attitude was replaced with polarization and relative harshness. The position of the U.S. in the post-Cold War order fundamentally changed beginning in 2008.

CHANGE AGAINST CHANGE

Trump's election in 2016 was in some ways the flip side of Obama's in 2008. The U.S. electorate was dissatisfied both with some of the results and with the lack of results of the Obama years. Reaction came in the form of Trump's 2016 election. Trump's outspoken directness appealed to many who continued to believe some form of change was a necessity, but were dissatisfied with the outcome of Obama's approach. Many voters felt marginalized during the Obama years; Trump's direct messaging resonated with their reaction. In some sense, the election of Obama, then Trump, represented a continued desire for a new direction and solutions to near-intractable problems (relative economic decline, public cynicism, war fatigue and some sentiment for the past). Despite Trump's radical stance on many issues, in many ways he's a traditionalist with similar values to those of Obama, e.g., strongly held beliefs, the importance of economic priorities and a deep patriotism.

A review of the common challenges faced by both Obama and Trump and their respective approaches is helpful. Both believe in strong government, though not necessarily on how large the government should be. Obama felt that the U.S. could and should complete the work of progressive administrations going back to the 1930s. His pursuit of universal healthcare was a hallmark of his administration. Trump approached the same problem by attacking the perceived inefficiency of Obama's program and focusing on the indirect benefits of strengthening the business community. Obama embraced inclusiveness by, for instance, leading in the legalization of gay marriage, and continued to support government involvement in addressing systemic inequality in the nation. Trump's focus, while also inclusive in a sense, focused on communities who felt marginalized by the actions and priorities of Obama and previous progressive administrations. Initiatives and programs intended to mitigate white privilege were increasingly seen as anachronisms in a society many felt had taken DEI actions and programs too far.

The position of illegal immigrants was notably targeted under Trump. Government priorities under Obama tended towards an attitude of professional management; conversely, Trump saw government intrusion in the private sector as both a political target and a problem to be tackled in the form of reduction of government agencies. Obama's vision was inclusive and forward-looking; Trump's vision is confrontational, sentimental, reductionist, but arguably also focused on unity. Obama's diplomatic focus was on harmony and continuation of American commitments; Trump's focus has been on novel approaches, shaking up existing structures and reducing American financial commitments and deployments abroad. Again, despite the very different approaches, few truly question the patriotism of Obama or Trump or the desire of both to find effective solutions to problems facing the nation; rather, the two men represent very different attitudes facing the same problems. Trump and Obama are two expressions of the same historical moment. The difference lay in their approach to that change. Both rose from dissatisfaction with the established order. Both drew energy from the feeling that American life had become detached from ordinary citizens. Both promised change. The difference lay in what kind of change the country wanted.

Trump's MAGA brand has almost come to be a parody because of the criticism Trump's direct, confrontational style has brought on. MAGA has become a focus of hatred towards Trump to the point where it's lost most of its utility as a political movement. Still, Trump never lost the core of his support and as events unfolded, he still continued to be able to command a great deal of popular support long after MAGA was sidelined as a brand. The Trump phenomenon has become, over time, more and more focused on Trump himself. The old bipartisan language of unity was rejected, and Trump has tackled the problems of the day in a much more direct style many see as abrasive and divisive, and many others see as more honest and effective. The unity Obama sought has been replaced with relatively extreme polarization, perhaps seen by Trump as a temporary and necessary evil. Trump's brash, mercurial style, no doubt, may well have been his intention to keep his opponents guessing.

Trump's strength is a combination of his strong personality, independent political style and exceptional experience with people in situations that involve negotiation and compromise. His weaknesses are perhaps narcissism and an intolerance for public compromise. He understood that a large part of the American public

no longer believed in the moral authority of the institutions that claimed to speak for the nation. He understood that expertise had become vulnerable to distrust. He understood, too, that conflict itself could be presented as honesty. In a media age where everything was filtered through performance, he made performance the point. That was crude at times and self-defeating at others, but it was effective because it matched the mood of the country.

Trump turned public disillusionment with the liberal order into enduring political power.

Trump's first term largely centered around his determination to make changes in the way government, business and public life were conducted in America. Much of his focus was on tearing down existing structures and efforts, e.g., Obamacare and DEI institutions domestically. Internationally, Trump ended the JCPOA with Iran and worked to undermine the existing NATO funding agreements, which he felt were unfair and unsustainable for the U.S. Trump maintained a consistent hostility towards the legacy press. This, in combination with the pressure of the internet and the increasingly impossible economics of print media, accelerated the trend towards the fragmentation of journalism and the media in general. At the same time, rumors, conspiracies and poorly sorted evidence increasingly flooded the internet. The result was a general degradation of journalistic professionalism, which Trump used to his advantage.

The COVID-19 pandemic (2019–2023) caused economic shock and intensified general frustration. Expansion of government controls related to the pandemic was resented by many. This event dampened economic and political activity in general, and no doubt slowed some of the progress Trump hoped to make towards his goals. The 2016 election and the broader backlash it represented was not an aberration. It was both a dissatisfaction with the Obama years and a response to a longer period of perceived elite failure, social strain and geopolitical disappointment. The old liberal order had promised prosperity, stability and global leadership. What many Americans felt instead was dislocation at home and uncertainty abroad; Trump turned that feeling and a desire for a different approach than Obama's into political power.

AFTER THE END OF HISTORY

Upon reelection in 2024, Trump is essentially the same man in his second term as he was in his first, but the circumstances of 2024 are very different from those of 2016. Despite rumors, few seriously doubt he intends to leave office at the end of this term. Concerns about reelection are no longer a focus. His vision is clearly relatively more constructive and legacy-focused in this term relative to the shake-up and tearing down of institutions in his first term. Economic priority setting continues to center around 1) maximizing the U.S. position, as we see in Venezuela and negotiations with China, and 2) minimizing commitments, as we see in negotiations with NATO, Ukraine and Russia. Events in the Middle East have somewhat dictated his focus on Israel and Iran, but clearly nuclear proliferation and the Abraham Accords were major priorities for Trump even before October 7, 2023. Looking forward, the continued economic rise of China and India presages a new geopolitical world landscape. Many smaller powers and nations seem more interested in economic prosperity along capitalist lines than ideology. The world is becoming more capitalist in a sense, as expected, but more crowded and conditional.

Alliances have weakened in many cases (NATO, for instance), shifted, and in some cases strengthened (U.S.-Israel). But many are more transactional than during the Cold War and the early post-Cold War years. Domestic politics now shapes foreign policy much more directly than it did during the Cold War or even during much of the 1990s. Governments must answer audiences that are angrier, more skeptical, less patient, more vocal and more fragmented. The old vision of leaders quietly managing world affairs from above has diminished. Yet turning away from global burdens has rarely produced the clean slate its champions anticipated. Instead, abrupt disengagement has often operated as an overcorrection, alarming traditional allies while inviting opportunistic moves from adversaries eager to step into the resulting vacuums.

One of the strongest features of the new era is the return of faith-based conflict, especially around Israel and the Middle East. The region has long been an arena of religious connection and conflict, but in recent years faith and ideology have become more central to life and politics. The Arab-Israeli conflict remains stubbornly problematic, with new extremes unseen in 1989. The Gulf War (1990–1991) was the largest American conflict since Vietnam. U.S. bases in the Persian Gulf, the failure of Israeli-Palestinian peace by

2000, 9-11, invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and finally October 7 and the Iran Conflict have resulted in a volatile situation quite unforeseen in 1989 as the USSR began to crumble. Faith has also been a significant part of some of the disputes over immigration. In some sense, the old Cold War has been replaced by a new struggle involving faith. This development, too, was not a major focus of Western prediction in 1989–1991.

The technology of war continues to interplay with its conduct. The American struggles in Iraq and Afghanistan showed the limits of high technology. Conversely, missile, anti-missile and drone technological developments have changed the nature of war, particularly in the last two decades. Stealth technology and the capabilities and vulnerabilities of aircraft carriers are evolving quickly - even as are the economic strengths of the powers that fund wars. The world of 2026 seems much less certain than the first years after 1991. Diplomacy has been changed by several factors, including public pressure and the Internet, new priorities of immigration, faith, general nationalism and economic nationalism. Obama's and Trump's very different personal styles, and the left-right polarization seen more broadly in Latin America and Europe, have also affected the old diplomatic international stability. As of 2026, the United States remains a central actor in the world due to its economic, military and in part cultural strengths. But change is clearly coming in the world and is clearly necessary in the U.S. as it adapts.

The old post-Cold War world was built on the belief that history had reached a kind of verdict. It had not. In 1991, when the USSR dissolved, many Western observers and leaders felt vindicated and confident the decades ahead would see more or less smooth progress towards the Western vision of capitalism, democracy and human rights as put forth in the UN Charter. By 2024 it had become clear such a vision was at the very least on hold for some years to come. Russia, China and much of the Islamic world had yet to show signs of adopting key elements of the Western vision - in particular democracy and freedom. In the West, internal stresses raised questions also. The happiness expected simply had not materialized even decades later, as some in the West had expected in 1991. Still, economic stability and growth remain robust in many key world economies, especially including the U.S.

Technology continues to transform life, with the internet, artificial intelligence, electric and autonomous vehicles and nuclear power changing markets and economies at a rapid pace. Genetics, robotics

and aerospace seem close to major breakthroughs. Digital surveillance, cyber-security and cyber-war become more prominent yearly. Stresses, near anarchy and even outright war have risen to surprising levels. Uncontrolled or poorly controlled migration continues to be a major problem in many areas. Instability seems the order of the day, yet some trends seem quite likely to continue looking ahead. Economic levelling and globalization seem unstoppable. Healthcare priorities have rapidly changed to reflect the new world connectivity. Diseases arise and spread faster and the demands of an aging population constantly increase. Though the U.S. and the world are dealing with many modern stresses, no great or even middle power seems on the verge of collapse as the Soviet Union appeared in the years prior to 1991.

The Cold War confrontations have been replaced not by hoped-for peace, but by much more tension and war in the Middle East; by nationalistic struggles few expected, such as the Russia-Ukraine war; and by continued uncertainty over nuclear weapons and proliferation. The UN appears almost moribund in the face of current conflicts. Yet the world still gets smaller every day, and freedom of action decreases every day. It's not unreasonable to see a new wave of nuclear weapons reductions soon for the simple reason that it's in the interest of no major power to continue along the current uncertain path for long. Should the UN fail completely, the need for such an organization remains the same, or increases. Again, there is cause for optimism simply because there are few viable options except cooperation.

Ideologically, Western-style governance has made less progress than many expected over the last three decades. But no serious alternative has arisen either. Dictatorship as seen in Russia and China is not likely to appeal much outside those nations, or even inside forever. Islamic nations have shown signs of populism (the 2011 Arab Spring), but their progress has been hampered by other events that, again, seem unlikely to change the overall course of globalization and increase over time in human rights. Progress is simply slower than expected. Germany in 1933 and Gaza in 2006 remain cautionary tales. Hitler and Hamas received enough votes and popular support to result in great destruction in each society. Freedom to choose and democracy have been shown to be no absolute guarantee of good decisions. Events can trump an ideological vision.

The Roman Empire arose from the ruins of the Republic, after decades of failure to solve Rome's pressing problems despite Rome's love and reverence for its failed Republic. A durable order was built that lasted for centuries. It was not free, and it was not ideal, but it was effective. Today there is some cause for optimism, but not the complacency many felt in 1991. The new world order from the vantage point of 2026 may be bright, but the vision will be shaped by shifting economic power, loosening and changing alliances, faith-based conflict, technological change, new forms of war, continuing ideological debate, a gradually peaking and aging world population and a decreasing human diversity worldwide. The United States will likely remain central to this process for some years, but as 1991 showed, change can come crashing down. From the U.S. perspective, the key issue now is how the nation will settle after years of rapid change and polarization. In a few years, the key issue is likely to be how the nation will settle into a very different world.

A New American Internationalism

Between Global Overreach and Strategic Retreat

ALAN TANG

When the Soviet flag came down over the Kremlin, many in Washington believed they were watching history end in their favour. For a brief unipolar moment, American power seemed limitless: NATO expanded, markets opened, and the language of "liberal order" spread almost by default. Yet three decades later, the United States finds itself torn between two exhausted instincts—holding on to an old vision of primacy, or pulling back from a world that no longer appears willing to be managed.

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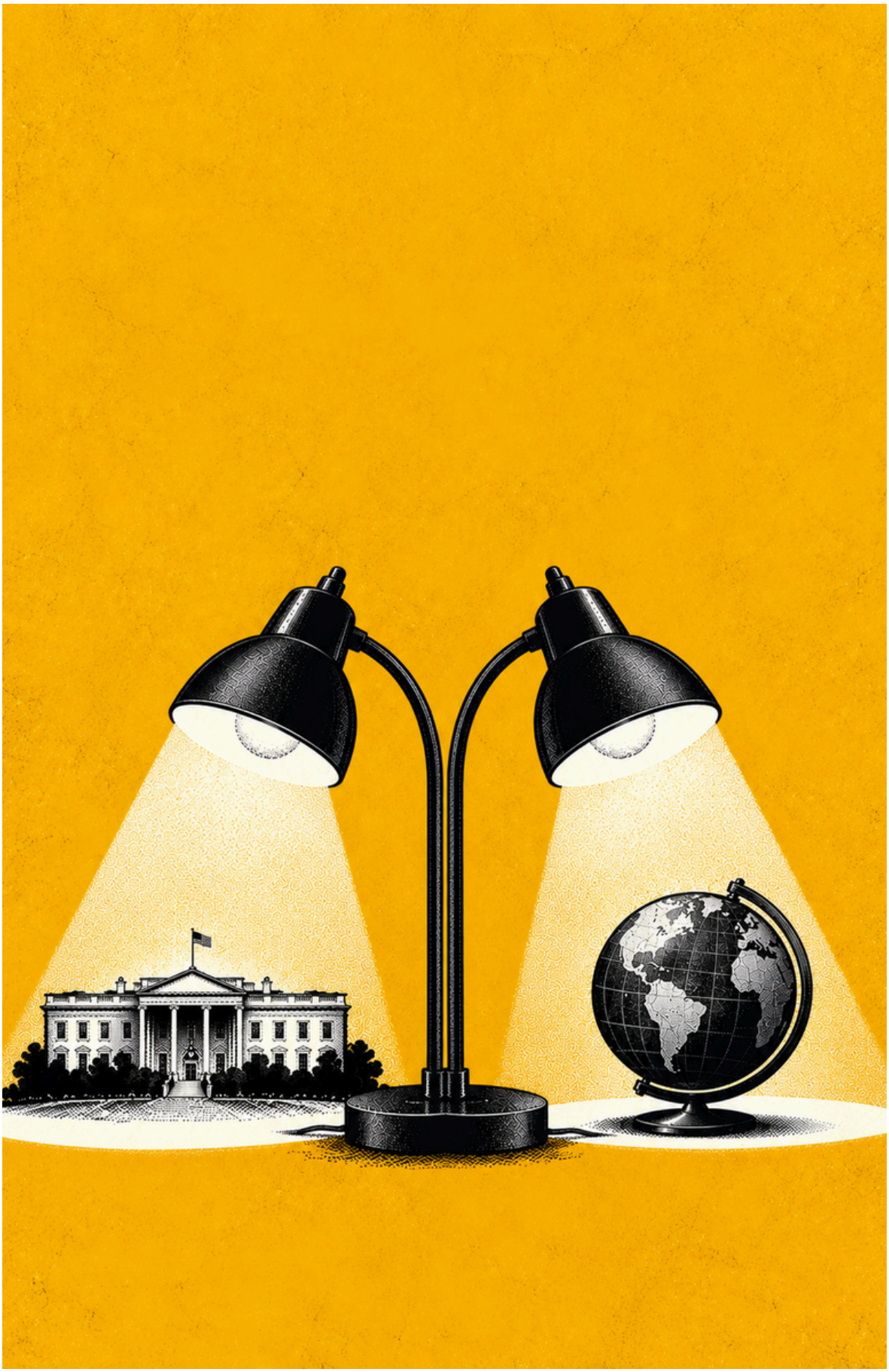


Illustration by Artificial Intelligence

The dilemma is not simply whether America stays engaged or turns inward. It is whether it can reimagine leadership under conditions of multipolarity, domestic fragmentation, and increasingly sceptical allies. The familiar choices—global policeman on one extreme, reluctant bystander on the other—no longer match the pressures of an international system shaped by China's rise, Russia's renewed assertiveness, and the growing voice of the Global South. The question is whether a new American internationalism can emerge that is more selective, more alliance-centred, and more grounded in the realities of its own middle class than the expansive ambitions of the post-9/11 era.

THE PRICE OF THE UNIPOLAR MOMENT

The Cold War's conclusion did not just eliminate a rival; it dismantled the strategic discipline the rivalry had instilled in American foreign policy. During the Cold War, the doctrine of containment required Washington to distinguish between critical and peripheral theaters, engage through alliances, and recognize the limits of American influence in different political contexts. Following 1991, this strategic discipline diminished. Without a peer competitor to impose constraints, a tendency emerged to conflate capabilities with entitlement.

This period is often called the "unipolar moment," marked by the United States' unmatched military capabilities, significant economic power, and a confident ideological stance after the Soviet Union's collapse. NATO's expansion aimed to embed Central and Eastern Europe within a more secure and democratic framework. Interventions in the Balkans were justified as both strategic imperatives and moral responsibilities. Additionally, trade liberalization and stronger global institutions seemed to extend the effectiveness of a rules-based international order. While each initiative had its own rationale, collectively they fostered the belief that American dominance could not only deter threats but also shape the political trajectories of entire regions.

In the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks, U.S. foreign policy evolved from a strategy of containment to one emphasizing transformative change. The objective shifted toward removing adversarial regimes and establishing democratic institutions in their stead. Consequently, the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq were framed not just as acts of self-defense but as critical experiments to test whether overwhelming military force could effectively

reconstruct fractured states and foster a more stable regional order. The issue was not the abrupt decline of American power. Rather, military dominance addressed only the initial phase of the challenge. While it could dismantle regimes and defeat armies, it struggled to foster legitimacy, unify differing political factions, or establish locally accepted governance structures. The aftermath of the 2003 Iraq invasion starkly highlighted this reality. Overthrowing a regime did not resolve the complexities of governing a fragmented state. In fact, it often exacerbated them.

This exemplifies the mechanism of overreach in U.S. foreign policy. Policymakers often translated military superiority into unwarranted confidence in political outcomes, creating a significant gap between strategic ambitions and the means to achieve them. Hal Brands highlights that American primacy relies not only on power but also on the ability to translate that power into a stable and legitimate international order. This conversion was more complex than the rhetoric of the unipolar era suggested. The ramifications of prolonged military engagements extended beyond Iraq and Afghanistan. Such extended operations consumed not only military focus and financial resources but also political capital. They also exacerbated the civil–military divide, as a limited professional force and a select group of policymakers shouldered the immediate burdens of conflict, while the broader public perceived these wars from a distance—until the cumulative consequences became undeniable.

Meanwhile, the post-Cold War era brought significant domestic economic transformation, marked by deindustrialization, regional disparities, financial instability, and an uneven distribution of globalization's benefits. This context fostered a growing perception that the United States prioritized substantial investments abroad while neglecting the communities adversely affected by economic shifts at home. While foreign policy did not directly cause all factory closures or declines in local opportunities, it became associated with an elite establishment perceived as more focused on reshaping other nations than on revitalizing its own.

The post-Cold War model of primacy faltered not only because of a succession of misguided interventions, but because it became structurally untenable. It required a level of political transformation abroad that American power could not consistently deliver, reinforced dependencies among allies that positioned the United States as the principal security provider, and lacked a comprehensive domestic coalition to sustain, finance, and validate

its ambitions over the long term. The key takeaway is not that the United States should relinquish its leadership role, but that such leadership must not rely on the assumption that American power can solve all problems, that allies will remain perpetually dependent, or that external commitments will maintain public support despite domestic repercussions. The unipolar era did not end because of a decline in American capability. Rather, it ended because the unrestrained use of power, lacking political grounding, proved increasingly unsustainable.

RETREAT IS NOT A STRATEGY

By the 2010s, strategic fatigue emerged as a dominant theme in American political discourse. The conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan shifted the perception of military intervention from a demonstration of national resolve to a testament to previous overconfidence. Once-unified bipartisan support for liberal internationalism eroded, giving way to heightened skepticism about alliances, trade agreements, overseas military presence, and the international institutions that had historically facilitated U.S. influence. The term "forever wars" reflects deep discontent with the expectations foreign-policy elites place on Americans to support prolonged military engagements abroad, often without clear justification of their domestic benefits. Strategically, these conflicts have drained resources while failing to yield sustainable security. Morally and politically, many perceive that Washington can allocate extensive resources to effect change in foreign societies, yet neglect tackling insecurity, inequality, and institutional decline within its own borders.

Donald Trump's "America First" agenda epitomized a significant political backlash against established international relations norms. Allies were seen less as strategic partners and more as clients who neglected their financial obligations. Trade agreements were criticized as drivers of deindustrialization, while multilateral institutions were seen as constraints rather than tools of American influence. The implementation of tariffs, a transactional diplomatic approach, and ongoing skepticism towards NATO reflected a departure from traditional isolationism. Instead, these actions signalled a rebellion against the perceived burdens and expectations of post-Cold War dominance.

The critique highlighted a key reality: the United States has often struggled to distinguish between core commitments and less critical pursuits. Specifically, the mission in Afghanistan had evolved into a

strategically diminishing endeavour, with ongoing involvement unlikely to influence the nation's fundamental political or military dynamics. A Brookings evaluation suggested the withdrawal was strategically warranted, as the mission had become a futile investment incapable of altering Afghanistan's trajectory. The key takeaway is not that withdrawal is inherently reckless, but rather that unwavering persistence can itself represent a form of strategic evasion. However, retrenchment is not a strategy simply because it diminishes commitments; it also requires hard decisions about which interests are essential, which responsibilities to share with allies, which risks to embrace, and how both partners and adversaries will perceive a diminished American role. While a state may curtail its exposure, this does not automatically reduce the instability that could ultimately affect it.

The withdrawal from Afghanistan highlights significant ambiguities regarding U.S. leadership in international relations. The swift collapse of Kabul adversely affected global views of American authority, as a comprehensive study published in the British Journal of Political Science found a 4–5 percentage-point decline in public approval of U.S. leadership across 24 nations. While this does not conclusively indicate that every ally believes the U.S. would abandon its commitments, research from South Korea and China suggests some respondents viewed the withdrawal as potentially enabling the U.S. to bolster its military presence in East Asia. Nonetheless, this situation amplified broader anxieties about the United States' ability to implement major strategic realignments effectively, communicate those changes credibly, and reassure partners that have depended on its support.

This distinction is significant. Credibility is not a simplistic measure that fluctuates uniformly with each foreign-policy decision. Allied states assess U.S. commitments through the lens of specific interests, treaty obligations, and regional dynamics. While Afghanistan differs markedly from South Korea, Japan, or NATO allies, the withdrawal raised concerns about competence and political will. In alliance politics, perception does not supersede capability, but it can shape how that capability is interpreted. Europe offers a compelling case study of the risks of uncoordinated military retrenchment. For years, the Atlantic alliance has operated on an implicit agreement: the United States has shouldered much of NATO's strategic framework—encompassing nuclear deterrence, intelligence, command structures, logistics, and advanced conventional forces—while many European nations have allocated

relatively little funding for territorial defense. Russia's extensive invasion of Ukraine highlighted the vulnerabilities inherent in this division of responsibilities.

The issue extends beyond whether European nations achieve specific defense expenditure benchmarks. It also encompasses the adequacy of Europe's ammunition production, integrated air and missile defense systems, logistical capabilities, readiness, intelligence gathering, and the political unity needed to sustain deterrence during an extended crisis. A swift U.S. military reduction in Europe might not strengthen Europe. Instead, it could create uncertainty at a critical moment when Moscow may seek to challenge NATO's political cohesion. The paradox of burden-sharing in international relations centers on the expectation that wealthier allies assume greater responsibility for their security. While Washington's demand for increased contributions is valid, framing it as a coercive ultimatum—"contribute more or risk U.S. withdrawal"—can undermine the trust essential for effective collective defense. This approach may lead European governments to pursue national rather than collective strategies, complicate decision-making, and cast doubt on the longevity of U.S. commitments, particularly amid electoral cycles. While strategic ambiguity may have a place in deterrence, it can be detrimental within an alliance.

The Middle East presents a distinct perspective on the challenges of foreign intervention. The setbacks in Iraq and Afghanistan have discredited extensive occupations and regime-change initiatives. However, regional actors often perceive a sudden or unclear decrease in American involvement as an opportunity. Russia's intervention in Syria exemplifies how a relatively modest military presence can transform military action into a tool for political influence. Research from Carnegie emphasizes that Russia sustained its involvement with only 30–40 combat aircraft, about 20 helicopters, several hundred mercenaries, and a maximum of 4,000–6,000 troops at any time—significantly fewer than forces deployed by other regional actors—while capitalizing on inconsistencies in U.S. policy.

The assertion that a reduction in U.S. presence invariably creates a void for Russia or China is overly simplistic. Regional states have agency and do not merely wait for great powers to dictate their trajectories. However, when Washington's priorities are unclear, it allows rivals and local actors greater latitude to test boundaries, expand influence, and alter the diplomatic landscape. Research

indicates that inconsistent U.S. engagement and the withdrawal from northeast Syria provided Moscow the opportunity to assert itself as a more prominent security actor in the region. As a result, retrenchment must not be conflated with strategic disengagement. A vacuum is not merely empty space; it becomes an arena where alternative actors shape the framework of influence. The critical inquiry is not whether the United States can or should oversee every region—such capability is untenable. Instead, it centers on whether Washington can distinguish between commitments that undermine its power and those that mitigate more severe future crises.



CONSTRUCTION CONTINUES ON THE NEW HELIPAD ON THE SOUTH LAWN OF THE WHITE HOUSE AFTER PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP ORDERED CHANGES TO THE PROJECT ON AUGUST 6, 2026 IN WASHINGTON, DC. (PHOTO BY KEVIN CARTER/GETTY IMAGES)

A sustainable American foreign policy must reject two prevalent pitfalls. First, it must avoid maintaining legacy commitments solely because of the perceived political risks of withdrawal. Second, treating disengagement as inherently strategically wise without evaluating its consequences is equally flawed. The United States should pursue fewer open-ended missions, set clearer priorities, and build stronger partnerships. Moreover, effective leadership should not be assessed merely by financial commitments; it should be evaluated by whether decisions enhance or undermine the broader international framework that underpins American influence.

THE NEW LOGIC OF LEADERSHIP

A novel framework for American internationalism cannot merely be a more appealing term for an established strategy. Its academic significance hinges on a harder question: what should replace the post-Cold War premise that effective American leadership requires extensive military dominance and the geopolitical transformation of other nations? The current discourse presents multiple competing

frameworks, including liberal hegemony, restraint, offshore balancing, and selective engagement, each revealing significant limitations in the others. However, none independently resolves the complexities of strategic competition, alliance dynamics, domestic economic constraints, technological interdependence, and institutional legitimacy that fundamentally influence American power.

Liberal hegemony holds that the United States' security is best ensured by maintaining a stable international order. It emphasizes that alliances, military presence, open markets, and international institutions are essential for global stability. A key insight of this perspective is that American security is interconnected with international developments. Events such as major wars, coercive actions in East Asia, financial crises, technological threats, and the erosion of global norms can significantly impact U.S. prosperity and security before a direct military threat emerges.Liberal hegemony has often obscured the distinction between safeguarding an international order and actively shaping it. While sustaining alliances and deterrence can be essential, the notion that the United States must dictate political outcomes globally or utilize military force to propagate liberal values is considerably more ambitious. The post-9/11 era showed how a strategy aimed at preserving order could become entangled in extensive political transformation efforts. The primary failure was not the pursuit of international engagement itself, but rather the flawed belief that American military dominance could reliably create legitimacy in foreign contexts.

Restraint offers an essential corrective to this habit. Its advocates warn that foreign interventions can produce unintended consequences, that military power has clear political limits, and that allies should not be permanently insulated from the costs of their own security. The restraint tradition is not intellectually uniform: some advocates focus on preventing great-power war, while others emphasize protecting domestic democracy, reducing military expenditure, or avoiding the inequalities associated with an expansive security state. What unites them is skepticism toward the claim that a vast overseas posture is the indispensable foundation of American security.

This critique deserves serious attention. A strategy that makes every regional crisis a test of American credibility eventually converts limited interests into unlimited obligations. Yet restraint can become too dismissive of the assets that sustained alliances

provide. Alliances are not simply bilateral partners available to Washington. They generate intelligence-sharing, operational interoperability, basing access, diplomatic influence, market ties, technological collaboration, and political legitimacy. RAND's recent network analysis concluded that the U.S. alliance and partner network remains sufficiently strong and robust to support the execution of U.S. grand strategy. The question is not whether these relationships cost the United States. They do. The question is whether their benefits can be preserved while their burdens are distributed more fairly.

Offshore balancing presents a pragmatic approach in international relations. It advocates that the United States maintain significant influence from a distance, intervening directly only when a rival state threatens to dominate a key strategic area, typically Europe, East Asia, or the Persian Gulf. This strategy emphasizes efficient resource allocation: regional powers should primarily manage their own balances of power, while the United States retains the capability to intervene if the regional order deteriorates.

The challenges associated with offshore balancing are both temporal and geographical. This strategy holds that the United States can withdraw during stable periods and re-engage effectively when a regional hegemon poses a threat. However, essential elements such as deterrence, access, intelligence sharing, and political trust cannot be easily reestablished in times of crisis. These elements are cultivated through ongoing consultation, joint planning, and a consistent force posture. Scholars of U.S. grand strategy often classify approaches such as deep engagement, restraint, and offshore balancing based on differing assumptions about the significance of alliances and military presence before a crisis. A reactive strategy that delays intervention until a clear imbalance occurs may find its options significantly constrained.

The goal is to coordinate rather than command, to deter without occupation, and to engage without overextension.

Traditional selective engagement serves as a robust foundational approach in international relations. It acknowledges that regions differ in strategic significance, prompting the United States to focus its resources where power dynamics directly affect its security and economic interests. This approach rejects both universal intervention and blanket withdrawal, emphasizing stability in critical areas while shunning the ambition of hegemonic

Even selective engagement, in its traditional sense, raises two critical questions today. First, how can international commitments maintain legitimacy in the United States, where citizens increasingly question foreign policy's relevance to their economic security? Second, how can Washington lead effectively when allies call for greater participation and countries in the Global South prioritize representation and autonomy over mere security assistance? These inquiries indicate a shift toward a model of networked leadership in international relations.

Networked leadership retains a disciplined approach to selective engagement but alters the political dynamics of leadership. It views alliances not as passive recipients of U.S. protection but as collaborative systems that co-create stability. While the United States remains essential for certain capabilities—such as nuclear deterrence, intelligence sharing, strategic logistics, advanced technology, crisis management, and coalition building—regional partners must undertake a significantly larger role in conventional defense, resilience, industrial capacity, diplomatic efforts, and regional problem-solving. This concept extends beyond mere financial burden-sharing; it embodies a redefined division of responsibilities. In Europe, the United States will maintain NATO's strategic framework while European allies build capacity in ammunition production, air defense, logistics, and conventional warfare to defend territory effectively. In the Indo-Pacific, the U.S. will bolster deterrence and technological partnerships, collaborating with Japan, Australia, South Korea, India, Taiwan, ASEAN states, and European partners based on their respective interests and capabilities. In the Middle East, Washington will safeguard its core interests and deter significant escalations while avoiding the role of default manager for every regional conflict.

This model contrasts with traditional alliance management by acknowledging that more capable partners will naturally enjoy greater autonomy, presenting an inherent trade-off. For instance, a Europe equipped with enhanced defense capabilities may adopt stances that the United States may not favor. Similarly, India will maintain its strategic independence even while fostering closer ties with the U.S., and Southeast Asian nations are likely to resist pressure to choose definitively between Beijing and Washington. These differences should not be seen as failures; rather, a network of empowered partners, each with genuine agency, is likely more resilient than one built on dependency or coercion. The principles of economic and technological statecraft have evolved, particularly in

U.S. grand strategy, which historically viewed domestic economic policy and foreign policy as distinct domains. This separation is increasingly untenable. Key areas such as semiconductor production, critical minerals, clean-energy supply chains, digital standards, and advanced research now intertwine economic prosperity with national security. The United States must strengthen its domestic capabilities; however, achieving resilience requires collaboration with trusted partners to coordinate investment, research, standards, and supply chains rather than pursuing unattainable economic self-sufficiency.

Therefore, networked leadership rests on three key principles. First, prioritizing American power is essential; not every global crisis warrants an equal military response. Secondly, it is vital to share American power; allies and partners should be empowered to increase their influence, even if it means diminishing Washington's unilateral authority. Lastly, American power must be anchored domestically. International commitments should align with a domestic consensus that ensures economic security complements international engagement. This framework does not eliminate inherent trade-offs. More distributed leadership typically leads to slower coordination and potential disagreements. While industrial policy can enhance resilience, it may also create tensions with allies. Enhanced European capabilities might foster greater autonomy. Efforts to compete with China could become counterproductive if they necessitate political alignment from states with diverse interests. Nevertheless, these challenges should not prompt a retreat into nostalgia for past dominance or a preference for isolation. Rather, they represent the current realities within which effective leadership must now operate.

The goal of a new American internationalism is not to reinstate a global order in which Washington sets every rule and bears all responsibility. Instead, it aims to establish a system in which American leadership is defined by its ability to foster collective strength: to coordinate rather than command, to deter without ongoing occupation, and to engage without undermining the political foundations needed for sustained involvement. Selective engagement necessitates a critical premise: not all crises warrant equal attention, military resources, or political investment from the United States. A strategy that treats every region as equally important undermines the ability to distinguish essential interests from those that are merely advantageous. The central question is not whether the U.S. should remain globally engaged, but rather

where such engagement can most effectively deter aggression, maintain a favorable balance of power, safeguard key economic networks, and prevent localized instability from spiraling into broader disorder.

In the near future, Europe and the Indo-Pacific will remain Washington's primary strategic arenas. However, they present distinct challenges that require tailored approaches. Europe's focus is on maintaining the credibility of treaty alliances and addressing Russian aggression. In contrast, the Indo-Pacific entails a broader, longer-term competition with China, encompassing military dynamics, maritime access, critical technologies, supply chain stability, and regional influence. While the Middle East remains significant, it should no longer dominate U.S. attention and military resources as it did following 9/11. The challenge lies not in setting priorities but in translating them into a feasible distribution of responsibilities, ensuring that prioritization does not amount to neglect.

SHARING THE BURDEN

In Europe, selective engagement should not merely mean reducing American troop presence and urging European nations to increase defense spending. While this strategy may be appealing in Washington, it is strategically inadequate. Effective deterrence relies on operational capacity—such as ammunition availability, integrated air and missile defense systems, secure logistics, trained personnel, resilient infrastructure, intelligence sharing, industrial capabilities, and effective command structures under duress. The conflict between Russia and Ukraine has highlighted critical distinctions in Europe's defense capabilities. While Europe has made notable strides in strengthening military support and expanding defense-industrial capacity, the war has also exposed significant shortages. Initiatives such as the European Union's common procurement strategies and the European Peace Facility have facilitated military assistance and aimed to boost ammunition production. However, challenges in meeting the goal of supplying one million artillery rounds have revealed the gap between political aspirations and industrial capacity.

The alliance has initiated a response through NATO's Industrial Capacity Expansion Pledge, which prioritizes collaboration with defense industries and the rapid production of essential capabilities, particularly in ammunition and air-defense systems. This approach

is critical, as modern deterrence relies not only on the immediate availability of forces during a crisis but also on the alliance's ability to replenish losses and sustain operations over extended periods. A redefined American internationalism should establish a clearer division of labor in security roles. The United States should maintain and enhance capabilities European states cannot quickly replicate, including extended nuclear deterrence, strategic intelligence, high-end command and control, long-range mobility, select missile defense systems, and rapid reinforcement during crises. Meanwhile, European allies should increasingly take on responsibilities for conventional territorial defense, ammunition production and stockpiling, air and missile defense, logistics, force readiness, cyber resilience, and the protection of critical infrastructure.

This discussion transcends the notion of Europe merely "paying its bills." It focuses on establishing a sustainable military alliance. If the United States continues to shoulder most of Europe's conventional defense responsibilities, it risks increasing domestic pressure to scale back its commitments. Conversely, a Europe reliant on American defense may struggle to deter threats if Washington's focus wavers or its political landscape becomes unstable. The most effective alliance is not one in which the United States shoulders all burdens or retreats from engagement, but one that cultivates collective military capacity. A significant trade-off is clear: stronger European capabilities could lead to greater strategic autonomy. A more capable Europe may adopt stances that diverge from Washington's on issues like China, trade, or military engagement. Some U.S. policymakers might interpret this as a diminishing of influence. However, a certain level of autonomy is a necessary consequence of fostering stronger allies. The alternative is a Europe that remains perpetually dependent, where its vulnerabilities repeatedly necessitate American support.

Washington's task is therefore political as well as military. It must make clear that burden-sharing is not an exit strategy. If European governments hear only the message that America is tired of Europe, they may hedge, fragment, or pursue national solutions that weaken collective defense. If they instead understand that Washington is committed to a stronger, more capable alliance, greater European responsibility can reinforce rather than dilute transatlantic solidarity. American influence in Europe should not be evaluated by the presence of troops stationed on the continent, but by NATO's ability to deter and withstand coercion through robust European capabilities, rather than by reliance on extensive U.S. support.

DETERRENCE THROUGH NETWORKS

The Indo-Pacific region poses a distinct strategic challenge. China is more than a regional military threat. It is a systemic competitor that can undermine U.S. interests across domains including maritime power, technology, industrial capabilities, standards-setting, digital infrastructure, finance, and diplomacy. The primary challenge lies not only in preventing military conflict but in ensuring that no single power can coercively dominate the region's political decisions, trade routes, technological frameworks, or security architecture. Effective deterrence in Asia cannot rely exclusively on American military forces because of geographical constraints, distances, and differing regional interests. The United States must build a network of treaty allies, strategic partners, and capable regional actors, each contributing based on its unique political context and strategic goals. Japan's defense transformation, South Korea's technological prowess, Australia's geographic advantages, India's influence in the Indian Ocean, Taiwan's role in semiconductor supply chains, and the diplomatic significance of ASEAN states collectively create a complex strategic environment that goes beyond traditional bilateral alliances. Washington's task is to integrate these relationships without imposing a rigid Cold War-style framework.

The Quad and AUKUS exemplify distinct manifestations of a networked diplomatic strategy. AUKUS prioritizes hard security, advanced defense capabilities, and long-term deterrence. Member nations have described this alliance as a way to leverage national strengths, enable defense-industrial collaboration, and provide "layered and asymmetric capabilities" that strengthen integrated deterrence. This initiative is significant not only for its focus on nuclear-powered submarines but also for its aim to unify industrial capabilities, promote technology-sharing, drive innovation, and ensure military interoperability among the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom. The Quad functions distinctly and should not be viewed as an Asian NATO. Its significance stems from the informal collaboration among Australia, India, Japan, and the United States. The agenda encompasses maritime security, emerging technologies, economic resilience, humanitarian aid, clean energy supply chains, digital connectivity, and critical minerals. Providing over 400 million COVID-19 vaccine doses in the Indo-Pacific shows how strategic partnerships can deliver public benefits beyond merely counterbalancing China's influence.

This distinction matters, as the United States cannot prevail in its competition with China through military posturing or mere rhetorical affirmations of a "free and open Indo-Pacific." Regional states will evaluate U.S. leadership by its ability to expand their options, bolster economic resilience, improve infrastructure, and uphold their political autonomy. An approach that views every regional issue exclusively through the lens of confrontation with Beijing may alienate the very nations essential to cooperation. Technology plays a pivotal role in contemporary international relations. Advanced semiconductors, artificial intelligence, quantum computing, undersea cables, and 5G and 6G networks constitute the backbone of state power. The Quad has explicitly associated trusted technology collaboration with security, supply-chain resilience, and competitive economies, focusing on critical minerals, advanced manufacturing, and trusted networks.

A sustainable U.S. strategy should integrate targeted restrictions with broader technological collaboration. It must safeguard genuinely sensitive technologies, diversify strategic supply chains, and coordinate export controls effectively. However, it should avoid framing all economic interactions with China as security risks. Complete decoupling is neither practical nor conducive to stability, as it would burden U.S. firms, alienate partners with significant economic ties to China, and potentially fragment the global landscape into rigid blocs.

The more pragmatic goal is de-risking: minimizing strategic vulnerabilities while maintaining some degree of economic interdependence. This entails enhancing domestic capabilities while acknowledging that resilience is fundamentally multinational. The United States cannot achieve complete self-sufficiency in sectors such as semiconductors and critical minerals. It relies on Taiwan's manufacturing expertise, Japanese materials, South Korean memory technology, Dutch lithography, and mineral resources from Australia and beyond, as well as collaborative research networks across Europe and Asia. Effective leadership also involves navigating complex trade-offs. More capable partners may not always align with U.S. preferences. For instance, India values its strategic autonomy, while ASEAN nations are reluctant to choose between their security ties with the United States and their economic links with China. Even close allies might resist American export controls or industrial subsidies if they impose high costs. These divergences do not signify a failure of partnership. Rather, they illustrate that the Indo-Pacific is not a region the U.S. can unilaterally dominate. The

objective is not to establish Asia as a new Cold War bloc, but to prevent coercive hegemony while maintaining a regional order that allows states flexibility in their actions. Achieving this requires credible deterrence alongside practical cooperation, ensuring American partnerships offer value beyond security assurances.

LIMITED INTERESTS, LASTING RISKS

The Middle East remains strategically significant. However, the United States should not invest the same level of military resources, political capital, and strategic focus it did after September 11th. Experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan revealed the limits of extensive military engagements, regime changes, and indefinite political reconstruction efforts. A revised framework for American internationalism should challenge the notion that every regional crisis necessitates an increased U.S. military presence. Although American interests have not vanished, significant motivations remain for continued U.S. engagement. These include preventing major regional conflicts, mitigating threats from transnational terrorist organizations, ensuring freedom of navigation in vital maritime corridors, deterring nuclear proliferation, managing escalation risks between Israel and Iran, and supporting allies whose security decisions shape the regional balance. To rank national interests effectively, avoid elevating objectives such as regime change in Tehran, regional military supremacy, or the obligation to solve every local conflict. A more strategic approach would focus on deterring major escalations, targeted counterterrorism efforts, intelligence sharing, maritime security, diplomacy, and stronger regional burden-sharing.

Sustainable international engagement requires a credible domestic consensus.

This strategy incurs costs. A reduced U.S. presence may limit Washington's ability to respond promptly to developments. However, an excessively expansive posture risks transforming local disputes into tests of American credibility, potentially entangling the United States in uncontrollable escalation dynamics. The objective should be to find a balance—not disengagement or outright domination—aiming for a credible yet limited role: sufficient to deter significant threats while being restrained enough to avoid assuming the default management of a region where

underlying political conflicts remain unresolved. The principle of selective engagement goes beyond rejecting military interventions. It emphasizes the need to build capabilities, forge alliances, and establish diplomatic frameworks that enable a prudent "no" while preventing chaos. Europe needs a more robust and autonomous NATO, the Indo-Pacific requires an enhanced network of security, technological, and economic collaborations, and the Middle East necessitates targeted commitments aligned with specific interests rather than indefinite regional management. The United States will be evaluated not on its ubiquitous presence, but on whether its strategic involvement in key areas fosters stability, avoiding the overextension that previously rendered its strategies unsustainable.

THE PRICE OF AMERICAN POWER

A viable international strategy must not demand sacrifices from citizens solely for abstract ideals while failing to provide tangible security in return. Although military power, alliances, and diplomatic influence visibly signal national strength, that strength ultimately rests on more local foundations: productive capacity, social cohesion, technological advancement, and economic confidence. Moreover, public support is essential to ensure that global engagement is perceived as beneficial beyond the interests of distant elites. During the post-Cold War era, American foreign policy largely perceived domestic economic policy and grand strategy as interconnected yet distinct domains. Trade liberalization, global supply chains, technological integration, and financial openness were viewed as indicators of national confidence. The prevailing assumption was that a more integrated global economy would not only enhance domestic prosperity but also strengthen U.S. influence on the international stage.

The assumption regarding globalization holds some validity. It has generated significant advantages for consumers, businesses, and innovators within the American economy. However, these benefits have not been evenly distributed. In regions facing manufacturing decline, job insecurity, diminished labor influence, and economic development disparities, global integration has often been seen as an imposition rather than an opportunity. This perception has substantial political implications: foreign policy has increasingly been linked to an elite agenda that appears adept at navigating global markets while neglecting the needs of citizens adversely affected by economic dislocations.

This perspective oversimplifies a complex issue. Factory closures arose from factors such as automation, corporate decisions, domestic policy failures, and evolving consumer markets. Political legitimacy depends not only on economic indicators but also on public perception and lived experience. When citizens see that international engagement incurs high costs while benefits accrue elsewhere, their support for alliances, trade commitments, development assistance, and security guarantees that seem remote from their immediate concerns diminishes. Recognizing the need for a "foreign policy for the middle class" led to a pivotal shift. The Biden administration's 2021 Interim National Security Strategic Guidance explicitly committed to prioritizing "the American people—especially working families—within national-security strategy." Scholars have observed that this approach is distinctive in evaluating foreign policy not solely through traditional metrics of power or security, but also by its domestic reception. The core insight is clear: sustainable international engagement requires a credible domestic consensus.

This does not mean every foreign policy decision must directly raise wages or build new manufacturing facilities. Grand strategy transcends mere electoral messaging. Rather, it should be understood through the lens of the economic foundations of national power as vital strategic assets. A nation that depends on vulnerable supply chains, is prone to technological coercion, or cannot produce essential goods will struggle to maintain international confidence and stability. Industrial policy has reemerged as a pivotal element of American strategic frameworks. The CHIPS and Science Act goes beyond economic stimulus, recognizing that semiconductor production, advanced research, and technological capabilities are essential to national security. This legislation allocates $52.7 billion to enhance U.S. semiconductor manufacturing, research, and workforce development, with $39 billion designated for incentives in fabrication, assembly, testing, and advanced packaging facilities. The underlying rationale is evident: semiconductors are fundamental to civilian infrastructure, artificial intelligence, communications networks, advanced weaponry, and the broader digital economy.

The Inflation Reduction Act is a major clean energy initiative, allocating about $369 billion for subsidies, loans, grants, and tax incentives. This legislation aims to spur investment in sustainable technologies, lower clean-energy implementation costs, and strengthen domestic manufacturing capabilities. The intersection of

climate policy, industrial policy, and geopolitical competition is becoming increasingly pronounced. A nation that effectively innovates, manufactures, and secures its supply chains for batteries, solar technology, electric vehicles, and critical minerals is poised to reap economic benefits and bolster its strategic resilience. These policies reflect a significant shift in American views on national security and economic strategy. The earlier belief that market mechanisms would naturally align production with national security needs has lost much of its validity. The COVID-19 pandemic, semiconductor shortages, and geopolitical tensions with China have shown that efficiency does not equal resilience. While low-cost supply chains may function optimally in stable conditions, they reveal vulnerabilities during crises.

Domestic renewal must not evolve into a form of economic nationalism. This tension is central to the new industrial strategy. If Washington equates resilience with fully relocating supply chains to the United States, it risks creating friction with essential allies needed to enhance supply chain security. Advanced technologies emerge from collaborative international ecosystems. Semiconductor supply chains link the U.S. with Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, the Netherlands, and Germany. Similarly, critical minerals, green technologies, pharmaceuticals, and digital infrastructure rely on diverse expertise, capital, raw materials, and manufacturing capabilities.

The Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) has emphasized significant tensions in international trade and investment. While European governments acknowledge the Act's ambitious climate goals, they worry that its subsidies and domestic-content requirements may siphon investment away from Europe and toward the United States. Analysts in Europe contend that aspects of the IRA could distort trade dynamics and incentivize green-technology firms to relocate production to the U.S. This concern is especially pronounced in sectors such as electric vehicles, batteries, hydrogen, carbon capture, and renewable energy manufacturing, where eligibility for U.S. tax credits is contingent upon local assembly or sourcing.

These concerns should not be dismissed as only protectionist grievances from affluent allies. Conversely, they highlight a critical strategic challenge. A decline in European manufacturing driven by American industrial policy could undermine the allied capabilities essential to collective resilience. If the United States seeks to rally its partners against coercive dependencies on China while concurrently diverting investment and innovation from them, it will complicate,

rather than enhance, alliance coordination. The solution does not lie in abandoning industrial policy but in internationalizing it. Instead of viewing allies as rivals competing for a limited pool of investment, Washington should establish frameworks for cooperative resilience. This includes coordinated supply-chain mapping, shared strategic stockpiles, standardized technologies, reciprocal investment arrangements, joint research initiatives, and trusted-vendor networks. The key criterion should be straightforward: does a policy enhance the collective capacity of allied nations, or does it simply shift resources from one partner economy to another?

This strategy aligns with the concept of "friend-shoring." Although often applied imprecisely, it suggests that shifting production from China to the United States inherently strengthens allied resilience. In reality, friend-shoring should mean building diversified production networks among trusted partners so no single disruption, political conflict, or coercive action can jeopardize critical supply chains. The aim is not isolationism, but rather to ensure redundancy, diversification, and collaborative capacity. Inevitably, trade-offs exist in international cooperation. Enhanced coordination may impede timely decision-making. Allies are likely to seek access to U.S. technology, subsidies, and markets as a condition for policy alignment. Domestic stakeholders might argue that internationalizing industrial strategy reduces its advantages for American workers. However, the alternative— a narrowly focused national strategy—could yield short-term domestic investment but risk fragmenting America's broader coalition, fostering resentment, and diminishing resilience against coercive measures.

Domestic renewal and international engagement are intrinsically linked. A United States that lacks robust industrial capacity, secure supply chains, and domestic confidence will struggle to exert global influence. Conversely, efforts to enhance domestic conditions at the expense of allied capabilities will ultimately undermine the very partnerships crucial to its own security. The primary challenge is building a secure foundation of essential domestic capabilities while avoiding economic isolation. A viable American internationalism must demonstrate to citizens that global engagement can bolster economic security rather than compromise it. At the same time, it must convey to allies that American revitalization is not a zero-sum endeavour but an integral part of a broader initiative to build a more resilient democratic economic order. The true indicator of success will not be the complete return of all factories to the United States. Instead, it will hinge on the ability of the United States and its allies

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to collectively uphold the industrial, technological, and social pillars of power in a global landscape where economic dependence can quickly become a strategic vulnerability.

REFORMING THE GLOBAL ORDER

The argument for a revised American internationalism must extend beyond reinforcing alliances in Europe and the Indo-Pacific. While these partnerships are crucial, they represent only a segment of the global landscape. Many countries do not align closely with the U.S., China, or Russia. Instead, they prioritize debt management, sustainable development, climate resilience, food and energy security, public health, infrastructure, and political autonomy. The strategic importance of the Global South cannot be overstated. Washington often sees these nations as mere players in its geopolitical rivalry with Beijing and Moscow, overlooking their autonomy. Countries in Africa, Latin America, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East typically do not frame their interests within a binary alignment model. Instead, they may collaborate with the United States on security, engage in trade with China, seek development financing from diverse sources, and assert their independence against pressure from major powers to take sides. The Global South should not be perceived as a monolithic entity, as its constituent nations, including India, Brazil, Indonesia, South Africa, Saudi Arabia, Kenya, and Vietnam, exhibit diverse political systems and foreign-policy objectives. However, they collectively argue that post-1945 institutions no longer reflect current global demographics, economic standing, and political dynamics.

The demand for "reformed multilateralism" arises from existing global imbalances. It is not merely a bid for greater efficiency but a call for stronger representation, equity, and influence over the rules governing security, finance, development, technology, and climate action. Proposals to reform the UN Security Council, amplify the voices of developing nations within the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, improve sovereign debt mechanisms, expand climate finance, and enhance access to development funding are interconnected. An international order lacks legitimacy if a significant portion of the global community is sidelined from its decision-making processes. The United Nations' 2024 Pact for the Future directly addresses underrepresentation in its diplomatic efforts. Adopted at the Summit of the Future, the pact aims to make the international system more inclusive and effective in meeting

contemporary global challenges. It notably includes a significant commitment to reform the Security Council, emphasizing Africa's historical underrepresentation as a critical priority.

This commitment holds significant political and institutional importance. The Security Council's permanent membership reflects the victorious powers of 1945 and fails to represent today's distribution of power, population, and legitimacy. A governing body tasked with addressing modern threats cannot sustain its credibility while Africa, Latin America, and much of Asia remain underrepresented in critical decision-making processes. Reforming the Security Council is a complex undertaking. Expanding representation raises critical questions: which states should gain permanent seats, how regional representation should work, whether new members should have veto power, and how to keep the Council effective with a larger membership. The veto power remains a significant barrier to reform. Nevertheless, the challenges do not justify inaction. A Security Council that fails to become more representative risks becoming formally relevant yet politically marginalized.

Washington should consider reform as a strategic investment rather than a mere concession. Enhancing the representativeness of international institutions does not diminish American influence. Instead, it recognizes that influence is more enduring when exercised through institutions others perceive as legitimate. The United States ought to advocate concrete measures to promote greater representation from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, improve transparency, and increase the participation of states directly affected by the Council's decisions. The principle of credibility in international economic governance is particularly pertinent for developing nations. Their reliance on the international system is often measured by access to financing, emergency liquidity, climate adaptation costs, and infrastructure investment rather than by Security Council deliberations. UNCTAD has highlighted the necessity for a robust global financial safety net, enhanced multilateral development banks, and reliable sovereign-debt restructuring mechanisms to ensure the system can respond effectively and efficiently to emerging challenges.

Contemporary American internationalism must address developing countries' concerns through substantial reforms to the international financial system. This includes enhancing the representation and voting power of these economies, bolstering multilateral development banks, streamlining debt-restructuring

processes, and increasing access to concessional finance. Additionally, climate finance should be regarded as a fundamental issue of global legitimacy rather than a peripheral concern. For nations grappling with rising sea levels, drought, and food insecurity, climate adaptation is essential to ensuring both economic and political stability. This approach transcends mere charity. It reflects a strategic imperative. In regions where the United States fails to provide credible development partnerships, alternative actors, particularly China, will assume that role. The Belt and Road Initiative exemplifies the geopolitical significance of infrastructure financing, despite criticism over debt accumulation, transparency, environmental impacts, and project feasibility. To counteract Chinese influence, Washington must do more than issue warnings; it must propose viable alternatives. This includes strengthening infrastructure partnerships of higher quality, ensuring transparent financing, providing technical support, promoting digital connectivity, investing in clean energy, fostering public health collaborations, and improving market access.

Engagement in international relations should not require political subservience. The United States will frequently face disappointment when it pressures nations to align exclusively with either Washington or Beijing. Instead, a more effective approach is to help countries broaden their economic and strategic options. The objective should be to foster partnerships without mandating alignment, thereby respecting sovereignty while incentivizing cooperation based on shared norms and tangible results. Reformed multilateralism necessitates a pragmatic recognition of institutional constraints. Universal organizations remain essential; the United Nations offers legitimacy, convening ability, and legal authority that smaller entities cannot replicate. The World Trade Organization is crucial for maintaining a rules-based global trading system, even amidst limitations in its dispute-resolution processes. Similarly, the World Health Organization plays a vital role in coordinating transnational public health responses.

American influence will depend less on unilateral power and more on organizing collective power.

However, these universal institutions often move slowly, are susceptible to vetoes, and face limits imposed by conflicting political agendas. The solution is not to marginalize them, but to enhance their effectiveness through flexible, issue-oriented coalitions that can act in the absence of consensus. Minilateralism refers to

collaborative efforts among a limited number of states to address specific global challenges without requiring universal participation. This approach is particularly beneficial in areas such as maritime security, critical mineral supply chains, climate adaptation, pandemic preparedness, cybersecurity, digital governance, and infrastructure investment. The Quad and AUKUS serve as key examples of security-oriented minilateralism, though its application extends beyond these frameworks.

However, minilateralism carries inherent risks, including perceptions of exclusivity, the exacerbation of bloc politics, and the potential marginalization of smaller states that lack access to elite diplomatic forums. Contemporary research on the Indo-Pacific indicates that minilateralism can have complex effects on existing institutions, either complementing, competing with, or reshaping them based on its objectives. The United States should frame these small coalitions as enhancements rather than alternatives to comprehensive organizations like the UN, ASEAN, or the African Union. A sustainable framework in international relations necessitates a division of institutional responsibilities. Universal institutions should provide legitimacy, representation, overarching guidelines, and forums for dialogue. Meanwhile, smaller coalitions must deliver agility, innovation, resources, and practical implementation. The former without the latter risks stagnation, while the latter without the former may foster exclusion and political fragility.

For improved U.S. diplomacy, a shift in approach is essential. Leadership should involve not merely advocating pre-established American agendas but also actively listening to other nations' concerns, sharing agenda-setting power, and acknowledging differences among partners. This is especially crucial in engagements with the Global South, where historical experiences of intervention, unequal trade, and selective commitments have fostered skepticism toward Western efforts to uphold a universal order. A revitalized American internationalism should engage China in conflictual areas while also collaborating on shared global challenges, avoiding the notion that every institution is a zero-sum arena. It should encourage adaptable coalitions without compromising the integrity of universal organizations. Ultimately, the endurance of American influence relies not only on the commitment of traditional allies but also on the perception of U.S. leadership as relevant, legitimate, and responsive to the needs of nations beyond existing alliances. The stability of the rules-based

order will not be ensured by merely upholding the institutions established in 1945. It will persist only if these institutions evolve to better reflect the contemporary global landscape they seek to govern.

LEADERSHIP WITHOUT ILLUSION

The United States cannot restore its unipolar dominance, nor can it shield itself from global instability by retreating behind oceans, imposing tariffs, or adopting narrower national interests. The post-Cold War era highlighted the limits of relying on military superiority to reshape international political systems. The ensuing backlash has revealed a significant risk: disengagement without a strategic framework can weaken alliances, encourage rival opportunism, and compel Washington to react to crises that could have been preemptively addressed at lower costs. The challenge lies not in choosing between global hegemony and strategic withdrawal, but in cultivating leadership that is disciplined, sustainable, and legitimate.

A new framework for American internationalism must prioritize Europe and the Indo-Pacific, as instability or coercion in these regions directly impacts the security, prosperity, and political freedoms of the United States and its allies. However, this prioritization should not equate to abandonment. In Europe, the U.S. must position itself as NATO's essential strategic coordinator, helping allies develop their conventional defense capabilities. In the Indo-Pacific, the focus should shift towards reinforcing deterrence through strong alliances, while acknowledging that regional nations will pursue their own interests and resist being marginalized in U.S.–China dynamics. In the Middle East, core interests must be safeguarded without engaging in further open-ended military interventions aimed at reconfiguring the region.

The strategy should be anchored in domestic renewal, as American power depends on a robust economy that can produce essential technologies and maintain resilient supply chains. An innovative industrial base and a society that links international engagement to national security are also crucial. Consequently, industrial policy, technological competitiveness, and economic resilience are fundamental to the United States' capacity to uphold credible international commitments. Domestic renewal must not lead to economic isolationism. The United States cannot achieve resilience solely through self-sufficiency. Its technological and

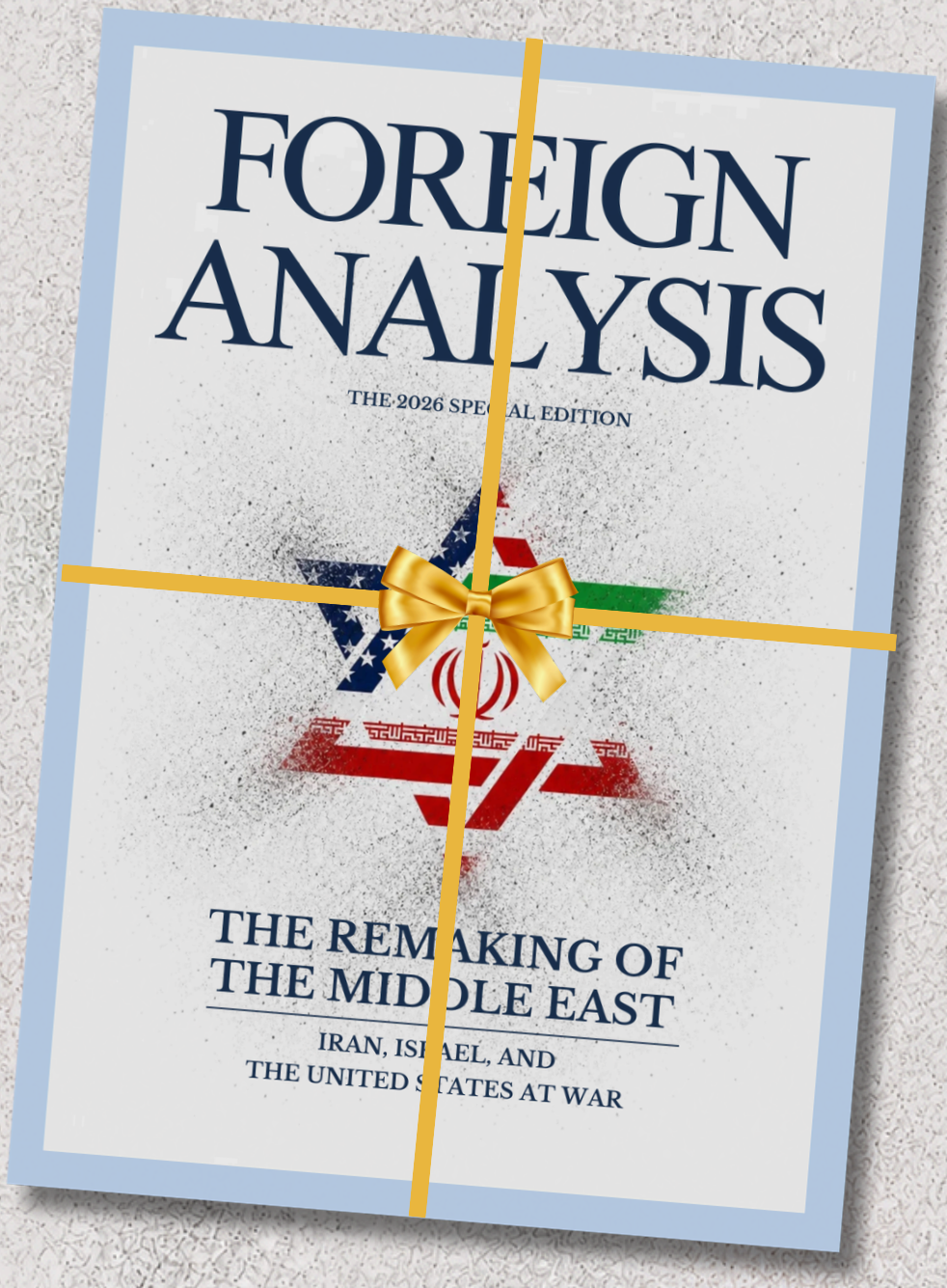
industrial prowess relies on collaboration with allies and partners across sectors such as semiconductors, critical minerals, clean energy, maritime, and digital economies. The challenge lies in securing vital capabilities domestically while building broad alliances that reduce the risk of coercion, disruption, and overreliance.

To enhance its global leadership, the United States must reform its institutional approach to be more representative. The shaping of the international order will be influenced not only by NATO's unity and the geopolitical dynamics in the Indo-Pacific but also by how nations in Africa, Latin America, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East perceive the legitimacy and responsiveness of global governance structures. A U.S. strategy focused solely on galvanizing alliances against China and Russia will have limited influence. Conversely, a commitment to fostering inclusive institutions, providing credible development finance, and addressing climate adaptation, health security, and digital equity will position the United States to cultivate sustainable partnerships.

The framework of networked leadership in international relations posits that while the United States remains crucial, it is not the exclusive anchor of global order. Its primary function is to coordinate collective capabilities: providing select high-end resources, convening coalitions, upholding key norms, supporting institutional reforms, and enhancing partners' abilities rather than fostering dependency. This strategy may diminish Washington's unilateral control, as more capable allies may express divergent views, Global South partners will assert their autonomy, and institutional reforms will necessitate a greater readiness to share agenda-setting authority.

These developments do not indicate a decline of American influence. Rather, they exemplify the requirements for effective leadership in a multipolar world where power is increasingly shared, and legitimacy must be earned. The primary challenge for American strategy in the twenty-first century will not be its capacity to intervene globally or resolve all conflicts. Instead, it will hinge on the United States' ability to translate its considerable power into a sustainable framework for international cooperation—one that effectively deters coercive actions, accommodates competitive dynamics, and possesses the legitimacy to persist over time. The United States' future influence will hinge more on its ability to organize collective power effectively than on the extent of its unilateral power projection.

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Xi is the Winner

How Trump Weakened America's Greatest Strategic Advantage

TERESA HABIB MERIGGI

It has become difficult to deny that the age of supreme American hegemony is coming to an end. A second Trump era has continued to break apart the international rules-based order, and has plunged the world into fretted uncertainty as to what comes next. As part of this transition to the unknown, a multipolar order has emerged from the fragments left behind by the U.S., dominated by the power struggle between the U.S. and China. Despite Washington's attempt to contain Beijing's accumulation of power, it is simultaneously weakening the very international order that has sustained its own hegemony for so long. How can we reconcile these two goals coming out of Washington: to maintain dominance over China and withdraw from the international order?

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Illustration by Artificial Intelligence

The U.S.-led international order has long been considered Washington's greatest strategic advantage. Through military and economic prowess, it was able to construct a global system based on liberal values with itself at the centre. Now, gone are the golden days of cooperation and globalisation, as Trump continues to withdraw the U.S. deeper into a bed of isolationism. Trump's behaviour has weakened the institutional, diplomatic, and ideological foundations of American global leadership. While U.S. consistency and leadership appear increasingly fragile, Beijing, on the other hand, is constructing an image of itself as stable, pragmatic, and globally engaged. The weakening of international institutions and rules that once governed the globe has given China space to produce its own rival structures and strategic partnerships, and increase its global influence. Beijing has been 'hiding strength, biding time' (韬光养晦), developing its economic and political networks to rise through the ranks. Now that Washington and the Western nexus of power have begun to dissolve, Chinese power has been given a clear vacuum to grow into.

Trump has therefore given Xi China's greatest strategic opportunity through the purposeful erosion of the U.S.-led international order. This erosion and fragmentation have been interpreted not merely as a temporary political crisis, as some may argue the Trump era to be, but as evidence of a deeper structural transformation that is about to take place. Critics of U.S. hegemony have argued that cracks caused by Trump's leadership have allowed inherent structural issues within the American-led order to bubble to the surface, and while developing nations have long since felt the brunt of American hegemony, now even those in the privileged West are having to come to grips with it. The struggle between the great powers of China and the United States now centres not around military and economic competition, but over the ability to shape, organise, and legitimise the international order of the future.

THE ORDER OF POWER

In 1992, Francis Fukuyama argued that we had reached the "End of History"; that international liberal democracy, led by the U.S., was the zenith of civilization. This system portrayed liberal values as both human nature and the end goal of human development. It relied on trust and predictability, often called the rules-based international order, and functioned under the assumption that

everyone would continue to follow these rules.

This liberal international order has been the foundation of U.S. primacy, and thus its greatest advantage. The order was built not only on military and economic dominance, but also on legitimacy derived from its liberal democratic values, alliances, and institutional leadership. The UN Security Council, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organisation all centre around U.S. interests and necessitate the subordination of other less powerful nations, typically from the Global South, to the will of the United States. Liberal internationalism, as a set of values to be exported around the globe through these multilateral institutions, functioned as a force multiplier for U.S. power in the sense that it justified the expansion of U.S. interests; these values were used to push the narrative of American leadership through consent rather than empire through coercion.

Crucial in supporting these foundations of the system were alliances. The strategic importance of allied confidence in U.S. leadership cannot be understated; not only did they facilitate U.S. military domination, but they also provided soft power platforms that situated the U.S. at the top of aesthetic and cultural hierarchies. The support of Europe, Japan, South Korea, and other allies was necessary in order to recognise the U.S. as the "leader of the free world" by being the "free world" for it to lead. These allies supported U.S. military domination by providing land for military bases, collaborating on training exercises and drills, and buying weapons from large U.S. manufacturers. In this sense, alliances created mutual strengthening by supporting the American military-industrial complex, and in return they received U.S. military support. Mutually beneficial economic networks meant that both sides supported the other. Soft power also functioned as a critical geopolitical asset, as by espousing values that everyone around the world was taught to look up to, America was seen as the pinnacle of democratic legitimacy.

As a result, the international institutions it founded were perceived as credible. This extended beyond political institutions and permeated the psyche of the average person: "I want the American dream, just like in the movies; I want justice and liberal democracy, just like in America." These ideals purposefully juxtaposed the destruction and exploitation the American empire imposed, and continues to impose, in Southeast and West Asia under the guise of global stability and security guarantees. As the leader of this international order, the U.S. was able to use these tools to

continuously reproduce a hierarchy of nations: the U.S. as hegemon, followed by its allies, and trailed behind by aspiring developing nations. These developing nations, exploited to the point that they depended on the hegemon economically and militarily, had no choice but to comply. Any deviation from the system by these smaller, less powerful nations was dealt with by the all-powerful bloc of the U.S. and its allies. Privileged under the international system, this bloc monopolised economic and military power and shared the same liberal values. We now know that this system only functions when its hegemon follows the rules too.

HIDING STRENGTH, BIDING TIME

Deng Xiaoping is regarded by many as the man who changed the fate of the Chinese economy, and thus the world. The "Reform and Opening" period, during which Deng and the CCP opened Chinese markets up to the rest of the world, allowed China to tap into the phenomenon of globalisation and use it as an engine of economic growth. Following its accession to the World Trade Organisation in 2001, China's cheap labour, natural resources, and vertical integration of supply chains have pushed down prices and led to a de facto monopolisation of manufacturing markets: the world has become addicted to China and Chinese goods. Aside from the obvious examples of cheap clothing and the like, China's domination of rare earth and renewable energy product manufacturing clearly shows the world's dependency on China. China dominates almost the entire supply chain—from mining and processing to manufacturing.

It is therefore true that China has benefited from its inclusion in the liberal international order. Trade with other nations under the WTO has allowed it to accumulate economic power and leverage; however, it must be acknowledged that the West was all too happy to make China its factory in order to keep supplying it with cheaper goods. This is what resulted in reliance on the Chinese economy. Despite being such a key beneficiary of the liberal international order, Beijing has simultaneously continued to challenge it. It has refused to recognise human rights, which form part of the key norms of the order, developed its own parallel institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, BRICS, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and formed close strategic partnerships with other opponents of the West and its allies. China is therefore both a product and a challenger to the existing international system.

THE BROKEN ALLIANCE

Trump's transactional approach to American alliances has left global security networks irreparably fragmented. From claims of annexing Greenland, to withdrawing support from Ukraine, and scolding NATO members for not supporting his war in Iran, Trump has been at the centre of tensions building across the Atlantic. Most notably, NATO burden-sharing disputes and spats with European allies over whether or not the U.S. could use their airbases to fire missiles into Iran have meant that the once powerful alliance is scrambling to secure itself without U.S. military guarantees. Coercive tactics continue to contribute to the growing mistrust of the U.S., as tariffs and threats of trade wars towards allies and non-allies alike wreak havoc on international trade. Trump's attempts to make others bend to his will have done nothing but erode trust in long-term U.S. strategic commitments. What does it mean for global security within the liberal international order if not even its leader can be depended on to defend it?



US PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP WALKS OFF STAGE DURING A CAMPAIGN RALLY AT PINNACLE BANK EXPO CENTER IN GRAND ISLAND, NEBRASKA, ON OCTOBER 5, 2026. (PHOTO BY KENT NISHIMURA / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES)

This is part of a broader retreat from liberal internationalism and diplomacy. Trump's initial withdrawal from the Paris climate agreement in 2017 left a gaping hole in global cooperation and dumbfounded the international community. This utter disappointment has continued to repeat itself, with Trump's withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal and from the World Health Organisation. With billions of dollars cut from funding for life-saving USAID programmes, the idea that the U.S. is still interested in international cooperation is laughable. The United States has become rife with scepticism towards free trade, globalisation, and international cooperation—the very values that form the basis of the international order it created. Through drawing the nation into a deeper pit of protectionism and isolationism, it is clear that Trump

wants nothing to do with the founding values of the order over which it exercises hegemony. No longer is American interventionism justified through democratic rhetoric; now the U.S. does whatever it wants, shirking moralistic arguments in its foreign policy discourse and ignoring the international framework of diplomacy. There is not even an attempt to pretend that the U.S. acts for the greater good under Trump's leadership. Hard power with a lack of moral architecture has become enshrined as a defining feature of the Trump era, as underpinning values disappear.

Exacerbating the malignant manifestations of retreat are diplomatic inconsistency and foreign policy volatility. The global uncertainty surrounding commitments from the U.S., and what the lines are that should or should not be crossed, has put the U.S. in a contradictory position. It can no longer claim to be the "leader of the free world" as its President is no longer regarded as someone capable of leading anything. Trump has weakened America's image as a stable guarantor of order, and instead pushed allies to prepare for a world devoid of American reliability.

BEIJING'S ADVANTAGE

Beijing has little choice but to see this situation as a strategic opportunity; Western domination is waning, and the rules-based order itself is fragmenting and withering away. The polarization and tension amongst Western allies is seen as a symptom of systemic decline, and now China is finally able to escape the legacy of its "century of humiliation". No longer subordinated by the Western powers, once desperate to carve out its territory and exploit its people and land, China sees this reconfiguration of the balance of power within the international system as justice.

Xi has juxtaposed China with increasing American volatility, and used the narrative of Chinese stability in order to portray China as a defender of globalisation and the international economy. The contrast between Chinese continuity and American unpredictability allows China to be seen as a more favourable and reliable ally, leading the way particularly in terms of AI and climate governance. These are two pressing global issues that Trump's America has been explicitly silent on. Xi has leveraged Trump's behaviour, and has presented China as a responsible global actor, and thus has expanded its reach through diplomacy, trade, and investment in infrastructure, as opposed to direct confrontation so characteristic of Trump.

Weakening American leadership has thus created space for Chinese influence. As the U.S. retreat left an institutional vacuum, China has had little reason not to fill the space left behind. This has manifested in several ways: China's role in conflict mediation in West Asia as it seeks to play a larger part in international governance, and expanding Chinese presence in the Global South, as evident by tensions in the South China Sea recently on show at the BRICS summit. Moreover, China continues to build on influence over infrastructure through the Belt and Road Initiative as both economic and geopolitical infrastructure. Despite reports of recent slowdowns in the project, it has nevertheless shown nations in the Global South that an alternative to the unreliable, unpredictable, and highly transactional nature of U.S. alliance exists.

China has continued to undermine the liberal international order in such a way that it has not expressed a desire to fully destroy the current system, but rather spread questions on the legitimacy of U.S. and Western hegemony. While it continues to benefit from the system, it has little reason to completely overturn the structures in place, as much of the American narrative seems to suggest it wants to do. China has not expressed a will to replace what the U.S. has abandoned, such as huge funding commitments for international organisations like the World Health Organisation or programmes like USAID. Xi has elected not to take the military interventionist approach rife in U.S. history despite attacks on strategic partners such as Iran. China therefore continues to benefit and function from the existing liberal international order. Notwithstanding, its subversion is clear.

It seems increasingly unlikely that, even after Trump's second term, the U.S. will return to its former hegemonic position in the global order. It cannot seriously continue to compete with China while weakening the very systems that crowned it hegemon. The U.S. continues to lose institutional legitimacy, whereas China continues to develop its role in global AI, climate, and diplomatic governance, as well as building networks of partnerships, institutions and global trust. If Trump wants to retain a modicum of legitimacy in the international community, he cannot continue to ignore the contradictory aspects of his foreign policy.

Trump has continuously reduced leadership to pure coercive capability and adopted a highly transactional form of governance: he has threatened (and taken) military action, implemented

economically damaging tariffs, and pulled funding. This approach comes with a cost. U.S. lives have been lost, billions of taxpayer dollars spent, and the cost of living for average Americans has risen as a result of increasing oil prices due to the conflict in the Strait of Hormuz. The U.S. voter, as evidenced by Trump's approval ratings, is not happy. Moreover, middle powers have taken to hedging behaviours, walking along a tightrope between China and the U.S. — balancing predictability and unpredictability. Strategic autonomy in Europe, Türkiye, India, and the Gulf continues to develop as the U.S. withdraws. While involvement in the past made these nations reliant on American funding and military power, as strategic autonomy develops, they will no longer need U.S. allyship. When the U.S. is no longer needed, it loses its leverage.

This is notwithstanding the fact that U.S. military supremacy is no longer a guarantee. China's military capabilities have continued to grow, with a focus on the Asia-Pacific region — the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea being the main points of contention. Even within the next decade, the world's security institutions and infrastructure could look very different. The question facing the international community today is not whether China will match American military power, but what this means for global security infrastructure.

It is crucial to remember, however, that despite American floundering, its weakening does not guarantee Chinese supremacy. China's rise up to this point has been due to its own policies in conjunction with wider international factors, and this continues to be the case for the future. It must continue to cultivate strength internally to remain a superpower, and therefore must address its own structural constraints. Its demographic decline and debt burdens are issues that it must tackle if it wants to continue to be the world's manufacturing hub and economic powerhouse, although AI may already be making headway on these challenges. Moreover, international trust is likely to continue to be a barrier on the wider global stage. Many point to the Hong Kong National Security Law as an example of China letting nothing get in its way when it has the capabilities to achieve its objectives. In this sense, if China wants to be in a position where it can create strategic partnerships with other nations beyond its existing network, it must show itself as a trustworthy partner. If Xi wants to fill in the space left by U.S. retreat, to whatever extent, China must actively partake in what is left of the international order. Only in this way can Xi shape what is to come.

THE ORDER CHINA INHERITS

The greatest geopolitical advantage China now has is the fragmentation of the American-led order. Although its economic growth as well as the resulting accumulation of military power have, of course, been part of its rise, American withdrawal has left space for China to grow into on the international stage. In this sense, Trump did not "create" China's rise, but has accelerated the processes that allow China to amass power by eroding the system that maintains the U.S. as the hegemon.

The international system incorporated China as it opened its markets up for trade with the rest of the world, and China made the world dependent on it. Over time, it strategically accumulated military and economic strength. Now, it continues to pick up pieces left behind by the fragmentation of the international order caused by the U.S. To progress, diplomacy and alliances, or as it calls them, strategic partnerships, remain a crucial aspect of its journey to power. The future of global leadership and whatever system replaces the international liberal order depends not only on material power, but on the ability to sustain legitimacy, alliances, and institutional trust.

At the turn of the 21st century, the focus of China watchers was on whether China could lift its population out of poverty. In the 2010s, the question was how far China's economic rise would go and if it could compete with other leading economies. Now, the question we must ask ourselves is: post-U.S. hegemony, what will an international order shaped by China look like?

A Fragmented Giant

Why Europe Cannot Remain Divided in a World of Great Powers

GOLO VANDEN EYNDE

On 19 September 1946, Winston Churchill delivered a powerful speech at the University of Zurich, setting out his vision for the future of Europe, "this noble continent", which, over the course of only a few decades, had so tragically torn itself apart. According to Churchill, the first step towards Europe's reconstruction would be for France and Germany to set aside their historic rivalry. Together with other willing nations (though notably not the UK), they should establish a union of European states, a federation of nations, which Churchill called "the United States of Europe". Explicitly drawing on already existing ideas about European federalism from the interwar period, such as those promoted by the Austrian count Richard von Coudenhove-Kalergi and the former French foreign minister Aristide Briand, Churchill envisaged a unified continent, confidently declaring: "If Europe were once united in the sharing of its common inheritance, there would be no limit to the happiness, to the prosperity, and to the glory which its three or four hundred million people would enjoy."

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Illustration by Artificial Intelligence

The two great wars that had ravaged Europe between 1914 and 1945 (considered by Churchill "a second Thirty Years' War") had left the old continent, once the undisputed centre of the world, in ruins. In his speech, Churchill warned that without a peaceful process of reconciliation between France and Germany, Europe risked being reduced to a state of dependency under the domination of the United States and the Soviet Union. "I must give you a warning," he cautioned. "Time may be short. At present, there is a breathing space. The cannons have ceased firing. The fighting has stopped, but the dangers have not stopped. If we are to form the United States of Europe, or whatever name it may take, we must begin now."

Today, eighty years on, many of his recommendations have been realised. France and Germany form the core of a peaceful and prosperous political union. However, we are still far removed from achieving Churchill's ambitious vision for Europe's future. In its current constellation, the EU is still deeply and dangerously divided, not just across various economic sectors, but also on a wide range of policy domains. This political and economic fragmentation might not have been a serious reason for concern had it not been for the increasingly volatile geopolitical environment in which the EU needs to operate.

Most concerning of all, Europe is quickly falling behind its global competitors. Not unlike the postwar period, our autonomy is once again being threatened by powerful external actors: Russia, China, the U.S. Europe is slowly but surely sliding into geostrategic irrelevance. If we fail to overcome our internal fragmentation and reduce our dependence on foreign states for our security, we may be reduced to 'vassal status' once more. In its current form, the European Union is unable to respond adequately to the challenges of our time. Structural reforms have become a vital necessity. The main point here is not that more integration is always necessarily 'better'. In many policy areas, local, regional or national decision-making might actually be preferable. However, there are still several key areas where deeper integration (that is, transferring political responsibility from the national to the 'federal' European level) would benefit all participating states.

As a federation of nation-states, the EU would be much better equipped to protect its strategic interests and respond to the pressure coming from Russia, China and the U.S. Closer integration would also allow us, among other things, to complete the internal market, create a single capital markets union, remove unnecessary barriers to trade and innovation, manage irregular migration, and

finally enforce the common fiscal rules of the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP), which are essential for the continued stability of Europe's economy. These measures, it seems to me, will require the EU to adopt more of the characteristics of a federal state and less of a confederal union of states. This is not to say that the nation-state has lost its validity as an organising concept, but it needs to be encapsulated within a broader federalist framework. Only within a federal framework can national autonomyand pan-European unity be reconciled.

STRIKING A BALANCE

Throughout its history, the tension between national sovereignty and European unity has been a defining feature of the European project. Indeed, European history more broadly has long been characterised by recurring conflicts between various forms of supranational governance on one side and popular demands for (proto-)national autonomy on the other. Past attempts at pan-European unification (whether Carolingian, Habsburg or Napoleonic) have systematically failed. However, despite its lack of centralised political control, Europe has always shared a common cultural heritage, and European states regularly engaged in various forms of diplomatic consultation. Despite its national differences, Europe can therefore also be said to have a long tradition of intergovernmental cooperation and supranational forms of governance. Integration and fragmentation, centralisation and decentralisation have long been part of the European experience.

The point is not that one approach is inherently 'better' than the other. Europe's political fragmentation has been a source of incredibly productive competition, as well as catastrophic destruction. National sovereignty is not the root of all evil (as some on the far left like to pretend) and European unity is not some secretive globalist conspiracy (as some on the far right would like us to believe). The historical reality is far more complex and nuanced than either the post-national left or the ultra-nationalist right are willing to acknowledge.

European integration is not about 'abolishing' the nation state, but about incorporating it within a larger federal structure that has the capabilities necessary to serve and sustain the interests of its members. European integration was never intended to weaken the autonomy of its member states. Rather,The European project has never been about 'weakening' the nations that chose to participate

in it. On the contrary: its purpose has been to strengthen their collective position in an increasingly unstable and less Eurocentric world. European unity is not just a project of peace, but also an instrument of power; an exercise in 'Realpolitik'. It is unfortunate that in our polarised political discourse, national autonomy and European unity are all too often presented as if they were mutually incompatible; as if we had to choose one over the other. European integration is about striking a balance between the need for national autonomy on the one hand and the benefits of political unity on the other. It is not an 'either-or' question.

INTERNAL DIVISIONS

The problem with political unions that lack a strong central authority (like the current-day EU) is that they eventually fall prey to their internal contradictions. Deep divisions continue to undermine the EU's external action. Decisions made in one national capital can have ripple effects across the entire Union. Without central coordination, the actions of one country can often come at the expense of the rest. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that different capitals have very different perceptions of the challenges facing the continent and how best to address them.

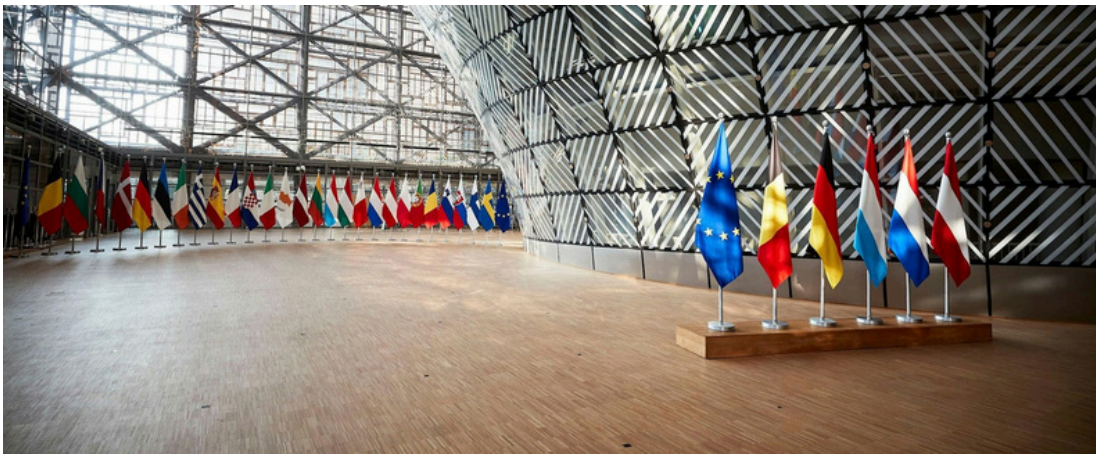
These divisions are a natural consequence of the EU's composition as a union of sovereign states with distinct historic, economic and political identities. Although such divisions are not necessarilyproblematic and may even reflect the pluralistic nature of the EU, they can becomeproblematic when they result in contradictory and mutually incompatible policies. This tension between unity and diversity is not accidental, but a defining feature of the EU's governance structure.

One of the most infamous examples was Hungary's opposition to EU sanctions against Russia. During the former Orbán government, Hungary repeatedly opposed EU measures in response to Russia's aggression. Likewise, divergentapproaches to migration policy have exposed deep divisions within the EU. Countries like Germany, Sweden and Spain, for instance, have long been advocates for a very 'open' stance towards migration. Other states, by contrast, primarily in Central and Eastern Europe, have pursued a more cautious approach.

Another area of persistent tension is fiscal policy, where Greece's struggle to contain its debt and deficits has frequently brought it into conflict with common EU guidelines, most notably in the wake

of the 2008 global financial crisis. After all, it was the Greek government's manipulation of its debt and deficit figures in order to adopt the common currency, the euro, which eventually caused the global financial crisis to spill over into the European sovereign debt crisis.

What each of these cases clearly illustrates is this: it is a practical impossibility to have common political responsibilities (like a common currency, a common trade policy, or a common area of free movement) without a centralised governing authority and without some sort of consensus on the ways in which these policy areas should be governed. By contrast, the Covid-pandemic was managed relatively effectively, precisely because national governments chose to procure vaccines collectively, rather than individually. This shows that in those cases where national governments manage to act together, in close coordination with the European institutions, they can actually achieve remarkable results.



THE EUROPA BUILDING IN BRUSSELS IS THE MAIN SEAT OF THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL AND COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION. — © EUROPEAN UNION

Thankfully, there arehave been numerous notable examples of successful forms of cooperation and integration among EU member states. Take, for instance, the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) and the European Pact on Migration and Asylum (EMU). The Stability and Growth Pact, which went into force in January 1999 and received a major update following the financial crisis in 2011, aims to ensure budgetary discipline among member states by setting limits on deficits and public debt, thereby safeguarding the stability of the Economic and Monetary Union. Similarly, the European Pact on Migration and Asylum, which entered into force in June of 2026, seeks to streamline asylum procedures across the EU and facilitate orderly returns for those applicants whose request for asylum has been rejected.

Even in domains like defence and security policy, which were long considered the exclusive purview of NATO, there is now a discernible trend towards closer alignment and improved interoperability. Some illustrative examples of this development include the European Defence Agency (EDA), which encourages cooperation among member states in defence research, development, and procurement; the European Defence Fund (EDF), which provides funding for collaborative defence projects; and, last but not least, the Strategic Autonomy for Europe (SAFE) initiative, which provides no less than 150 billion euros150 billion euro in funding for the common procurement of military equipment.

Unfortunately, however, many hurdles still remain. Even joint programmes between just two or three countries can often encounter significant difficulties. For instance, Germany recently withdrew from the Future Combat Air System (FCAS) programme, which aimed to develop a new generation of fighter jets. Underlying this setback were deep internal disagreements over the way in which the new aircraft was to be designed. If integrating defence capabilities among only a few countries is already so challenging, how can the EU possibly hope to achieve military interoperability among all twenty-seven of its member states? One thing is therefore clear: this will be a long and gradual process which will take many years, if not many decades, to complete.

INSTITUTIONAL CONSTRAINTS

Europe currently finds itself in a paradoxical situation: it is too deeply integrated to untangle itself without causing irreparable damage, yet still not integrated deeply enough to presentform a united front on issues such asagainst Russian aggression, American pressurecoercion, and Chinese coercioncompetition. or even irregular migration flows. Resolving this dilemma, it seems to me, would require much closer coordination of hitherto separate policy areas within the framework of a federal union.

As Mario Draghi, the former president of the European Central Bank, recently observed in a speech he gave at KU Leuven: “Power requires Europe to move from confederation to federation. Where Europe has federated — on trade, on competition, on the single market, on monetary policy — we are respected as a power and negotiate as one. We see this today in the successful trade agreements being negotiated with India and Latin America. Where we have not federated — on defense, on industrial policy, on foreign

affairs — we are treated as a loose assembly of middle-sized states, to be divided and dealt with accordingly."

The transformation from confederation to federation will not happen overnight. Suggesting otherwise would demonstrate a lack of understanding of European politics. Another formal treaty change akin to the Lisbon Treaty of 2007 appears highly unlikely. After all, for that to happen, unanimous agreement among all twenty-seven member states would be required, which is exceedingly difficult, especially if the EU were to follow through on its plans to expand to thirty members or more. To put it simply, the EU can either deepen or expand, but doing both simultaneously will be extremely difficult. From a purely legal perspective, therefore, the EU is unlikely to change its institutional structure in the near future. Formal federalism remains a distant prospect.

Yet federalism is a famously elastic concept; there are multiple paths that lead to Rome... Small-scale, functional integration in specific sectors may lead, over time, to a more informal kind of federalism — a 'de facto' federation. This 'piecemeal' approach, through a series of so-called 'spillover effects', could gradually bind previously separate states into a larger federal entity, blurring the line between federation and confederation to the point of becoming irrelevant. This theory of integration is known as neofunctionalism. As Robert Schuman famously stated on 9 May 1950: "Europe will not be made all at once, or according to a single plan. It will be built through concrete achievements which first create a de facto solidarity".

The EU needs to decide whether it wants to become the 'U.S.' of Europe, or the 'UN' of Europe.

Currently, European governments seem more likely to rely on the intergovernmental approach (that is, on 'ad hoc' forms of cooperation, or 'coalitions of the willing') rather than on ever deeper defence integration'ever closer union' or treaty reform. Given the current political landscape, this may be the most realistic path forward. In the long term, however, further integration of European defence industrieswill still be necessary. This is especially evident in the domain of defence. After all, what is the point of spending billions of euros to expand national defence budgets if the end result is still twenty-seven incompatible defence industries and weapon systems?

GLOBAL INSTABILITY

The need for deeper integration has become much more urgent in light of the growing instability of the global geopolitical landscape and the increasing competition coming from economic superpowers like China and the U.S. The assumption that the liberal international order (that is, the post-Cold War system defined by free trade, universally accepted rules, independent institutions like the IMF, WTO and OSCE, and the U.S. as a unilateral 'global policeman') would continue to characterise international relations for the remainder of human historyhas proven overly optimistic, if not dangerously naive.

Interdependence only functions ifas long as all parties adhere to the same set of rules and norms. However, major powers such as Russia, China and the United States have repeatedly violated the principles that underpin theon which the rules-based order used to rest. Some obvious examples include the Trump administration's brazen imposition of tariffs on other countriesand China's manipulation of its currency and its use of state subsidies to give its own industrial giants an unfair competitive advantage. International arbiters like the WTO have proven unable or unwilling to respond effectively. Similarly, multilateral organisations like the OSCE, tasked with maintaining security, like the OSCEhave essentially been rendered powerlessirrelevant.

If the EU wishes to avoid a similar fate to that of organisations like the OSCE, which has become largely irrelevant,it must transform itself from a largely intergovernmental institution into a truly supranational organisation capable of protecting the common interests of its members. As Verhofstadt once quipped, the EU needs to decide whether it wants to become the 'U.S.' of Europe, or the 'UN' of Europe. The idea that it can be both (or that it can simply stay somewhere in between) is an enticing but inaccurate illusion which Europe can no longer afford to entertain.

ELECTORAL LANDSCAPE

Some might argue that the recent rise of nationalist parties across Europe signals a lack of legitimacy and waning public support for the EU. In Europe's three most powerful countries (France, Germany and the UK), populist parties have indeed made significant gains and are expected to win the next general election. Disillusionment with traditional centrist parties, which have so far

failed to adequately address legitimate public concerns about uncontrolled immigration, has led to a surge in support for Eurosceptic populist parties. These parties are now expected to gain power in some of Europe's most influential capitals. This could be a huge setback for the Eu9ropean project.

However, subsequent opinion polling by the European Parliament's Eurobarometer clearly indicates that a growing majority of citizens is actually in favour of European integration. In fact, support for the EU has increased in recent years. Although this support is strongest among centrist and explicitly pro-European parties on the left, such as Volt and DiEM25, it would be wrong to assume that Europe's current right is anti-Europeanthe European right is anti-EU across the board. Many moderate right-wing parties are strongly pro-EU, even if they do not always endorse the idea of an 'ever closer union'.

Moreover, even among parties that are ostensibly nationalist, the appetite for a full exit from the EU has significantly waned following the fiasco of the Brexit experiment. The rise of nationalist parties appears to reflect dissatisfaction with specific government policies at both the national and European levels, rather than opposition to the EU in and of itself. Just as citizens may criticise their own government while still remaining loyal to their country, many voters drawn to the populist right may still support a stronger EU as long as it manages to address their concerns. They may want a different EU, but very few actually want to leave it entirely.

Dismantling or breaking up the EU is simply not a realistic proposition. Those who advocate such a course of action, often for short-term political gain, usually overlook the countless practical challenges that would inevitably arise. Would it really be wise, for example, to abandon the EU's common trade policyto abandon the Common Commercial Policy, dismantleto abolish the Common Agricultural Policy, or abandon the euroor to dismantle the common currency? Any new government, even one with a radical right-wing agenda,whether on the left or the right, would soon have to recognise the impracticality of such proposals.

Furthermore, it is highly likely they would realise that addressing the issues they were elected to resolve, chief among them uncontrolled immigration, actually requires deeper integration and closer coordination with other European capitals. The 2015 migration and refugee crisis of 2015 was not the result of excessive central control from the EU. , but rQuite the opposite: it was the result of a lack of coordinated action, which led to a chaotic and

contradictory array of national reactionspolicies. In reality, European integration actually serves the national interest. Fragmentation, by contrast, further endangers it.

The EU in its current configuration is still far from becoming a genuine federation. Nevertheless, the necessity of responding collectively to both internal and external challenges may, over a long period of time, gradually push it in a more federalist direction. Thus, there may still be reason for cautious optimism. Despite the electorate's shift towards more nationalistic parties, a stronger, more federal EU is still possible. Personally, I strongly believe this would not just benefit the particular interests of some, but would truly be in the interest of Europe as a whole. Yet Churchill's warning still resonates: time may be short. We must begin now.

The Next Korean War Won't Stay in Korea

How a Peninsula Conflict Could Trigger a Multi-Theater Great Power Crisis

UNBI CHOI

The Korean Peninsula once had relatively clear strategic boundaries. By night, satellite images revealed the stark contrast between the lights of North and South Korea. Military tensions persisted along the Demilitarized Zone, while North Korea's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs remained the defining source of regional insecurity. Today, that picture is beginning to blur. A major turning point came with the war in Ukraine. There, North Korea's strategic partnership with Russia translated into growing involvement in a conflict that has devastated Ukrainian territory. At the same time, the growing risk of nuclear, missile, and other military technology proliferation has become increasingly difficult to ignore. That may be the warning: North Korea could fuel future crises, from the Taiwan Strait to confrontations involving Iran, the United States, and Israel.

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Illustration by Artificial Intelligence

Meanwhile, strategic competition between the United States and China has expanded beyond trade and diplomacy. It has increasingly shifted toward emerging technologies, particularly artificial intelligence. How could these transformations reshape the balance of power? What has changed is the strategic landscape surrounding the peninsula. In this new environment, the Korean Peninsula is no longer just a regional security issue. Korea—a nation divided by ideology—is increasingly becoming part of global great-power competition. It is as if the Cold War has found a new chapter.

THE LOGIC OF SURVIVAL

North Korea is still widely perceived as one of the world's most isolated states. Yet this image did not emerge overnight. There is a story behind how North Korea has survived in the international system—a story that reveals the consistent strategic logic shaping its behavior today. North Korea has chosen its own destiny while navigating the changing world around it. From its founding, its leaders sought to secure the country's survival by carefully navigating between two major powers: China and the Soviet Union. When the Democratic People's Republic of Korea was established in 1948, the Soviet Union provided extensive political, economic, and military assistance. In 1950, North Korea crossed the 38th parallel and invaded South Korea with Soviet backing, triggering the Korean War.

That relationship began to fracture in 1953—the year Stalin died and the Korean War Armistice Agreement was signed. Three years later, Nikita Khrushchev denounced Stalin's cult of personality, helping to trigger the Sino-Soviet split. For North Korea, the implications were unmistakable: the two great powers upon which its security depended were beginning to drift apart. The emerging rivalry offered North Korea a lasting lesson: relying heavily on a single great power could threaten the regime's survival. Kim Il Sung therefore pursued a strategy of balancing between Beijing and Moscow. He declared Juche, or self-reliance, as the very foundation of the North Korean system. It served as an ideological doctrine for maintaining internal control while seeking to reduce external dependence and preserve the regime's autonomy.

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North Korea experienced a severe famine known as the Arduous March. From Pyongyang's perspective, these developments carried a clear lesson: seemingly durable political systems could collapse, and even long-standing allies could fundamentally change. North Korea learned that excessive dependence on outside powers could become a strategic vulnerability. It developed a foreign policy that followed a simple principle in navigating the major powers of Eurasia—regime first. Against this backdrop, under Kim Jong Il's leadership, North Korea expanded its military capabilities through Songun, or military-first politics. Nuclear weapons were defined as both a deterrent and a strategic asset that reduced dependence on any single partner while expanding Pyongyang's diplomatic leverage.

Under Kim Jong Un, this approach became even more pronounced. In December 2013, he executed Jang Song Thaek, a powerful figure within the regime. Fear and uncertainty spread throughout Pyongyang as Kim Jong Un tightened his grip on the regime. The fall of Jang was particularly significant because of his close ties to China. As Kim Jong Un consolidated his power, another pattern became clearer. North Korea's relationships with China and Russia were increasingly shaped by changing strategic circumstances. Beijing may remain Pyongyang's most important neighbor. Yet importance does not always translate into trust. North Korea has continued to adjust its relationships with its neighboring powers according to its strategic interests.

The Russia–Ukraine war made this long-standing strategy visible to the world. Through its partnership with Russia, North Korea emerged as a strategic actor. It has used the changing international environment to exploit great-power competition for its own strategic benefit. It is actively leveraging rivalry among major powers to strengthen its bargaining position. What began as a strategy of survival has increasingly become a source of strategic leverage. The message is clear: North Korea's isolation has itself become part of its strategic experience. Decades of navigating isolation have taught the regime how to identify fractures among major powers and turn them into opportunities to advance its own survival.

NORTH KOREA GOES GLOBAL

The war in Ukraine has opened a new chapter in North Korea–Russia relations and their strategic partnership. As the war has dragged

dragged on, Russia has received weapons, ammunition, and personnel support from North Korea. For Pyongyang, meanwhile, Russia has become an opportunity to gain not only economic benefits but also military technology and operational knowledge. After decades of distance following the collapse of the Soviet Union, North Korea and Russia have found strategic value in each other once again.

This new picture of the 21st century shows that North Korea is not merely a recipient of support—it is becoming a strategic partner that helps sustain Russia's war effort, in a relationship that in some ways recalls the Korean War. Relations with Russia provide North Korea with economic and diplomatic means of survival while helping to ease the pressure of international sanctions. Here is the question: What has North Korea learned from this war? Its involvement in Russia's invasion of Ukraine has given North Korea an opportunity to experience modern warfare directly. This experience could change the way the North Korean military approaches command and control, intelligence collection, and operational execution. The North Korean military will not suddenly gain technological superiority. But the battlefield itself could become a classroom, shaping its military doctrine and making its forces more adaptable.



NORTH KOREA PARADES NEVER-BEFORE-SEEN MISSILES ACROSS KIM IL SUNG SQUARE DURING A MILITARY PARADE ON SATURDAY. (WONG MAYE-E/ASSOCIATED PRESS)

This could pose a growing threat to South Korea, North Korea's counterpart on the peninsula. If a crisis were to erupt there, the threat posed by North Korea could become even greater. If North Korea brings the experience gained in Ukraine back home, South Korea must consider the implications. In particular, South Korea's leadership and its relationship with the United States will be tested, as the strategic environment has changed significantly. This transformation is not confined to the Korean Peninsula. The Russia–

Ukraine war is no longer a regional conflict; it is becoming a platform that facilitates military cooperation among states challenging the existing security order. The issue is not simply that North Korea may become stronger—the larger concern is the possibility of a new security bloc linking Europe and East Asia.

For North Korea, weapons and military technology are not only instruments of deterrence but also strategic resources for survival, generating foreign currency and diplomatic leverage. For example, if tensions among Iran, the United States, and Israel were to escalate into a military conflict in the Middle East, who would emerge as a key supplier behind the war? North Korea could be one of them, having already gained similar experience through its involvement in Ukraine. It could strengthen its relationship with Iran by providing weapons, military supplies, or technical assistance. As North Korea lacks a conventional export market, war itself could become one of its most valuable markets. Weapons, military supplies, and battlefield experience can be exchanged for foreign currency, technology, and political influence. In this way, military capabilities accumulated in one conflict do not remain there—they can travel across regions through North Korea's expanding supply networks, shaping the next battlefield before it even begins.

This is where the broader significance of North Korea's strategic transformation becomes clear. The story is now about more than a security problem confined to the Korean Peninsula. It is about the emergence of a transregional security actor capable of moving weapons, military technology, and wartime experience across regions. Through North Korea's expanding networks, the capabilities forged in one war can shape the next. North Korea is reaching far outside the Korean Peninsula—it is becoming a powerful piece on a geopolitical chessboard that stretches across regions.

NORTH KOREA'S STRATEGIC OPTIONS

North Korea's growing relationship with Russia has expanded its military and diplomatic options. Yet today's partnership may not tell us where the relationship is heading tomorrow. The future of North Korea's relationship with Russia could depend on the course of the Russia–Ukraine war. Meanwhile, technology is emerging as a new force shaping the security order, alongside shifting relations among great powers, including China and the United States. The current North Korea–Russia relationship was born under the

exceptional circumstances of war. This does not offer a guarantee that the two countries will share the same strategic objectives in the long term.

Looking back at the history discussed earlier, their relationship has changed with the course of international relations. From their Cold War ties through the collapse of the Soviet Union and beyond, including Russia's strategic shift following the Crimea crisis, changes in the international environment have shaped their relationship beyond shared ideology. What happens if the conditions that brought North Korea and Russia together begin to change? If Russia's ability to sustain the war, its economic conditions, and the technology and resources it can provide to North Korea change, will their relationship remain the same? As artificial intelligence, drones, and unmanned systems continue to advance, the security landscape itself is being rewritten. The war in Ukraine, for example, has demonstrated that military power alone is not enough; what matters is how quickly states can adopt new technologies and adapt their tactics.

Technological innovation could expose North Korea's weaknesses in outdated equipment and command-and-control systems. It is important to ask how North Korea can keep pace with these changes. With limited capital, acquiring advanced technologies requires Pyongyang to find the necessary resources. Where will North Korea obtain emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence? How far can its partnerships with Russia and China fill that gap? These uncertainties mean that current North Korea–Russia cooperation and the battlefield experience gained in Ukraine cannot automatically be translated into future military superiority.

The peninsula is becoming a strategic space where the interests of three great powers.

The most important uncertainty lies in North Korea's own diplomatic strategy. Historically, North Korea has sought to avoid complete dependence on a single great power, adjusting its relationships with China and Russia. Its relationship with Russia is now deepening, but today's alignment does not necessarily place North Korea permanently in the Russian camp. Moreover, China remains indispensable to North Korea in terms of trade, energy, and economic ties. More importantly, geography cannot be changed—China shares a border with North Korea, making its proximity a strategic reality that Pyongyang cannot ignore. If Russia's influence declines as the situation in Ukraine changes, North Korea may turn

its attention back to China, allowing their relationship to blossom again.

Beyond China and Russia, U.S. policy toward North Korea is another force shaping this balance. If new diplomatic options emerge in U.S.–North Korea relations, the strategic weight North Korea places on China and Russia could shift, giving Pyongyang a new choice beyond dependence on a single great power. One of North Korea's strengths has been its ability to read the shifting distance among major powers and adjust its relationships according to its own interests as the international environment changes. North Korea may be moving closer to Russia today, but that does not mean it will remain in the same position tomorrow.

KOREA'S STRATEGIC CROSSROADS

The strategic landscape surrounding the Korean Peninsula is beginning to tell a different story. The peninsula is becoming a strategic space where the interests of three great powers—the United States, China, and Russia—intersect. As the Russia–Ukraine war has revealed, the lines between European and East Asian security are beginning to blur—connecting what were once seen as separate security spaces.

As security boundaries start to fade, traditional deterrence strategies may no longer be sufficient. Weapons, military technology, intelligence, and battlefield experience can cross regional boundaries, allowing capabilities accumulated in one war to be transferred to another region in the future. We should not ignore the pattern emerging from the war in Ukraine—what Ukraine is fighting against today is what it is trying to prevent from spreading beyond its borders. The crisis in Ukraine should not be understood as a regional crisis; it should be taken as part of an interconnected security space that extends to the Taiwan Strait, the Middle East, and beyond. Within this emerging interconnected security environment, the Korean Peninsula carries different strategic implications for each great power.

From China's perspective, the Korean Peninsula is an important buffer zone directly linked to border security, maritime access, and the presence of U.S. forces in South Korea. For Beijing, North Korea helps shape the regional environment, while its relationship with South Korea is part of its search for a regional strategy amid competition with the United States.

From Russia's perspective, the Korean Peninsula holds strategic value as a space for expanding its military and diplomatic influence in East Asia. Russia has embraced military cooperation with North Korea as a means of sustaining its war in Ukraine while competing with the West. However, South Korea remains strategically important to Russia, particularly because of its economic role in Northeast Asia. Russia cannot easily discard South Korea, as shifting international circumstances may require Moscow to act pragmatically.

The United States faces a different strategic picture. The Korean Peninsula is increasingly connected to its Indo-Pacific strategy, extended deterrence, and its response to developments in the Taiwan Strait. If a conflict were to break out in the Taiwan Strait, the strategic importance of the Korean Peninsula could become even greater in China's calculations, potentially affecting the security environment on the peninsula. The United States needs to strengthen trust with South Korea by recognizing Seoul's strategic concerns and geographic realities, while reinforcing the U.S.–South Korea–Japan partnership as a foundation for regional security.

Taken together, these shifts reveal a security environment in which no crisis stands entirely on its own. As security becomes increasingly interconnected, deterrence must adapt to that reality. Rather than treating security challenges as separate, future deterrence strategies must recognize how a crisis in one region can reshape the strategic calculations of another amid great-power competition.

SECURITY BEYOND THE PENINSULA

The future security environment will not be determined by military power alone. Three elements are likely to shape its direction: strategic relations, technological transformation, and the capabilities and constraints of states. These three elements do not move independently. A change in one can reshape another, creating a chain of consequences across the security environment—and it is within these connections that deterrence itself becomes increasingly interconnected.

Technology may become one of the most powerful forces of change among the three elements. Emerging technologies are beginning to redefine what it means to hold an advantage on the battlefield. States with greater military power may not retain that advantage in future conflicts. For instance, Taiwan could create new

strategic advantages by rapidly adopting advanced technologies and integrating them into its defense and strategy, even when facing a much larger military power.

The lesson is that the next era may be shaped by who can recognize change and adapt to it faster. Beyond technology, diplomacy itself can reshape the security environment on the Korean Peninsula. For China and Russia, the challenge is how to keep North Korea within their strategic relationships. For the United States, South Korea, and Japan, the task is to determine whether they can offer Pyongyang alternative choices through diplomatic engagement alongside military deterrence. Pyongyang's search for a new diplomatic path will not be determined by Pyongyang alone—the choices made by the United States and China will also shape its future direction.

This is where interconnected deterrence matters: understanding how changes in strategic relationships, technological innovation, and national capabilities and constraints can influence one another—and adjusting deterrence, diplomacy, and alliance strategies accordingly. It should recognize multiple theaters without treating them as a single conflict. The future security environment is not a map that has already been drawn. What matters is recognizing that one change can trigger another, and that this chain of consequences can redraw the map itself before the next crisis takes shape.The picture of the Korean Peninsula is beginning to look very different.

The boundaries are fading as the Russia–Ukraine war, U.S.–China competition, and tensions across the Taiwan Strait become increasingly interconnected—bringing the peninsula into a much larger strategic picture. Yet that picture is still being drawn. Three forces will shape what comes next: strategic relations, technological transformation, and the capabilities and constraints of states. As one changes, it can reshape another, carrying consequences across borders and into other regions. What matters is how changes elsewhere can reach the peninsula—and how changes beginning there can travel far beyond it. Understanding these connections may be the key to navigating the next chapter of security. The Korean Peninsula stands at the intersection of these changes—where the next security order may begin to take shape.

Migration as Policy, Migration as Strategy

How Migration Became a Tool of American Power

LEONARDO GIORGINI

No issue has defined the United States as a body politic like migration. From—and even before—its origins as a nation of immigrants, America has constantly asked itself who has the right to stake a claim to this country. At times, this questioning has taken the form of overtly racist laws and policies, while at others, it has been remarkably open to strangers. This article aims to shed light on some of the less well-known parts of this story: how controls on migration have altered and continue to alter the balances of power, both at home and abroad.

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Illustration by Artificial Intelligence

For as long as America has existed, it has been anxious about who could lay a claim to its land and rights. In a missive that is humorous in retrospect, Benjamin Franklin, one of the first and most prominent figures to encourage the people of the Thirteen Colonies to see themselves not only as British subjects or residents of their particular colony but as members of a greater American community, wrote despairingly of the number of German and Dutch immigrants coming to his province of Pennsylvania. As part of a larger book, he complained, "Why should Pennsylvania, founded by the English, become a colony of Aliens, who will shortly be so numerous as to Germanize us instead of our Anglifying them, and will never adopt our language or customs, any more than they can acquire our complexion?"

Indeed, he noted that the total proportion of white people in the world was quite small, emphasizing that "in Europe, the Spaniards, Italians, French, Russians and Swedes are generally of what we call a swarthy complexion; as are the Germans also, the Saxons only excepted, who with the English make the principal body of white people on the face of the earth." That was 1755. The United States would not declare its independence for another 21 years, and already there were fears of America becoming demographically altered, becoming less white—with Germans, now universally considered white, to blame.

The question of migration played a key role in American nationhood. The Declaration of Independence, in its list of complaints against King George, charges that "He has endeavoured to prevent the population of these States; for that purpose obstructing the Laws for Naturalization of Foreigners; refusing to pass others to encourage their migrations hither," suggesting that while the revolution was based in large part on the Crown's and Parliament's denial of the political rights of Englishmen, the architects of independence believed that it should be easier than it was to become an Englishman, at least in the eyes of the law.

And yet one of the first laws passed by the First Congress, the Naturalization Act of 1790, did not shy away from incorporating racial preferences. That law allowed any "free white person … of good character" to become a U.S. citizen after residing in the country for only two years, with minimal scrutiny; in fact, all they had to do was apply for naturalization in any court and take the requisite oath. This was, of course, a deliberate choice to exclude all who were not white from eligibility to naturalize, regardless of character. But early on, it became apparent that not even all white Europeans would be

accepted into the fold, and that this often took overtly geopolitical forms. During what became known as the Quasi-War with France, the Adams administration developed a set of parallel fears: one of Americans becoming unfaithful to constitutional democracy (and to the Federalist Party), and the other of foreign, usually French, agitators spreading dangerous ideas under the guise of free speech. Hence the package of laws that became the Alien and Sedition Acts.

As most relevant here, the Alien Friends Act allowed the president to declare specific foreigners to be persona non grata in the United States and order their departure from the country, while the Alien Enemies Act allowed the government to collectively expel male citizens of foreign countries designated as hostile to the U.S., and the Naturalization Act of 1798 increased from 5 to 14 years the amount of time before which a foreigner could be naturalized as a U.S. citizen. Although the Alien Friends Act was not invoked against anyone before it expired according to its own terms, it did have the effect of coercing French ideologues to leave the country in anticipation of proceedings being brought against them. The Naturalization Act went further and tied American migration policy to national security and international relations.

Because the Adams administration was hostile to revolutionary France and the ideas with which it was associated, the Naturalization Act aimed to make it harder for a person holding those ideas to enter the American body politic and thereby change the makeup of the citizen body. This law represented an early migration restriction based on political ideology and allegiance, and its target was a white, European population. Future such restrictions tended to apply either to specific ideologies associated with Europeans (such as anarchism and socialism) or to racial categories targeted for exclusion at particular times.

CHINESE EXCLUSION AND AMERICAN POWER

After the Civil War, and with Reconstruction sadly in the rearview mirror for the foreseeable future, America faced a renewed pair of crises, one of labor and the other of demographics. The West Coast in particular saw an increase in Chinese migration. In part, this was due to the various crises in China itself, from civil war to drought to general poverty. It was also due to the promise that America offered to working men, from mining and panning for gold to building the railroads that rapidly tied the coasts together to toiling in the factories. At first, this did not seem like a crisis at all, but an

opportunity; indeed, many historians note that initial Chinese migrants were well received, especially in areas that were already prospering economically.

But when booms turned to busts and prosperity became scarce, then the migrants who had once been seen as indispensable turned into rivals competing for a slice of a shrinking pie. Unsurprisingly, it was the West Coast that led the national opposition to Chinese immigration and to the integration of Chinese people who had already made the journey. In the years following the Gold Rush, California experimented with imposing occupational taxes on foreign miners, taxing them monthly for operating in the state regardless of their profits. Although the tax was quickly lowered from $20 to $3 per month and failed to scare Chinese immigrants out of California altogether, it did largely drive them out of the mining industry, meaning less competition for white miners, and into lower-profit jobs, especially in restaurants and laundries. This was a one-two punch, in that it both left Chinese immigrants generally poorer on account of their reduced earning potential and fed into propaganda efforts depicting them as an essentially undifferentiated mass good only for menial work. (And when Chinese residents did find success in these jobs, exemplified by the large number of Chinese restaurants and laundromats that opened in the San Francisco area, the state and city authorities came up with new ways to stunt this growth, such as forbidding laundromats from being built in wooden buildings, which the U.S. Supreme Court found to be pretextual and discriminatory.)

One of the leading anti-Chinese agitators, who found success at both the state and federal levels, was a businessman and labor organizer named Denis Kearney—himself an immigrant from Ireland. Kearney, who saw the arrival of more and more Chinese migrants as a threat to both the bargaining power of white laborers and the identity of America as a white nation, found success when an unexpected partner agreed with him—China itself. In the 1850s, the Chinese emperor supported restrictions on migration by Chinese subjects, fearing a loss of productive workers at a time when the country was in strife. Thus, while California continued to pass laws targeting the Chinese (including one which explicitly banned their entry, before that was ruled invalid by the state courts), this did not lead to tensions at the international level. But when the U.S. and China, in the Burlingame Treaty of 1868, agreed to allow Chinese subjects to come to the U.S. with virtually no restrictions, this represented a threat to the West Coast nativist movement's hold on

local politics. Here was Washington, situated politically as well as geographically on the East Coast, guaranteeing to allow Chinese subjects (in Article VI of the treaty) the same rights of travel and residence as were enjoyed by citizens of more favored European nations, something that would potentially override state discriminatory laws. In effect, this treaty, with respect to migration, represented a conscious attempt by the federal government to reassert control over the border and ensure that it was used in the national interest, as so judged, rather than the local interests of nativist factions.

But when the nativists took over at the federal level, the balance of power shifted. Essentially, following incidents of labor unrest in the early 1870s, public opinion shifted towards restricting Chinese migration, in effect transforming the West Coast from an outlier to the vanguard. In 1875, Congress passed the Page Act, which combined measures targeting immigrants by attribute (prohibiting individuals with criminal records in their own country from entering the U.S.) with measures specifically targeting Asians, especially women. Three years later, Congress moved to ban Chinese immigration altogether, failing only on account of the veto pen wielded by President Rutherford Hayes. Come 1882 and the winds had changed. Congress tried again, and this time succeeded in enacting the Chinese Exclusion Act, whose title left little to the imagination.

This law banned the entry of most Chinese laborers into the U.S. for a period of 10 years (later extended to 20, which had been the initial plan, and then made permanent) and excluded people of Chinese origin from becoming naturalized as U.S. citizens. When the Chinese Exclusion Act was made permanent in 1902, it also required all Chinese subjects residing in the U.S. to obtain a formal certificate of residence. For almost four decades, Chinese migrants were treated as a category separate from the others. It was not until 1940 that Congress enacted a general alien registration statute, which covered all noncitizens in the country. And the Chinese Exclusion Act itself remained on the books until 1943, at which point Congress allowed 105 Chinese immigrants to come to the United States every year, in addition to relaxing the ban on their naturalization as U.S. citizens. Further legislation in 1952 and 1965 would do away with national origin quotas altogether.

The Chinese exclusion frenzy produced caselaw that strengthened the hand of the executive branch, at the expense of both U.S. relations with foreign countries and the most basic rights of U.S. citizens. In Chae Chan Ping v. United States (1889), the Supreme

Court affirmed the power of Congress to enact restrictive immigration laws that violated existing treaty obligations, treating border control as a fundamental attribute of sovereignty that could not be contracted away in any case. And in United States v. Ju Toy (1905), the Supreme Court reached the conclusion that even a U.S.-born citizen could not challenge his exclusion at a port once he returned from an international trip, as the relevant statutes required courts to defer completely to immigration commissioners' determinations of who was and was not a citizen. (This second ruling was unanimously cabined in Ng Fung Ho v. White (1922), which held that a person whom the government sought to deport under the Chinese Exclusion Act but who claimed to be a U.S. citizen was entitled to a judicial determination of his status, and, if a citizen, to remain in the country.) Much like the French in John Adams' day were perceived to import radical democracy and moral libertinism, the Chinese in the late nineteenth century were associated with despotism. In both cases, a people across the sea were judged by the U.S. as incompatible with the republican form of government envisioned by the framers.



CHINESE MIGRANTS WAIT FOR A BOAT AFTER HAVING WALKED ACROSS THE DARIEN GAP FROM COLOMBIA TO PANAMA. AP PHOTO/NATACHA PISARENKO

NEEDED, THEN EXPELLED

It can be said that the first major instances of Latin Americans becoming part of the U.S. took place in the early 19th century, when the border quite literally came to them. The Louisiana Purchase in 1803 and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo at the close of the Mexican-American War in 1848 brought large numbers of Spanish-speaking people into U.S. control. There was a reprise five decades later, in 1898, when the U.S. annexed Puerto Rico following the Spanish-American War, but since then, the two major ways in which the Hispanic population in the U.S. has grown have been through migration and birth in the U.S. Both of those, as we will see,

have become major flashpoints, often with deeply racist implications.

The history of the southern border, and of the U.S.' role as a migrant destination, is shaped in large part by labor. One early example exists as part of the larger story of the California gold rush. In January 1848, prospectors discovered gold, triggering a frenzy that brought people from every corner of the world to the seemingly bountiful lands of California, swelling the population and transforming the character of what would become the new state. One constituency that played an outsized role was the population of Mexicans and Central and South Americans, numbering in the tens of thousands, who came to California post-annexation. In one sense, they had an advantage over other arrivals, in that they spoke Spanish, not to mention that many of them were experienced in mining elsewhere. Even so, they ran into the fact that, despite assurances in laws and treaties that existing land rights would be respected, English-speaking settlers were encroaching on lands held by Spanish and Mexican owners who had chosen to stay, with the acquiescence of the government.

Although the early state of California did not adopt explicitly anti-migrant laws, it did enact heavily discriminatory measures against nonwhite populations writ large, including barring them from testifying in court in many cases. (Predictably, one effect of this, which was certainly not seen as unfortunate to the legislature, was that Hispanic landowners had a harder time defending their legal claims to their land against Anglo challengers. Thus, a domestic court rule both privileged white migrants over nonwhite locals and privileged white locals over nonwhite migrants.)

Despite this fraught beginning, Hispanic immigration to the U.S. only grew in the years after the beginning of the gold rush. Sometimes this took the form of Spanish-speakers from all over the Western Hemisphere moving to the U.S. West and Southwest; other times, particular parts of the U.S. received disproportionate migration from specific countries, such as the large number of Cubans who made their way to Florida. And as the years went on, land routes and geographic proximity gave way to other pathways, such that New York City, Chicago, and other cities became home to large Hispanic populations.

From as early as the gold rush, entire sectors of the U.S. economy came to depend on labor performed by Hispanics, both citizens and noncitizens. And as this happened, the Hispanic population shouldered the burden of being needed but not always wanted,

especially in periods of general uncertainty or economic downturn. One striking example is the two periods of "Mexican repatriation," one of which took place in the decade before the start of World War II (as the Great Depression raged), and the second of which occurred in the years after the end of the war.

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, Mexican immigration to the U.S. was frequent and largely unregulated. A 1921 law imposed more controls, but even those were comparatively ineffectual, especially given the difficulty of policing a large, arid land border at the time, compared to stopping ships at ports in the case of European and Asian migration. This was a trend which was very much appreciated by U.S. business interests, which had a high demand for labor and in fact sought to negotiate directly with the Mexican government to encourage even more migration. And once Mexicans were in the U.S., they settled all over the country, contributing to industrial economies in cities and to agricultural ones in rural areas.

Once the Depression hit, the existing anti-migrant sentiment only picked up force, as large numbers of American workers found themselves unemployed and government agencies sought to minimize the number of beneficiaries receiving public assistance. To that end, the federal government, especially under the Hoover administration (1929–33), worked with state and local governments to coordinate the widespread deportation of Mexican migrants and their families, a process euphemistically termed "repatriation," as though these were refugees finally able to return home. In many cases, those repatriated did voluntarily make the move, in the hopes of having better luck avoiding the economic impacts of the Depression in Mexico. But the government also used a carrot-and-stick approach to effectuate its goal. The Mexican government, which wished to both grow its own labor force and remain on good terms with the U.S., incentivized people to return to Mexico by offering land for them to farm, an appealing prospect at a time when economic prospects in the U.S. were dire.

On the flip side, as Kevin R. Johnson describes, there was very much a "forced" aspect to this policy. Perhaps the most glaring indicator of this is that as many as 60% of the people "repatriated"—that is, at least ostensibly returned to their home country—were in fact U.S. citizens. And to the extent that this can be called voluntary, in that U.S. citizens could by that point not be deported against their will, this did not apply to noncitizen parents of American children. So if the government removed all the adults in

a Mexican-descended family, but their children were U.S. citizens, then the adults were placed in the terrible position of either leaving their children behind in a country to which they had a legal as well as a moral claim but without anyone to care for them, or taking the children with them and thereby legitimating their effective expulsion. With respect to adults, citizen and noncitizen alike, Francisco E. Balderrama and Raymond Rodríguez describe how local governments, with support from the Hoover administration, conducted mass raids of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans and either removed them by force or offered them free train tickets to the other side of the border.

After World War II, the project of redefining American demographics through mass deportations resumed with full force. The early-to-mid-1950s, under the Eisenhower administration, saw a wave of mass deportations, this time organized by the federal government, given the name Operation Wetback—a racial slur referring to Hispanic immigrants. Once again, citizens as well as noncitizens were removed from the U.S., with the only criterion being Mexican ancestry. But that is only one part of the story. To be sure, deportation alone is significant, especially given the sheer number of people affected. However, not all of those caught up in this operation were, in fact, permanently removed from the U.S., and that is equally important.

The background for this was the Bracero program, established in 1942 by mutual agreement of the governments of the U.S. and Mexico. After the U.S. entered World War II, it quickly found itself with a severe need for agricultural labor, given the number of young men who were going off to war. So it turned south and negotiated with its neighbor (Mexico was also on the side of the Allies, but had far less of a military presence abroad than the U.S.). The two countries agreed to create, more or less on a permanent basis, a scheme by which Mexicans known as braceros would work on U.S. farms for pay that was low by U.S. standards but favorable compared to the cost of living in Mexico. These laborers did not enjoy strong legal protections at all, and were never intended to hold permanent status in the country in which they worked—indeed, bracero refers to their arms, brazos, indicating that their role in the U.S. was purely as a source of muscle. What did Mexico gain by allowing this export of its manual labor? For one, it benefited from sustaining the U.S. economy during wartime, as the U.S. was by that point a strong trading partner. Mexico also benefited from the money that the braceros spent locally or sent back to their families

back home, and, more ambitiously, hoped that returning participants would bring home skills that would be useful for Mexico's own push towards industrialization.

While Operation Wetback is most commonly described as a deportation push, it was more than just that, as Eladio Bobadilla describes for the Gilder Lehrman Institute. For one, not all those swept up were actually deported; many were taken into custody and then "paroled" back to their communities, this time with the requirement that they effectively be supervised by a U.S. farmer. For others who were in fact deported, this was not the end of their story in the U.S.: large numbers were either readmitted as braceros or simply returned without authorization. In both cases, they were once again in the U.S., but with a lower degree of security and far less of an ability to assert their rights in the area of labor and elsewhere. Operation Wetback was an intentional beating-down of the social and economic standing of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans. And it could not have happened, from start to finish to aftereffects, without the active endorsement of the Mexican government and the cooperation between Washington and the Distrito Federal.

THE POLITICS OF MIGRANT LABOR

As we have seen, the fact that migrants are essential to large swaths of the economy has never protected them from organized anti-immigration sentiment. However, this is complicated by the fact that employers dependent on migrant labor often share political affiliation with nativist voters, something that frequently leads to clashes. Consider the modern history of North Carolina's poultry industry, a case Steve Striffler discusses in his book Chicken. Beginning in the 1990s, North Carolina became a destination for Central American migrants, often fleeing civil war or persecution, who found work in the area's chicken processing plants. This influx was in effect a godsend for the region, which, like so much of the country, was undergoing contractions from deindustrialization and population loss. Indeed, at least at the beginning, migrants generally described getting along well with the locals, even more so than they had expected. But changing demographics often lead to discord, and chicken country soon attracted a wave of resentment of Hispanic residents, stirred up in large part by Klan leader David Duke.

Duke tapped into two sources of discontentment, one local and one national. In this part of North Carolina specifically, the

proportion of students in the local schools who spoke English as a second language was increasing, which alarmed many English-speaking residents. And all of this took place in the context of the broader immigration debate, as successive presidents had sought to toughen up the border. To someone like Duke, given these conditions, it was easy to turn this part of the country into the staging ground for anti-immigrant demonstrations, which, perhaps, would have the effect of making racial purity politics acceptable once again after the success of the civil rights movement a generation prior. One must not read too much into cases like these and reach the conclusion that all opinions on one side of the immigration debate are racist, let alone tools of the Klan. But the story of North Carolina in the '90s, in the context of globalization woes, illustrates how even communities which depend on migrants for their labor and which see themselves transformed by their presence can come to adopt or accept strong anti-migrant hostility. That is not a new phenomenon.

WHO BELONGS IN AMERICA?

One factor that complicates the involvement of migration policy in U.S. electoral politics is that voters are, by definition, citizens, while those coming to the U.S. are not. Thus, anyone running for office has an interest in appealing to as broad a base of citizens as they can, but has less of an interest in advocating for noncitizens. Of course, citizens often support policies that are friendlier to migrants, not to mention the many U.S. citizens who have loved ones on the other side of this legal binary. And, through the Fourteenth Amendment, while a person can go their whole life living in the U.S. without legal status or citizenship, their child, by virtue of being born in America, will be a citizen from the moment of birth. The effect of all these combined factors is that, especially in areas near the border or with particularly large immigrant populations, political candidates must navigate very uncertain waters.

However, it is overly simplistic to say that only noncitizens are directly harmed by measures related to migration. As the recent attempt to dramatically narrow birthright citizenship shows, taking away citizenship from future generations born to parents here unlawfully or temporarily would necessarily have called it into question for the generations of Americans (and their descendants) who had already been born and may have lived here their whole lives. While the Supreme Court thoroughly rejected that effort on

the part of the government, it did allow, at least temporarily, the government to search and detain people in Southern California based in part on their race and language. There are countless examples of U.S. citizens and legal residents who have been swept up in raids ostensibly aimed only at those without legal status. The kind of rhetoric that treats all of America as a border brings the policies of the border closer to home and leaves all Americans less secure in their rights and citizenship, but especially those of us who are or appear only one generation removed from recent immigrants. So, how do candidates and policymakers thread this highly delicate and complicated needle? Unfortunately, often with promises that they have little intention of keeping, rhetoric that demonizes, and policies that preserve a status quo with which very few people are truly satisfied. That is not an accident.

Going into the 2024 election, border crossings, including unauthorized ones, were high, something that disproportionately impacted border communities and other communities with large populations of recent immigrants. Those populations, consisting of U.S. citizens, moved towards Trump. At the same time, the nativist movement opposed to migration (or nonwhite migration) generally also became more prominent within the Republican Party, as evidenced by the increasing influence wielded by Stephen Miller and Laura Loomer and the criticism directed at JD Vance for his marriage to a woman of Indian descent. For the 2024 election, these two factions, one anti-illegal-immigration and one anti-immigration period, coalesced and helped clinch the vote for Trump. But once Trump took office, he quickly realized that he could not satisfy them both at the same time.

Removing noncitizens unlawfully present in the country, especially ones who lacked strong community ties or had criminal records, would have appeased the immigrant citizen voting base, but it would not have been enough for people like Loomer, who voiced support for detaining 65 million people (which is approximately the number of Hispanics in the U.S.) in concentration camps as well as "feeding illegals to the gators." So Trump chose to side with the nativists, initiating campaigns that went far beyond targeted searches for noncitizens known to have skipped court appearances and entailed mass arrests of people deemed not American enough. These determinations were based not on any objective criteria, but on where someone lived, what language they spoke, the color of their skin, and the type of job they worked—factors that also apply to U.S. citizens. Unsurprisingly, Trump's

popularity among Hispanic voters has plummeted, according to numerous polls months apart.

It is good, of course, to discuss the factors in Latin America that push people to leave, and the factors in the U.S. that incentivize them to come to this country in particular. But understanding Latin American migration to the U.S. requires seeing it less through the lens of pure cause and effect and more as a long-running history, one which has taken different forms at different times, but which has always had profound effects on the political arenas both local and national. The current president—not to mention the country—has experienced a dizzying roller coaster effect in the last two years. But looking further back, the overall effect of these changes in migration policy has been to strongly increase the power of the presidency relative to the other branches of government.

Aside from the fact that the increasing severity of legislative restrictions on migration has created (and funded) a massive enforcement apparatus within the executive branch, the experiences of successive waves of foreign immigration, and the nativist responses to them, have vested more and more discretion in the hands of the president. A president who exercises this discretion in furtherance of his publicly announced policy objectives, such as sharply reducing Muslim presence in America or expelling Haitians, can do so using effectively unreviewable immigration control powers. And as we have seen from court cases both recent and historic, when these actions violate the law as set by Congress or even the Constitution itself, the courts often provide little redress. An area of law in which the executive's interpretation and decision-making are rarely second-guessed, even in egregious cases, is in effect a law-free zone.

AMERICA'S BORDER ABROAD

One of the elements of migration control—both in the U.S. and in other wealthy, developed countries—that are often invisible to lifelong citizens but evident to new arrivals is just how much of the work is done either out of the country, by people other than domestic immigration officials, or both. David Scott FitzGerald describes this strategy of "remote control of migration" as consisting of several components, ranging from security cooperation with migrant-originating countries aimed at preventing people from leaving to requiring airlines to verify that their passengers are eligible to travel to their country of destination. This is not a new

phenomenon. However, it is one that the U.S. has increasingly embraced in the past decades, at the same time as it has increasingly militarized its international borders.

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In the U.S. in recent years, two related policies, both of which have complicated pathways through the court system, have brought this to light: Remain in Mexico, and asylum metering. The first of these policies is formally called the Migrant Protection Protocols, but almost universally referred to as Remain in Mexico. It was adopted in early 2019, as part of the first Trump administration's comprehensive anti-immigration push. Under this policy, when a person filed a claim for asylum in the U.S. at one of several designated ports of entry and was not immediately seen as having a strong likelihood of having it approved, they would be removed to Mexico to await a determination. (The same day the policy was announced, the Mexican government signaled its intention to cooperate in implementing it.) In effect, the government was pre-screening asylum-seekers and allowing only a select few into the U.S. while their cases played out.

Although the name of the policy spoke of protecting migrants, the effect, as observed very shortly after implementation, was the opposite: according to Human Rights Watch, not even a year into the program, hundreds of people removed under its terms had become victims of violent crime in Mexico. With respect to legal status, the migrants who were subject to Remain in Mexico were significantly less likely to have their asylum claims approved compared to migrants outside the program: 0.1% versus 20% in September 2019. Remain in Mexico had a tortured procedural history in court. During the administration that implemented it, it was challenged by immigrant rights organizations on statutory grounds. Then, when the Biden administration took office, it rescinded the policy. This in turn prompted a lawsuit from several states, led by Texas, seeking to force the federal government to reinstate the policy; ultimately, the Supreme Court held in June 2022 that the rescission was lawful. Any effort to force the Biden administration to resume Remain in Mexico came to an end in 2023, when the Mexican government made clear that it would no longer accept migrants returned under the policy.

Asylum metering has its origins in 2016, at the end of the Obama administration. It arises from the way U.S. immigration law permits

anyone who arrives or is present in the country to claim asylum, regardless of the legality of their entry, provided they meet strict criteria and can demonstrate a well-founded fear of persecution. But while an asylum case plays out, the claimant is generally able to live in the U.S., with the prospect of a permanent future here should their application be ultimately granted. Unsurprisingly, this means that large numbers of people come to the U.S. with the intention of claiming asylum. Many of them have strong or at least colorable claims, while others are unlikely to be approved in the end. But the prospect of entering the system enticed large numbers of migrants to come to the border, leading to a temporary and localized situation at the San Ysidro port of entry, connecting San Diego and Tijuana, in which the border authorities could not process everyone who arrived at one time.

To manage this emergency, the government began turning away many of the arrivals, telling them that they had to wait in a line and would be processed once capacity was restored. Eventually, this mechanism turned into a generalized policy under the first Trump administration. As implemented, asylum-seekers were physically prevented from entering the U.S. side of the border with Mexico, and instead of being admitted immediately, had their information entered in a book, effectively placing them on a list, to be processed when convenient for the U.S. Exactly who kept these lists varied from location to location, but it was a responsibility delegated to Mexican actors, be they public authorities or private shelters.

Asylum metering was challenged in court, on the grounds that it violated federal immigration law. But despite lower-court rulings in favor of immigrant organizations, the Supreme Court upheld the policy in June 2026, on the grounds that a noncitizen stopped at the border is neither in nor has arrived in the U.S., and is therefore not legally entitled to claim asylum at all. By adopting these strategies, the U.S. was able to reduce the number of people already in the country with active asylum claims, meaning that it could choose to only admit those whose claims it deemed likely to succeed, thereby minimizing the number of people with a high likelihood of remaining illegally once their claims were denied. It also depended on the acquiescence of Mexican authorities the whole way, from allowing the U.S. to keep migrants on the Mexican side of the border (and thereby force Mexico to remain responsible for housing them) to delegating responsibility for keeping lists of eligible migrants. With respect to Remain in Mexico, the Mexican government's refusal to play its prescribed role in the program effectively led to its

collapse. These two recent experiences illustrate how effectively the U.S. can make use of other countries and their governmental infrastructures to aid U.S. immigration policy, whatever it may be—and how, without this cooperation, these strategies cannot succeed.

The U.S. has also repeatedly imposed country-wide restrictions on entry of foreign nationals as a means of inducing the countries covered to implement security measures that meet U.S. standards. The litigation during the first Trump administration on a series of entry restrictions, popularly referred to as the "Muslim ban," sheds light on this particular aspect of border securitization. In the first month of that administration, President Trump issued an executive order which completely suspended citizens of Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen from entering the U.S. for 90 days, temporarily suspended the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program for 120 days, and indefinitely suspended the admission of refugees from Syria, a country then gripped by a violent civil war.

Migration policy has served as both a domestic instrument of presidential power and a broader tool of U.S. strategy abroad.

Ostensibly, this order was justified on national security grounds: the government argued that individuals from the countries specifically targeted (and who were admitted as refugees generally) were disproportionately involved in terrorist activity in the U.S. and that the current screening mechanisms were letting people slip through the cracks who were likely to break the law. The early order was replaced by later iterations, which allowed people from blacklisted countries to obtain waivers in certain cases. But the effect of these orders, two of which bore the title "Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States," was to sharply limit the ability of people from certain parts of the world to come to the U.S. While one justification for this spate of restrictions was to improve capacity on the U.S. side to vet applicants for admission to determine who was likely to pose a real national security threat, it was paired with complaints about how foreign governments vetted their own citizens who sought entry into the U.S.

One interpretation, of course, is that this really was an attempt at a "Muslim ban," something Trump had repeatedly supported. Indeed, there is strong evidence that these orders both had discriminatory motivations and discriminatory effects in terms of excluding noncitizen Muslims. But another interpretation (which can coexist with the first) is that at least some of the motivation for

these orders was to coerce foreign governments into accepting a role in which U.S. migration policy, in the form of security vetting, was further outsourced in their direction. Indeed, six weeks after the initial executive order, Trump issued a revised one, which removed Iraq from the list of targeted countries. This came after Iraq agreed to implement stricter vetting of Iraqi citizens.

Nationals from other countries that did not make such agreements did not fare so well, even as the new order did allow people with otherwise valid preexisting visas to be exempted from travel restrictions. When the package of executive orders came before the Supreme Court, it was upheld in an early test of the sweeping executive powers asserted by the Trump administration. The majority opinion held that the challengers to the ban had not overcome the combination of discretion afforded to the executive branch under federal immigration law and deference afforded to the president in determining whether he acted with discriminatory motivations. Whatever conclusions one draws about these executive orders and why they were issued, it is clear that two practical effects of them, and of the litigation they spawned, were to make it harder for courts to rein in the executive branch's control over the borders and to enable the extension of the border farther and farther away from America itself.

MIGRATION AS ECONOMIC LEVERAGE

The fact that the U.S. is a leading destination for migrants, especially from Latin America, implicitly tells a story of need. People who come to the U.S. from abroad, often traveling long distances and taking large personal risks, understand that this is perhaps their best opportunity for a better life, not to mention the downstream benefits for others connected to them. There is also the inverse, that the economic system in the U.S. has either been built around or has come to require migrant labor—and, often, the fact that this labor lacks legal documentation is what makes it easy for wages and prices to be low. In utilizing migration control as a form of economic leverage, the U.S. emphasizes the first part and pays less attention to the second.

It is a migration story that almost everyone has heard of. When people leave their homes in a poorer country and settle somewhere else, whether legally or illegally and whether temporarily or permanently, they find themselves in the position of earning more money than they did at home. And even if they are far from rich,

they are certainly perceived at home as someone now doing well for themselves. As such, it is very common for migrants to send money back, whether directly to specific household members or to support a broader family or community. This money is given the technical term remittance, and it is highly relevant to contemporary U.S. migration policy/strategy. Efforts to restrict or tax remittance payments fall into one of two categories: a values-based belief that money earned in the U.S. should not be sent out of the country, or a pragmatic understanding that even a threat to disrupt the flow of money could pose a severe shock to foreign economies. If one takes the second approach, and excludes the people who wish to use this economic leverage for leverage's sake or to purely harm others, it is apparent how the U.S. can utilize its status as a source country for remittances to coerce the governments of receiving countries.

The history of U.S. migration policy is, at its core, one of power. Power not only to decide who is allowed to make a home and who is not, but also power to ignore one's own laws when convenient and to carve out zones, both physical and juridical, in which one person is effectively without any constraints. When one takes this view, the role of the U.S. in the world and the role of the presidency in U.S. life take on a clear meaning. Migration, as a subject of policy and a tool of strategy, has enabled an expansionist America abroad and an imperial presidency at home. But this power, at its core, relies on several assumptions, none of which ought to be taken for granted.

First, it assumes that there will be people who know that their lives will be better in the U.S. than in their home country, in order to make migration worth it. Second, it assumes that Congress will impose strict migration controls and not be too active in overseeing them in practice. Third, it assumes that the courts will continue to provide the president with a deference that is unknown to the law in most other cases. And fourth, it often requires the at-least-grudging acquiescence of other countries, especially in order to implement the policies that keep the most people out of the U.S. itself. Ironically, then, and much to the chagrin of those who believe in "America First," implementing even harsher migration controls requires the cooperation of foreign countries—including many of the ones which are themselves the departure states for recent immigrants.

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