



REDISCOVERING STATECRAFT IN A CHANGING POST-WAR ORDER

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If Washington doubles down on U.S. military and geopolitical predominance, it risks transforming the emerging competitive era into something far more confrontational and zero-sum than it needs to be. If it hopes to retain its position of leadership, the United States will have to make the present international order truly multilateral.

Politics is the art of the possible.

—Otto von Bismarck, 1867

The furor over Russia's poisoning of a former spy in Britain reflects a worrying, and accelerating, trend: America's relations with its primary rivals appear to be entering a period of lasting crisis. With new U.S. tariffs, trade disputes, clashes over international rules and norms in the South China Sea, and growing reports of Chinese influence-seeking, the competition with China is intensifying. Meanwhile, the Russian poisoning case and dozens of other provocations from Moscow have produced a situation of deep hostility that has been described as "even more unpredictable" than the Cold War.¹

The new U.S. *National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy* fittingly reflect this emerging strategic moment, offering a narrative of bellicose great powers that seek to expand their influence, shape the world according to their interests, and gain greater sway over the international order. Both strategies anticipate precisely the sort of aggressive rivalries we are seeing today. The *National Security Strategy* paints a dire picture of China and Russia challenging "American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity" while being "determined to make economies less free and less fair, to grow their militaries, and to control

information and data to repress their societies and expand their influence."² The *National Defense Strategy* warns of the "reemergence of long-term, strategic competition" with "revisionist powers."³

Some great power relationships are indeed reverting to a more tooth-and-nail kind of competition. China and Russia are ever more determined to claim the status and influence they believe is their due. But the response likely to emerge from these strategies, a reaction with deeper roots in U.S. foreign policy than the views of any one administration, deserves a more significant debate. That rejoinder calls for a reaffirmation of U.S. military and geopolitical predominance, accompanied by a defense build-up to empower a direct and ongoing confrontation with Russia and China in their own backyards — all in the name of a sprawling and uncompromising interpretation of the rules and norms of the post-World War II order. Unfortunately, such an approach is likely to fail, transforming the emerging competitive era into something far more confrontational and zero-sum than it needs to be.

The *National Security Strategy's* renewed reference to "peace through strength"⁴ and the *National Defense Strategy's* attendant focus on restoring military supremacy reflect a habitual and ongoing American post-Cold War quest for predominance.⁵ Yet, while military strength is important to deter hostile powers, trends in key regions and challenges to U.S. power projection

1 Andrew Higgins, "It's No Cold War, But Relations with Russia Turn Volatile," *New York Times*, Mar. 26, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/26/world/europe/russia-expulsions-cold-war.html>.

2 The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 2017, 2, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

3 The Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening America's Competitive Edge*, January 2018, 2, <https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

4 *National Security Strategy* 2017.

5 Hal Brands, "Choosing Primacy: U.S. Strategy and Global Order at the Dawn of the Post-Cold War Era," *Texas National Security Review* 1, no. 2 (February 2018), <https://tnsr.org/2018/02/choosing-primacy-u-s-strategy-global-order-dawn-post-cold-war-era-2/>. See also Eric S. Edelman, "The Broken Consensus: America's Contested Primacy," *World Affairs* 173, no. 4 (December 2010), <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/broken-consensus-americas-contested-primacy>. Van Jackson argues in a thoughtful essay that America never sought primacy, at least in Asia; see "American Military Superiority and the Pacific-Primacy Myth," *Survival* 60, no. 2 (March 2018). We would suggest he has defined the required elements of a strategy of primacy too narrowly.



make it virtually impossible to recapture the level of military superiority the United States enjoyed for the last three decades. Nor is it capable of stemming the tide of change: American primacy is visibly eroding,⁶ world politics are increasingly multilateral,⁷ and other major powers are noticeably less willing to accept American dictates. Paradoxically, too, America's military strength and martial tradition have, in some ways, contributed to the growth of these emerging challenges by displacing America's ability to effectively engage in the nuanced balancing of interests that are so central to international politics. In the post-9/11 era of persistent counterterrorism operations, the United States has tended to view every challenge as an outright threat, every problem as subject to the application of military power, and every contest

as something to win rather than to manage.⁸

This is not to say that American leadership is doomed, or that the post-war international order the United States worked so hard to build — the set of institutions, rules, and norms that have helped provide a stabilizing force in world politics since 1945⁹ — is destined to come to an end. In that regard, the call by the authors of these strategy documents for continued U.S. leadership is welcome and reassuring, and many of their specific policy prescriptions would help reaffirm that leadership. But clinging to visions of predominance and absolutist conceptions of U.S. goals poses great dangers to global stability during a time of turbulent transition that will only be survived through more flexible and pragmatic leadership. During our years of exposure to U.S. national security

6 Charles A. Kupchan, "The Decline of the West: Why America Must Prepare for the End of Dominance," *Atlantic*, Mar. 20, 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-decline-of-the-west-why-america-must-prepare-for-the-end-of-dominance/254779/>. For a more extended argument, see Charles A. Kupchan, *No One's World: The West, the Rising Rest, and the Coming Global Turn* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2014.895245>.

7 This was the conclusion of the National Intelligence Council's *Global Trends* report from 2008; see *Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2008), https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Newsroom/Reports%20and%20Pubs/2025_Global_Trends_Final_Report.pdf. See also Matthew Burrows and Roger George, "Is America Ready for a Multipolar World?" *National Interest*, Jan. 20, 2016, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/america-ready-multipolar-world-14964>.

8 Andrew J. Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans are Seduced by War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). See also Daryl Press and Benjamin Valentino, "A Balanced Foreign Policy," in *How to Make America Safe: New Policies for National Security*, ed. Stephen Van Evera, (Cambridge, MA: The Tobin Project, 2006).

9 For a description of the current order, see Michael J. Mazarr, Miranda Priebe, Andrew Radin, and Astrid Stuth Cevallos, *Understanding the Current International Order* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016). See also the analysis of John Bew, "World Order: Many-Headed Monster or Noble Pursuit?" *Texas National Security Review* 1, no. 1 (Dec. 2017).



processes, policies, and officials, we have watched as U.S. economic, military, and political dominance has underwritten a missionary approach to the international system. That approach is not only unsustainable given the shifting balance of power, but it ultimately represents one of the dominant fault lines between the United States and other major powers.

We are not proposing anything close to retrenchment. American leadership, a rules-based international order, and an extended network of alliances and partnerships that help keep the peace, remain valuable not just to the United States but also to small and middle powers alike. The heart of the American strategic challenge is how to reset the balance between ideology and pragmatism in foreign policy without killing off the key norms of conduct or the essential foundations of U.S. global engagement. The United States will have to make the present order truly multilateral in order to retain its leadership, keep dissent within the international system rather than forcing it outside, and accommodate competition. More than at any time in the last 70 years, dogmatism will be the enemy of strategy. The resulting challenge constitutes what is arguably the most difficult balancing act that U.S. foreign policy has confronted since 1945 — and perhaps, at any time in the country's history.

The Church of American Foreign Policy: Overdue for a Reformation?

Today, the malign intentions of states that wish to challenge the status quo are not the only factors increasing instability and raising the risk of conflict. After more than two decades of an ideological, values-driven approach to international affairs, the tone and tenor of American foreign policy can seem to have more in common with theology than statecraft. In approaching countries like Iraq, Afghanistan, or Libya and issues ranging from human rights to nonproliferation to the promotion of democracy, difficult choices of balance and priority are presented as normative absolutes. Increasingly after 1989, the imperative to forcibly extend the liberalism of the Western order has

been viewed as self-evident. As that order became more institutionalized and rule-based, and as American leadership of it became — for a time — more unquestioned, Washington (and other ambitious advocates of a more fully liberal order, particularly European nations and NATO members) has come to equate strategic judgments with moral imperatives. One risk of confounding strategy with morality is that the architect and enforcer of such an order loses the ability to compromise.

Absent any meaningful checks on American

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power, forcible democracy promotion, humanitarian intervention, the unbridled extension of alliances, and global campaigns against extremism came to dominate U.S. foreign policy. Critics of the ambitions of an ideology-driven U.S. foreign policy, from George Kennan to Andrew Bacevich, warned for decades about the hubristic missionary spirit at the core of U.S. global strategy.¹⁰ “We seem to be in one of those periodic revivals of the American missionary spirit,” *New York Times* editor Bill Keller argued as recently as 2011, “which manifests itself in everything from quiet kindness to patronizing advice to armored divisions.”¹¹ This trend helps explain the marriage of neoconservatives and liberal interventionists, which played a major role in justifying the Iraq War. Despite their differences, these two groups agreed on the most elaborate vision of rule enforcement and value promotion.

The story of the liberal turn of the post-war order in the 1990s was thus, at least partly, one of mission creep and of the gradual acquisition of a far more uncompromising, indeed pious, tone

10 See John Lewis Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life* (New York: Penguin, 2009) and Andrew J. Bacevich, *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism* (New York: Holt, 2009).

11 Bill Keller, “The Return of America’s Missionary Impulse,” *New York Times Magazine*, Apr. 15, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/17/magazine/mag-17Lede-t.html>.

and tenor.¹² These changes to the post-war order eventually found expression in the enlargement of NATO, which was justified as a right rather than a strategic judgment; humanitarian intervention in Kosovo; the emergence of a doctrine of a Responsibility to Protect (R2P), interpreted to overrule the sovereignty of other countries;¹³ rhetorical support for the Arab spring, leading to intervention in Libya;¹⁴ political backing for the Eastern European color revolutions;¹⁵ and material support for pro-democracy nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in dozens of other states.¹⁶ The post-9/11 embrace of a “global war on terror,” the plunge into nation-building in Afghanistan, and the choice to invade Iraq all flowed from the same maximalist instinct. One depressing sign that this kind of missionary overreach continues today is the fact that the United States will spend, in 2018 alone, \$45 billion in Afghanistan¹⁷ — more than the 2017 budget of the Department of Homeland Security, \$10 billion more than the budgets of either the Department of Housing and Urban Development or the Department of Justice, and nearly twice the budget of the Department of Energy.

Unlike the post-World War II order, which was principally underwritten by great powers and, eventually, by middle powers, this vision of foreign policy activism was one held primarily by the United States and a handful of its allies. Over time, the demand for purity in rule-making and enforcement has achieved a sort of religious fervor. Allowing such an uncompromising and moralizing vision to take the wheel of the post-war order was a strategic mistake, sparking the widespread perception that the United States was ideologically driven to advance regime change abroad, including the unilateral employment of force, whether permissible by international law or not. It signaled to some rivals that the United States reserved the

right to challenge the survival of their regimes at any moment, and thus tempted them to believe that their security was only guaranteed by military power, in particular nuclear weapons. The *National Security Strategy* and *National Defense Strategy* offer sensible warnings about the dangerous implications of this dynamic, implications such as Russian efforts to disrupt Western democracies and North Korean nuclear ambitions. But as we consider means of addressing these risks, it is worth keeping in mind that the seeds of that harvest were sown in part by America’s own post-Cold War missionary tendencies.

The stability of any international order ultimately depends on the leading powers seeing one another as abiding by shared and predictable rules of the game. These powers must also believe that the international order is willing to recognize their interests on some level.¹⁸ With the unipolar moment over, the system cannot be considered legitimate if the rules are interpreted by one power as it sees fit, even if the underlying intent is to promote what that power views as the greater good. This fundamental objection to the conventional American mindset is held most passionately, of course, in Moscow and Beijing, but varying degrees of the same frustration are evident in the statements and policies of a host of other countries, such as India, Brazil, South Africa, Germany, and France.¹⁹ It is a false assumption that the middle powers, which are important to the order’s endurance, underwrite, or subscribe to, American unilateralism in action and in interpretation of the rules.

What we are seeing today, therefore, is not only the rise of militaristic predator states, but also the insistence of other self-defined great powers that the United States both restrain its missionary impulses and interpret the rules of the post-war order in a way that does the least possible damage

12 Mark Kersten, “The Responsibility to Protect Doctrine is Faltering. Here’s Why,” *Washington Post*, Dec. 8, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/12/08/the-responsibility-to-protect-doctrine-is-failing-heres-why/?utm_term=.1ec01eb7adb1; Edward Rhodes, “The Imperial Logic of Bush’s Liberal Agenda,” *Survival* 45, no. 1 (2007), <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396330312331343356>; Michael C. Desch, “The Liberal Complex,” *American Conservative*, Jan. 10, 2011, <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/the-liberal-complex/>.

13 Anthony C. Zinni, “The ‘Responsibility to Protect’ and the Dangers of Military Intervention in Fragile States,” in *Secular Nationalism and Citizenship in Muslim Countries*, ed. Kail C. Ellis, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 171-177. See also Mohammed Ayoob, “Humanitarian Intervention and State Sovereignty,” *The International Journal of Human Rights* 6, no. 1 (September 2010), <https://doi.org/10.1080/714003751>.

14 Henry Kissinger, “A New Doctrine of Intervention?” *Washington Post*, Mar. 30, 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/a-new-doctrine-of-intervention/2012/03/30/gIQAacZL6IS_story.html?utm_term=.041085544113.

15 Russian views of this process are described in Andrew Radin and Clinton Bruce Reach, *Russian Views of the International Order* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017).

16 A sympathetic account of such activities which nonetheless describes their risks is Thomas Carothers, “Responding to the Democracy Promotion Backlash,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 8, 2006, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2006/06/08/responding-to-democracy-promotion-backlash-pub-18416>.

17 Ellen Mitchell, “Pentagon: War in Afghanistan Will Cost \$45 Billion in 2018,” *Hill*, Feb. 6, 2018, <http://thehill.com/policy/defense/372641-pentagon-war-in-afghanistan-will-cost-45-billion-in-2018>.

18 This is a major theme of Henry Kissinger, *World Order* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014).

19 An excellent source on these trends is Oliver Steunkel, *Post-Western World: How Emerging Powers Are Remaking Global Order* (London: Polity, 2016).

to their interests. The great danger of the post-Cold War American mindset is that the United States has lost the ability to take seriously or grant any legitimacy to these types of strategic objections. After all, one must grant adversaries some degree of legitimacy even to engage in basic diplomacy, let alone to create the foundations for stable strategic relationships. Yet Washington only seems capable of detecting normative wrongs and decrying them as sinful. If the United States responds to demands by other major powers for an independent voice by doubling down on a moralistic and uncompromising vision, then this emerging era of competition will become more perilous than it already is.

Misreading History: Pragmatism, Absolutism, and Order

Part of the irony of the U.S. mindset is that it harkens back to a conception of the post-war order that never really existed, mistaking it for something far more uncompromising than it ever was and drawing the wrong lessons from history.

American discourse on the international order conflates three very distinct phases: the post-World War II period, the post-Cold War period,²⁰ and the present, yet-to-be defined phase. During the Cold War, while Washington's policy outlook certainly began to acquire a more missionary character, the prevailing order was principally underwritten by the great powers left standing amid the ashes of World War II. The system prized sovereignty, spheres of influence, deterrence, and a balance of terror between the leading superpowers.²¹ To be sure, the United States led in the creation of the institutions and norms of the post-war order, and has labored

diligently to preserve them, for both self-interested and altruistic reasons.²² The resulting institutions — the U.N. system; the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade/World Trade Organization structures; international economic institutions like the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and G-20; and hundreds of smaller and more discrete organizations, treaties, and conventions — bolstered U.S. strategy over the decades. Associated norms, rules, and conventions began to build a sense of quasi-legalistic obligation at the foundations of world politics. But it remained a Westphalian order first and foremost, one built on the rule of sovereignty, a live-and-let-live spirit of mutual accommodation, and some degree of collective attention to shared problems.²³ It quite consciously attempted to balance great power interests with universal and nondiscriminatory rules, rather than simply enforcing such rules without regard to those interests.²⁴ That order was founded with World War II as its backdrop, and thus had the management of great power competition in mind.

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At its inception, therefore, and for much of its history, the post-war order never was conceived of as constitutional, absolute, or without exceptions. Balancing where its dictates would be enforced — and when they would be intentionally overlooked — was a central preoccupation of U.S. foreign policy. The emphasis on human rights provides

20 For a fine survey of U.S. strategy in the post-Cold War period, see Hal Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Rise of the Post-Cold War Order* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016).

21 This distinction is made in Mazarr, Priebe, Radin, and Cevallos, *Understanding the Current International Order*.

22 See, for example, Stewart Patrick, *The Best Laid Plans: The Origins of American Multilateralism and the Dawn of the Cold War* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2008).

23 An excellent recent survey of the evolution of thinking on sovereignty in the modern international order is Stewart Patrick, *The Sovereignty Wars: Reconciling America with the World* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution Press, 2017). See also Richard N. Haass, "World Order 2.0: The Case for Sovereign Obligation," *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 1 (January/February 2017), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2016-12-12/world-order-20>.

24 The story of the origins of the United Nations is told in Mark Mazower, *Governing the World: The History of an Idea, 1815 to the Present* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2012), 191-213. He concludes that the framers of the system "ended up creating an organization that combined the scientific technocracy of the New Deal with the flexibility and power-political reach of the nineteenth-century European alliance system."

a leading example. The managers of U.S. foreign policy have upheld this ideal, but they also have set it aside at various times for different reasons: a sense that long-term democratization demanded compromise, as in South Korea or Taiwan; a conviction that worse rights violations would occur without U.S. support, as was the case in Vietnam and Central America; or the demands of short-term national interests, admittedly sometimes craven, as in U.S. policy toward Iran and Chile.²⁵

Washington's emphasis on creating a post-war order that is based on institutions, rules, and norms was therefore balanced with a recognition that these aspirations had to be aligned with a real world that would only imperfectly reflect them. In the gap would go statecraft, an effort to herd key members of the international community toward those important normative goals — but always with the recognition that the allowance for exceptions would be as important as the rules themselves.²⁶ Push too hard, hold too inflexibly to the ideals, and the whole thing would collapse.

The statesmanship required to balance these multiple considerations — that is to say, the acceptance of inconsistencies in the rules and norms of the order — was not limited to achieving liberal goals like human rights. The global trade regime reflects the same pattern, having developed amid traditions of industry-protecting, quasi-mercantilist behavior, and occasional bouts of protectionist fervor.²⁷ In regard to the norm against interstate aggression, the United States and its friends offered clever legal justifications (and sometimes not even those) for what looked like outright aggression in Iraq, Libya, and elsewhere. The presence of American forces in Syria, to take the leading current example, has involved sustained

combat operations on the territory of another state outside any discernible national or international legal basis.²⁸

During the Cold War, Washington was forced to live with uncomfortable strategic half-measures. The military balance as well as the risks of nuclear war, escalation, and miscalculation, imposed a sober approach and restraint in the face of Soviet and, later, Chinese vital interests. There was no way to stop Soviet intervention in Hungary in 1956 or in Czechoslovakia in 1968. It may not be how we remember it, but the Cold War's lasting accomplishment was maintaining a time of peace between adversarial superpowers that possessed the ability to destroy the world. Despite the global competition, collaboration took place to resolve disputes, manage conflicts among allies or client states, and avoid dangerous gambits like the Cuban Missile Crisis. There was no need to refer to "spheres of influence" to recognize the simple reality that the closer one gets to the borders of a rival, or the more vital their interests at stake, the more one has to treat with care whatever rules or norms are at play.²⁹ The imperative not to normalize an undesirable reality in international politics was always there, but policy and strategy recognized objective realities.

Like any set of rules, therefore, the post-World War II order has endured, and in some ways, flourished as much through its exceptions as its uncompromising enforcement. That flexibility allowed the United States to avoid fundamental breaks with key states. It overlooked human rights violations, the stretching of nonproliferation norms, and occasionally bellicose behavior even by the Soviet Union as part of this careful balancing act. This approach recognized that for any order

25 The literature on the inconsistencies of U.S. human rights policy, especially during the Cold War, is immense. For a brief survey, see Mark P. Lagon, "Promoting Human Rights: Is U.S. Consistency Desirable or Possible?" *Council on Foreign Relations*, Oct. 19, 2011, <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/promoting-human-rights-us-consistency-desirable-or-possible>. See also David Carleton and Michael Stohl, "The Foreign Policy of Human Rights: Rhetoric and Reality from Jimmy Carter to Ronald Reagan," *Human Rights Quarterly* 7, no. 2 (May 1985), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/762080>; Ted Galen Carpenter, "The Hypocritical Strain in U.S. Foreign Policy," *National Interest*, May 4, 2011, <https://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/hypocritical-strain-us-foreign-policy>; and Kathryn Sikkink, *Mixed Signals: U.S. Human Rights Policy and Latin America* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2004).

26 The concept of balance and flexibility is a major theme in Dennis Ross, *Statecraft: And How to Restore America's Standing in the World* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008).

27 Indeed, this concept was given a theoretical foundation with John Gerard Ruggie's notion of "embedded liberalism," the idea that the post-war socioeconomic order gained strength through the flexibility to allow a certain amount of domestic variations from the liberalizing norms of the system. John Gerard Ruggie, "International Regimes, Transactions, and Change: Embedded Liberalism in the Postwar Economic Order," *International Organization* 36, no. 2 (Spring 1982), <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300018993>.

28 For arguments on this score, see Craig Martin, "International Law and U.S. Military Strikes on Syria," *Huffington Post*, Aug. 31, 2013, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/craig-martin/international-law-and-the_b_3849593.html; Sharmine Narwani, "Is the Expanding U.S. Military Presence in Syria Legal?" *American Conservative*, Aug. 4, 2017, <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/is-the-expanding-u-s-military-presence-in-syria-legal/>; and Laurie Blank, "Syria Strikes: Legitimacy and Lawfulness," *Lawfare*, Apr. 16, 2018, <https://lawfareblog.com/syria-strikes-legitimacy-and-lawfulness>. The international reaction to the legality of the latest round of U.S. and allied strikes has been mixed, with most states declining to take a formal position one way or the other. See Alonso Gurmendi Dunkelberg, Rebecca Ingber, Priya Pillai, and Elvina Pothelet, "Mapping States' Reactions to the Syria Strikes of April 2018," *Just Security*, Apr. 22, 2018, <https://www.justsecurity.org/55157/mapping-states-reactions-syria-strikes-april-2018/>.

29 Edward A. Kolodziej laid out an especially ambitious conceptualization of this de-facto mutual agreement in "The Cold War as Cooperation," *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 44, no. 7, (April 1991), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3824660>.



to endure, all the leading powers must endorse it to some degree — and they will never do so if the application of its norms proves fundamentally inimical to their vital interests.

The Russia Problem

Gradually during the Cold War and then with much more energy after 1989, this pragmatic tenor of American leadership — a willingness to compromise on the road to greater order and community — transformed into a much more uncompromising mindset of missionary zeal. This shift has helped produce some real dangers, one of which was the failure to secure the post-Cold War peace with Russia. That failure resulted in

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a cycle of engagement and disappointment that eventually helped drive U.S.-Russian relations into their present abyss.

Undoubtedly, a large share of the blame can be placed squarely on the shoulders of the Russian elite. However, it was the United States' decision to take a decidedly missionary, rather than strategic, approach to Russia that played an important role in the current breakdown in U.S.-Russia relations. Arguably, the United States should not be blamed for taking advantage of the Soviet Union's collapse in seeking to advance a Europe that is whole, free,

and at peace.³⁰ However, this was meant to be a slogan — not an ideology that led to perpetual NATO expansion, democracy promotion, and half-hearted bids for the former Soviet sphere. Nor was it ever consciously defined as a strategic concept. Taken too far and too quickly, some of these policies have resulted in negative-sum gains for all concerned. The United States never made a serious effort to establish a security framework in Europe in which Russia had a stake. Washington vacillated between ignoring Moscow as a defunct great power and naively seeking to convert Russian elites to Western values, rather than securing post-Cold War peace via structured settlement, negotiation on issues in dispute, and a strategy that planned for its inevitable return as a power in Europe.

In any scenario, Russia would have taken decades to complete a successful transition from being an imperial power to a constructive participant in a collective regional order, as did Britain and France at one point in their own histories. And yet, the United States took little notice of the long-running determinants of Russian strategy or foreign policy that would come into play in that transition. Russia had always sought buffer states in Europe to accommodate for its lack of depth and history of costly wars fought on Russian territory.³¹ This history, together with a natural inclination to establish regional hegemony, predictably yielded a zero-sum

outlook in Moscow when it came to the expansion of military or political blocs. A national security elite rooted in the Soviet experience would have always proven resistant to liberal democracy, and struggled to respect the independence of former Soviet republics.

These convictions did not need to be indulged by the United States — but they did need to be understood, planned for, and accommodated in a strategy designed both to advance liberal values and acknowledge Russian imperatives. It was precisely this sort of nuanced approach that a post-

30 James Goldgeier has argued that a series of U.S.-Russian meetings in the early years of the post-Cold War period "symbolize the narrative of the entire decade: While desirous of a new relationship with Russia, the United States saw itself as the Cold War victor and had the power to shape the security dynamic across Europe." The result, he argues, is that "while NATO enlargement spread security across a region more accustomed to insecurity or unwelcome domination, the failure to provide a place for Russia in the European security framework (for which Russia is responsible as well) left a zone of insecurity between NATO and Russia that continues to bedevil policymakers." See James Goldgeier, "Promises Made, Promises Broken? What Yeltsin Was Told about NATO in 1993 and Why It Matters," *War on the Rocks*, July 12, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/07/promises-made-promises-broken-what-yeltsin-was-told-about-nato-in-1993-and-why-it-matters/>. He is less critical of the post-Cold War U.S. strategy than our analysis; see also Goldgeier, "Less Whole, Less Free, Less at Peace: Whither America's Strategy for a Post-Cold War Europe?" *War on the Rocks*, Feb. 12, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/02/less-whole-less-free-less-peace-whither-americas-strategy-post-cold-war-europe/>.

31 For historical surveys of Russian foreign policy that touch on this perennial imperative in Russian strategic culture, see for example Robert Legvold, ed., *Russian Foreign Policy in the Twenty-First Century and the Legacy of the Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007) and Stephen Kotkin's "Russia's Perpetual Geopolitics," *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 3 (May/June 2016), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2016-04-18/russias-perpetual-geopolitics>. For a general discussion, see Dmitry Trenin, "Russia's Spheres of Interest, Not Influence," *The Washington Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (October 2009), <https://doi.org/10.1080/01636600903231089>.

Cold War United States, certain of its values and fueled by a unipolar moment, never managed to acquire. Instead, a host of well-meaning policy elites accepted Russian absence from European politics as a green light to engage in what Timothy Snyder terms the “politics of inevitability,” believing that the cycle of history was somehow stopped, and that Russian weakness could be taken as a license for strategic malpractice.³²

NATO intervention in Kosovo demonstrated that the alliance now saw itself as able to dictate security terms in Europe unconstrained by international institutions in which Russia had an equal voice.³³ The long-term consequences of the unilateral use of force in Europe at a time of Russian weakness and insecurity would only be realized years later. Tearing up the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty destroyed what Moscow thought was a pillar of strategic stability at a time when the conventional military balance was entirely in America’s favor.³⁴ Reframing NATO as a mechanism for out-of-area operations in support of American-led interventions made an equally powerful impression on Russia. A hodgepodge of efforts to promote democracy, political meddling, and NATO expansion ever further despite Russian warnings contributed to an elite consensus in Moscow that the West would only stop when faced with use of force. This is not a myopic argument about blowback from NATO expansion alone, but the inherent cumulative effect of American policies, many of which were uncoordinated, on U.S.-Russian relations.³⁵

Russian President Vladimir Putin signaled the upshot of this cumulative effect in his 2007 address at the Munich Security Conference.³⁶ Years of efforts to engage Russia and lectures on the benefits of Western integration, Putin’s broadside made clear, had in no way caused Russian leadership to redefine its fundamental national security assumptions, its outlook on the former Soviet space, or its enduring suspicion of Western intent. Simply put, more than 10 years ago, Russia’s obvious frustrations and public warnings

should have made it clear to Western officials that American foreign policy, together with European desires to expand their own supranational political institutions, would lead to conflict in Europe. This was evident to leading Cold War strategists in the 1990s, well before Putin took power or anyone in the West even knew his name.³⁷ After many years of failure to get its interests taken seriously by Washington, Moscow thought the Russia-Georgia

The long-term consequences of the unilateral use of force in Europe at a time of Russian weakness and insecurity would only be realized years later.

War made its concerns and outlook clear. Yet after 2008, a different group of American policy elites took the helm, still missionary in outlook, and holding on to the belief that with a few transactions in areas of mutual interest, Russian elites somehow could be convinced to abandon longstanding precepts of Russian strategic culture. Washington was then once again caught flatfooted over the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014.

The architects of these post-Cold War U.S. policies will insist that their intentions were good, that each of these actions was aimed at upholding some rule or norm of the international order, that Russia need not have been offended, and that it all would have been different if Moscow had made different choices. Some will admit that mistakes were made. But even those who do still cast Russia as the essential problem. They use renewed confrontation with Russia as a strange

32 Timothy Snyder, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2017).

33 For the role of resentment over Kosovo in sparking recent Russian actions, see Masha Gessen, “Crimea is Putin’s Revenge,” *Slate*, Mar. 21, 2014, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/foreigners/2014/03/putin_s_crimea_revenge_ever_since_the_u_s_bombed_kosovo_in_1999_putin_has.html. See also Ted Galen Carpenter, “How Kosovo Poisoned America’s Relationship with Russia,” *National Interest*, May 19, 2017, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-kosovo-poisoned-americas-relationship-russia-20755>; and Stephen J. Blank, *Threats to Russian Security: The View from Moscow* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army Strategic Studies Institute, 2000).

34 Tom Z. Collina, “Dumping the ABM Treaty: Was It Worth It?” *Arms Control Now*, June 12, 2012.

35 For a general review of events, see Jeffrey Taylor, “The Seething Anger of Putin’s Russia,” *Atlantic*, Sept. 22, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/09/russia-west-united-states-past-future-conflict/380533/>; and Radin and Reach, *Russian Views*, 23-29.

36 See “Putin’s Prepared Remarks at 43rd Munich Conference on Security Policy,” *Washington Post*, Feb. 12, 2007, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/02/12/AR2007021200555.html>.

37 See Thomas Friedman, “Foreign Affairs; Now a Word From X,” *New York Times*, May 2, 1998, <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/05/02/opinion/foreign-affairs-now-a-word-from-x.html>. and Kenneth N. Waltz, “Structural Realism after the Cold War,” *International Security* 24, no. 1 (Summer 2000), http://www.columbia.edu/itc/sipa/U6800/readings-sm/Waltz_Structural%20Realism.pdf.

kind of retroactive justification for the policies that played a hand in creating that confrontation in the first place. It goes without saying — and we must stress this point — that Russia's historic strategy for attaining security at the expense of others, its paranoid and narrow strategic culture, and its elite-driven decision-making process all constitute the real nub of the problem. But it is precisely *because* of those realities that almost every aspect of this conflict was predictable. Russia's spate of aggressive assaults on the post-war order do not exculpate U.S. policymakers for not only failing to secure the post-Cold War peace, but also for failing to prepare for Russia's inevitable return as a major power in the international system, and in particular a military power in Europe.

The harsh realities of Russian interests and intentions only reinforce the dangers of a post-Cold War policy toward Russia fueled by hegemonic overreach and missionary absolutism, rather than by an effort to deal with Russia as it is. Many of Moscow's demands need not threaten the security of the West and those that do must be vigorously countered. But America's approach to Russia in the wake of the Cold War looks like an almost willful 30-year effort to ignore Russian prerogatives, threats, and internal mobilization in the name of the rules and norms of the post-World War II order — an order that, as Moscow is busily reminding us (and as Beijing is likely to do as well), simply cannot endure if other powers don't subscribe to it.

The only reason Russia has not left this order entirely — as an aggrieved Japan once withdrew from the League of Nations in the 1930s³⁸ — is that it has few options in the way of allies today, remains dependent on the global financial system, and appears still to crave some degree of international legitimacy.³⁹ While Russia has not taken such fundamental steps as abandoning the United Nations or even many international treaties, there is growing evidence that Moscow perceives itself to be unconstrained by existing rules and norms. If anything, Russia seems increasingly unconcerned about its reputation, credibility, and legitimacy in the West. This is likely due not simply to desperation, but to the perception that there is little the West can do to impose its will. Russia has become unbridled in its use of political

and cyber-enabled information warfare against the United States and its allies. Its military campaign in Syria has demonstrated that Russia is able to independently and effectively project power in another region, reaffirming that Moscow is still a great power in the international system and that it was underestimated in 2015.

One of the barriers to the necessary course correction in U.S. strategy is that the missionary sensibility now guiding much of America's foreign policy is grounded in some very real — but also very qualified — truths. America's role *is* different from that of other great powers.⁴⁰ American values *do* travel. Soft power, a network of allies and partners, and a leading role in the order's governing institutions *do* constitute some of America's greatest advantages. Many other countries, perhaps most, *do* believe that their interests are better served with Washington at the helm than Beijing or Moscow — or no one at all. Equally important is that, despite the preponderance of American power in the post-Cold War period, small and middle powers do not see the United States as a threat.⁴¹ The post-war order *has* strongly benefited U.S. interests, in ways ranging from the creation of institutions that help stabilize the global economy to wrapping U.S. power and purpose in legitimizing multilateral context.⁴²

Such realities account for why so many other countries are willing to overlook the occasional hypocrisy, give the United States credit for good intentions, and remain firmly wedded to the order Washington cobbled together in the aftermath of World War II. They are also a major reason why Russian and Chinese calls to balance American power have long gone unheeded, and why, despite the inherently unstable nature of a unilateral system, it has continued for over 25 years. Yet how to maintain the current order, and American leadership, after the demise of unipolarity could prove the most vexing question of this looming transition. Continuing this post-Cold War pattern of standing too straight-backed at the altar of the shared order, holding too inflexibly to its rule set, will at best produce a brittle and unsustainable system — and at worst, magnify the dangers of unfathomably destructive wars.

38 Eri Hotta, *Japan 1941: Countdown to Infamy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013).

39 Radin and Reach, *Russian Views*.

40 One recent argument on this score is James Traub, "America Can't Win Great-Power Hardball," *Foreign Policy*, Nov. 16, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/11/16/america-cant-win-great-power-hardball/>.

41 Keir A. Lieber and Gerard Alexander, "Waiting for Balancing: Why the World is Not Pushing Back," *International Security* 30, no. 1 (Summer 2005), <https://doi.org/10.1162/0162288054894580>.

42 Michael J. Mazarr and Ashley L. Rhoades, *Testing the Value of the Postwar International Order* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018).



Rebuilding the City on a Hill

Part of the danger of a missionary attitude, then, is that it damages America's ability to take the interests of other major powers into consideration and encourages the adventurist promotion of Western values and the enforcement of rules

Adversaries who assume that the United States will punish them no matter what they do have no incentive for restraint.

in ways guaranteed to manufacture continual disputes and crises. A theological approach to foreign policy has warped Washington's judgment and, combined with the immense power at its disposal, impelled the United States to take more risks than its interests would dictate.⁴³ Ask a typical group of U.S. national security hands behind closed doors whether Washington should go to war over Ukraine, Georgia, or Syria, or to ensure free navigation in the South China Sea — as both of us have done on numerous occasions — and they are likely to laugh uncomfortably and shake their heads. And yet the inherent value of defending the norms established by the post-war order imbues each of these things with a supposed precedential value that supersedes the strict national interests involved.

This is not the first time that secondary issues have taken on primary importance because of their symbolic value. The Cold War was full of such examples. But there is a perilous difference between fighting off a global ideological menace in far-flung places with little inherent significance and defending abstract global norms along the borders of other great powers. The nature of the credibility imperative has changed, and yet the United States is sliding quickly back into Cold War thinking that, because general principles matter, everywhere and

everything matters — even issues and places of far more intrinsic importance to our competitors than to us.⁴⁴ Jack Snyder argues that the myth of “cumulative losses,” which often appear in the form of unsubstantiated domino theories (i.e., that any setbacks in international affairs will necessarily escalate into a cascade of defeats) is a recurring theme among policy establishments heading towards over-extension and strategic insolvency.⁴⁵

It is, of course, true that some of the states testing the boundaries today do have malign, or at least aggressive, intentions. The United States cannot simply disregard Russian aggression in Ukraine or meddling in Western political processes, or declare itself unconcerned with the potential for Chinese aggression against Taiwan. Our recommendations are designed to

sustain, not abandon, a broadly shared, rules-based order. Even without the prompting of exaggerated domino theories, some rules must be enforced if and when the violations are profound enough.

But an approach guided by statecraft rather than theology urges the United States to ask critical discriminating questions in the process of making such judgments. Which are the rules that must be rigidly enforced? What norms must be forcibly advanced? How, precisely, should the United States go about both of those tasks? There is a good reason why some form of compromise and respect for mutual interests has been part of every successful program to manage rivalry.

Merely saying some things matter less than others is not tantamount to saying nothing matters. If Washington is not careful, a refusal to temper U.S. ambitions will produce a series of unnecessary and exhausting wars that, in the most tragic of ironies, end up generating the only scenarios likely to pose a truly existential threat to the U.S. homeland. It is time to finally abandon the crude, unqualified domino theories and credibility obsessions that plague our policy establishment. Russian annexation of Crimea is not a prelude to an invasion of NATO. Lithuania is not Ukraine. And none of them is Germany.

In order to deter other powers and make room

43 A number of analysts have written about the tendency of modern American predominance to generate expanding ambitions. See, for example, Christopher Preble, *The Power Problem: How American Military Dominance Makes Us Less Safe, Less Prosperous, and Less Free* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), especially 87-115. Our own recommendations are less comprehensive than Preble's, and we do not agree with every aspect of his portrait of U.S. military power.

44 Stephen M. Walt, "Why Are U.S. Leaders So Obsessed with Credibility?" *Foreign Policy*, Sept. 11, 2012, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/09/11/why-are-u-s-leaders-so-obsessed-with-credibility/>; and Christopher Fettweis, "Credibility and the War on Terror," *Political Science Quarterly* 122, no. 4 (Winter 2007), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20202929>.

45 Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

for compromise, the United States should stop lecturing these nations about what their interests ought to be and instead determine which of those interests America can live with and be willing to grant those interests some measure of political legitimacy. To refuse to admit the legitimacy of a rival's core interests is to make the conflict total, rendering it impossible to offer them assurances that if they refrain from undesired actions, we will forgo punishment. There is a profound difference between delegitimizing enemies when at war, which is commonplace, and delegitimizing countries with whom you wish to avert war, thus reducing your own space for compromise, settlement, and any incentive they might have to negotiate. Without such assurances, effective deterrence becomes both difficult and expensive. As Thomas Schelling has argued, the "pain and suffering" embodied in deterrent threats "have to appear *contingent* on" a potential aggressor's behavior.⁴⁶ Adversaries who assume that the United States will punish them no matter what they do have no incentive for restraint.

Ideological purity also limits America's options for resolving disputes by making it difficult to compromise or broker imperfect deals out of fear of political backlash at home. The missionary mindset makes the United States unwilling to surrender one iota of freedom of action (by constraining missile defense deployments, for example), or institutionalize anything but the purest enforcement of rules. This makes most treaties or compacts impossible to pass and creates a host of constraints that result in Washington only having the "big stick" to use as its principal means of management. This pattern has accelerated since 1989: The United States has become constitutionally incapable of signing, ratifying, or upholding limited deals to manage complex problems — whether that's the Agreed Framework with North Korea, a series of climate accords, or the nuclear deal with Iran. But dismissing diplomatic half-measures in favor of the big stick is a strategy with little coercive value against powers with similarly sized sticks and a growing allergy to American dictates. If something like the entirely sensible post-Cold War

U.S.-Russian arms agreements were to give way to a world without any arms control, for example, U.S. interests would only suffer.

The International Order: Back to the Old Testament

What, then, is the alternative? The answer does not lie in one of the variants of retrenchment on offer today.⁴⁷ The U.S. role as the leader and hub of a flexible but still meaningful rule-based world order — including the deterrent power of a potent and globally-postured U.S. military — underwrites peace and stability. The general U.S. strategy of "deep engagement" has benefited both U.S. interests and global economic and political security,⁴⁸ and the commitments to such engagement found in the *National Security Strategy* and the *National Defense Strategy* are heartening indeed. But there is a readily-available middle ground between retrenchment and predominance: The United States should remain internationally engaged while abandoning the dangerous implications of the missionary mindset that has prevailed for more than three decades.

A more humble and restrained version of U.S. engagement would have several basic characteristics. First, it would require greater power-sharing in setting and enforcing rules in the international order, ranging from trade and finance to regional security.⁴⁹ As more states become determined to have a voice in the setting and enforcement of rules in the post-war international order, and as they acquire the power to make their voices heard, that order will have to become more legitimately multilateral if it is going to survive.⁵⁰ Keeping the other major powers vested in the system is an essential component of any strategy to constrain them and contain the competition; the lower their stake in the current order, the shorter its lifespan will be. There is some evidence that a shared order, with leadership coming from more corners of the world, could work. Consider Europe's drive to save the Paris climate deal

46 Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), 4.

47 For one recent example see Eugene Gholz, Daryl G. Press, and Harvey M. Sapolsky, "Come Home America: The Strategy of Restraint in the Face of Temptation," *International Security* 21, no. 4 (Spring 1997).

48 Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, "Don't Come Home, America: The Case against Retrenchment," *International Security* 37, no. 3 (Winter 2011/2012): 7-51, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00107.

49 See for example Amitav Acharya, *The End of American World Order* (New York: Polity, 2014).

50 A good recent statement of the need for a multilateral conception of a shifting order is Trine Flockart, Charles A. Kupchan, Christina Lin, Bartłomiej E. Nowak, Patrick W. Quirk, and Lanxin Xiang, *Liberal Order in a Post-Western World* (Washington, DC: Transatlantic Academy, 2014).

absent America,⁵¹ Japan's leadership of a rump Trans-Pacific Partnership,⁵² or China's desire to lead and change, rather than destroy, established international institutions.⁵³

A more multilateral order can work, but Washington must find a way to *make* it work, because an order based solely on American unipolarity is not sustainable. Simply put, American power, both relative and absolute, is insufficient to underwrite the order as it is currently conceived and being enforced by its own policy community. The more stakeholders and centers of leadership, the more resilient the current order actually will become, but this of course means the United States will have to learn to share the steering wheel. Otherwise the United States risks discrediting its leadership and surrendering even more influence to others. It is Beijing's quest to take charge of the current order, rather than destroy it and make enemies of its beneficiaries. That is what ought to worry Washington the most.

Second, a revised approach would counsel patience rather than urgency in the promotion of key norms and values. The great insight of U.S. Cold War strategy was that America's job was not to *force* a value change on the Soviet Union. It was instead to establish and safeguard an international system that ultimately would outlast and envelop the Soviet Union. The United States channeled conflict with the Soviet Union to distant proxy wars, where escalation dynamics could be controlled and the stakes to both parties were far from existential. In the process, beginning with Dwight Eisenhower's rejection of an outright "rollback" strategy,⁵⁴ successive U.S. administrations displayed a recognition of Soviet core interests, and a realization that the United States could not prevail if it competed so hard that it provoked the other side into a cataclysmic war.

In the end, the Soviet Union's own internal contradictions caught up with it, as cynicism and dysfunction consumed the system from the inside. Over time, it voluntarily signed up for the institutions of a system that would contain the competition, such as the Helsinki Final Act of 1975. Arms control, transparency, and confidence building treaties followed. In the end, the Soviet

Union ceased being a revolutionary power and became a satisfied power in Europe.

The same concept — taking steps to gradually and inexorably create a context that *produces* desired changes rather than dispatching military forces or implementing economic sanctions to *force* those changes overnight — can and should be the starting point for a revised conception of the international order. With properly employed statecraft, values that Americans believe to be self-selling goods, from free markets to human rights to democracy, ought to prove attractive of their own accord. U.S. policy can sponsor and support these outcomes with a continuing and powerful strategy for liberal value promotion. But the primary goal of such a strategy would be to encourage established and emerging trends toward liberal values rather than force them into infertile soil.

In the process of executing this strategy, the United States should eschew military intervention for humanitarian purposes except in select cases. Those would include situations in which the United States can obtain fairly universal endorsement in the form of such signs as U.N. Security Council support. This rule would generally avoid throwing American weight behind region-wide revolutions, especially those that are likely to wash up on the doorsteps of other great powers. Washington should not cease being a beacon for democracy, but it also should think carefully about where democracy promotion is liable to engender political crises that could translate into security contests. The United States can amply fulfill its commitment to liberal values without disregarding the sovereignty or interests of other major powers. It can craft closer and more overtly supportive partnerships with rising democracies, boost foreign aid to developing countries that are building nascent democratic systems, expand humanitarian assistance missions and programs, and advance technical assistance and human capital development programs around the world.

Third, the revised approach to U.S. engagement would prioritize diplomacy and statecraft over military power. Secretary of Defense James Mattis — like many recent secretaries of defense — has spoken repeatedly and passionately about the

51 Alison Smale, "Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron Unite Behind Paris Accord," *New York Times*, June 2, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/02/world/europe/paris-agreement-merkel-trump-macron.html>.

52 Shawn Donnan, "Globalization Marches On Without Trump," *Financial Times*, Nov. 6, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/d81ca8cc-bfdd-11e7-b8a3-38a6e068f464>; Koichi Hamada, "The Rebirth of the TPP," *Project Syndicate*, June 29, 2017, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/tpp-revival-japan-us-by-koichi-hamada-2017-06?barrier=accessreg>.

53 Bisma Momani, "Xi Jinping's Speech at Davos Showed the World Has Turned Upside Down," *Newsweek*, Jan. 18, 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/davos-2017-xi-jinping-economy-globalization-protectionism-donald-trump-543993>.

54 Robert R. Bowie and Richard H. Immerman, *Waging Peace: How Eisenhower Shaped an Enduring Cold War Strategy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 158-177.

importance of placing diplomacy at the forefront of U.S. national security strategy, and the need to invest in the tools required for such an emphasis.⁵⁵ Multiple diplomatic initiatives are now underway, from the Indo-Pacific-inspired engagement of India and Japan to negotiations with North Korea to close cooperation with NATO on enhancing deterrence.

Read in isolation, however, and considered alongside recent boosts in defense spending,⁵⁶ the new strategy documents seem to convey a vision in which the United States amasses military might to reaffirm U.S. dominance while avoiding hard political choices, essentially doubling down on raw power to compensate for loss of influence. In an era when leading competitors are discovering effective means of bolstering their influence outside the military lane and below the threshold of conflict, while also investing heavily in the capacity to offset U.S. power projection in their regions, this approach seems destined to disappoint. Despite some emerging concepts such as “multi-domain operations,” “dynamic force employment,” and “joint lethality,” there is little in the new *National Security Strategy* or *National Defense Strategy* to suggest a rethinking of how the United States integrates the military with other instruments of national power. Direct competition, contesting regional balances of power with Russia and China, and a capability-centric approach continue to dominate the national security mindset. In these documents, Washington recognizes the rise of great power competition, and the erosion of America’s military power, but not the need to change its strategy or outlook on the international order. As a consequence, the “whole of government” approach we so often hear espoused often turns out to be little more than a whole of Pentagon approach:

The military toolkit is not used in integrated combination with non-military approaches, but as a substitute for them.

Placing statecraft before military power would amount to a tacit acknowledgement that the United States is overburdened by an expansive alliance

network in which the credibility of extended deterrence is every day more difficult. Arming the regional adversaries of powers like Russia and China, or further expanding existing alliances, will have profound consequences, as these great powers have both the will and the power to enact stronger and destabilizing countermeasures. This requires exercising judgment in the choice of weapon systems and forces deployed on Russian or Chinese borders. It demands choosing deterrence over dominance in such theaters as the South China Sea, aiming to block potential Chinese aggression with far less expectation of power projection.⁵⁷ It also means indefinitely deferring NATO membership for some countries, a proposition many in Western circles find uncomfortable. However, it does not preclude creating other forms of affiliation, cooperation, and partnership beyond what has become a myopic fixation on NATO expansion.

As this last example suggests, the fourth and final characteristic of implementing a revised approach in U.S. strategy will be to confront hard choices and make painful compromises in dealing with Russia and China. These are major, resilient, and nuclear-armed adversaries, and there is no getting around the fact that these illiberal states will have a say in the order, just as the Soviet Union did before them,

The current confrontation is not only likely to be the new normal, it is also certain to continue as long as Putin is in power.

and just as the great powers did in the eras prior to the Cold War.

Absolutists will respond that any compromise on the order’s rules and norms is tantamount to surrender.⁵⁸ In some of the more pitiless conceptions of a global order, that is certainly true:

55 Robert F. Worth, “Can Jim Mattis Hold the Line in Trump’s War Cabinet?” *New York Times*, Mar. 26, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/26/magazine/can-jim-mattis-hold-the-line-in-trumps-war-cabinet.html>.

56 Greg Jaffe and Damian Paletta, “Trump Plans to Ask for \$719 Billion for National Defense in 2019 — A Major Increase,” *Washington Post*, Jan. 26, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-plans-to-ask-for-716-billion-for-national-defense-in-2019--a-major-increase/2018/01/26/9d0e30e4-02a8-11e8-bb03-722769454f82_story.html?utm_term=.aff638a5bce1.

57 See Terrence Kelly, David C. Gompert, and Duncan Long, *Smarter Power, Stronger Partners, Volume I: Exploiting U.S. Advantages to Prevent Aggression* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016).

58 For an interesting perspective on spheres of influence and balance of power, see Robert Kagan, “The United States Must Resist a Return to Spheres of Interest in the International System,” Brookings Institution, Feb. 19, 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2015/02/19/the-united-states-must-resist-a-return-to-spheres-of-interest-in-the-international-system/>. For a similar argument on realism, see Roger Cohen, “The Limits of American Realism,” *New York Times*, Jan. 11, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/12/opinion/the-limits-of-american-realism.html>.

An unapologetic great power-centric order would embrace value-free spheres of influence. Some believe that this is the Manichean choice that confronts the United States in Europe and Asia and that no acceptable middle ground exists on which Russia and the West, or China and the United States, can each see their vital interests upheld

Simply put, American power, both relative and absolute, is insufficient to underwrite the order as it is currently conceived.

while the rules and institutions of a shared order persist. There is now a tragic degree to which this has become a reality. For the foreseeable future, the U.S.-Russian relationship will be adversarial and the potential for cooperation or engagement extremely small. In order for relations to stabilize, some form of settlement must come into place concerning Ukraine. And that may take a while.

The current confrontation is not only likely to be the new normal, it is also certain to continue as long as Putin is in power. There is no deal to be made with him for two reasons. First, there is a broad political consensus in Washington that, after interference in the 2016 elections, Putin is de facto beyond the pale, and any condominium with him would be tantamount to betrayal. The second is more practical: Congressional sanctions passed in July 2017 make the confrontation structural, and it is rather difficult to see any scenario in which these sanctions are lifted absent Putin's departure. Even if the executive branch were so inclined, Congress has dramatically curtailed its ability to make any deals with Russia. For much of the policy establishment, the confrontation with Russia is, if not personal, highly personalized when it comes to Vladimir Putin.

However, Washington can begin thinking about how to position itself in such a way as to avoid repeating this same tragic cycle after Putin's departure. Were he to stay, the problem would remain much the same. U.S. policymakers need

to take heed not to indulge in some fantasy that a new Russian leader, or elite power structure, will be willing to redefine how Russia conceives of its security. Russia not only should be constrained, but also dealt with — and the only effective way to strike the necessary balances will be through statecraft rather than missionary confrontation.

Absent a change in approach, the same fate will befall U.S.-Chinese relations, as many in Washington prepare for a confrontation with Beijing over its regional and global ambitions. From the perspective of the missionary mindset, China too has sinned, by failing to liberalize as its economic power grew and refusing to behave “responsibly” in the international system — code for not behaving like a classical great power.⁵⁹ The real complaint is that American missionary expectations have been unfulfilled: China is not simply “joining” the U.S.-led order as it stands, subordinating its own objectives, and interpretations of its interests, to American and Western models. Such an outcome should never have been expected. China's history, size, and self-conception mean that it ultimately wants no one but itself to determine at least the Asian regional order.

This is not, again, to suggest that the United States must accede to China's view of the regional order, and quietly accept any behaviors Beijing undertakes. Some Chinese provocations would be incompatible with central rules and norms of any meaningful international order: paramilitary aggression against the Senkaku Islands, military adventurism to claim sovereignty in the South China Sea, an unprovoked attack against Taiwan, or accelerated economic espionage and coercive industrial policies against outside companies. The United States should lead multilateral processes to deter such actions (though not always with military threats, even in the case of military aggression). But such negotiations can unfold in a mutually respectful dialogue between two great powers who retain fundamental respect for each other's prerogatives.

The risk today is that the U.S. national security dialogue on China is becoming increasingly overheated and theological, nominating China for the role of ideologically motivated militarist. The new *National Defense Strategy* already paints China as having a sinister, shared vision with Russia, to “shape a world consistent with their authoritarian model.”⁶⁰ If the result is a replay, in different terms,

59 For two powerful recent arguments to this effect, see Kurt M. Campbell and Ely Ratner, “The China Reckoning: How Beijing Defied American Expectations,” *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 2 (March/April 2018), <http://heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?handle=hein.journals/fora97&div=37&id=&page=>; and Hal Brands, “The Chinese Century?” *National Interest*, Feb. 19, 2018, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-chinese-century-24557>.

60 *National Defense Strategy*, 2018.



of the refusal to take Russian interests seriously that unfolded after 1991, then China, like Russia, will be likely to break with the rules of the post-war order in a more overt manner. The conflict will then become total and ideological, just as it has with Russia. Yet, if the United States has failed to cow or isolate Russia, the prospects for doing so with China are virtually nonexistent.

The truly dangerous dynamic here does not reflect the cliché of the Thucydides trap — the idea of an explosive relationship between a rising and an established power.⁶¹ It is rather the reality of transforming any broad and nuanced strategy into a religion. When a predominant power, convinced of its indispensability, and viewing the world through the lens of moralism rather than statesmanship, holds so tightly to an immovable reading of shared rules and norms, it can provoke unnecessary opposition and perhaps even trigger a disaster.⁶²

Correcting America's approach to these two rivals would require seeking a serious, renewed dialogue with Moscow and Beijing about what a stable regional order would look like. It would also mean taking seriously each country's interests and ambitions rather than dismissing their legitimacy under the shadow of global rights and wrongs. This new approach would lay down a few hard and fast rules designed to sustain the fundamentals of a rule-based order — prohibitions on outright territorial aggression, destructively predatory economic policies, and actions taken to disrupt and fracture the politics and societies of other states — but otherwise it would be open to compromise and half-measures.

At the same time, it would work even more energetically to gain truly multilateral support for that narrower set of rules. America would need to acknowledge that arguments about how to achieve a shared goal (such as Iranian or North Korean

61 Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides' Trap?* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2017). For good critiques, see Rosemary Foot, "Two Differing Views on U.S.-China Conflict Find Common Ground in Their Solutions," and Neville Morley, "History Can't Always Help to Make Sense of the Future," both in "Book Review Roundtable: Is War with China Coming? Contrasting Views," *Texas National Security Review*, Nov. 1, 2017, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/war-with-china-contrasting-visions/>.

62 That model reflects a more accurate reading of the cause of war in Thucydides anyway — with the United States playing the role of the hubristic, overconfident Athens, gathering distant allies and goading Sparta into a war it neither desired nor sought. For a critique of the notion as applied to China, see Arthur Waldron, "There Is No Thucydides Trap," *Straits Times*, June 18, 2017, <http://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/there-is-no-thucydides-trap>.



denuclearization) are not tantamount to norm violations, and cease, for the most part, trying to coerce others into favored American tactics through such tools as “secondary sanctions.”⁶³ This fresh approach to U.S. engagement would require admitting that, increasingly, the United States will have to compromise on some of its own favored policies to get the deals it wants. A new consensus limiting Russian-style political interference, for example, is likely to require painful concessions on U.S. efforts to promote democracy abroad.

A revised strategic mindset would redouble efforts, and offer bold compromises, in order to achieve or renew bilateral arms agreements with both Russia and China. The changing military balances in Europe and Asia-Pacific call for regional security arrangements, treaties, and political agreements on behavior in global domains, such as cyber or space. A more robust American military presence should be coupled with stabilizing initiatives in conventional arms control and measures to drive the competition into stable deterrence rather than security dilemmas and spiral decision-making models, which Washington can doubtfully afford to sustain. Russia’s break with the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty may mean that this agreement will not survive, but Washington can only gain by looking for new ways to restrain Russian force modernization and expanded force posture in Europe.

As the single superpower with both global responsibilities and burdens and a normative vision for the international order, the United States has everything to defend, and only stands to lose from an uncontrolled competition. History offers valuable lessons here. Although the period of détente (1969–1979) failed to stop the Cold War, in part because of unrealistic expectations that it would do exactly that, it had a profoundly stabilizing effect at a time of transition in the global balance of power. This period led to formal arms control agreements, recognition of political borders, military confidence-building measures, and economic and cultural exchange along with an acknowledgment of the importance of human rights.⁶⁴ The Soviet Union sought to reduce tension on its Western borders at the same time as the

United States was dealing with an objective loss of global superiority. Then, as now, the policy establishment was looking to find its footing in the face of American decline in its predominance in both military and political spheres. Détente didn’t last, but it was profoundly beneficial for Washington, and by engaging Moscow, it set in motion a host of processes that would ultimately lead to the Soviet Union’s demise.

Today, similar forms of political, economic, and military agreements can be part of the recipe for reducing tensions with Russia and structuring the competition such that the United States retains leadership without eroding the order — that is, if the settlements become a way of reestablishing the order rather than forsaking it.⁶⁵ The challenge with this time period, unlike 1980, which saw the end of détente and a reinvigorated Cold War competition at a time of Soviet stagnation, is that history seems unlikely to repeat itself. Setting aside Washington’s problems with Russia, rogue states, and international terrorism, China alone has the range of power and ambitions to confront the United States with a competition it would struggle to resource and sustain. Hence the United States should revisit stabilizing periods like détente, when deals and compromises were made with adversaries, and restore that element of pragmatism to its strategic outlook.

In sum, then, a new U.S. approach to international affairs would include treating Russia and China with a degree of political respect and legitimacy, rather than as miscreants opposed to the true and right vision of the future. This does not mean that the United States should abandon its efforts to hold them to some standard. Quite the contrary. It is *only* by reining in its absolutism and behaving in a more multilateral and flexible fashion that the United States is likely to gain the global support it needs to sustain the most essential rules of the post-war order. And it is only by addressing the rising grievances of these two potentially dangerous revisionist powers — rather than simply declaring those grievances illegitimate — that the United States will begin to create the basis on which China and Russia themselves feel able to compromise.

At the same time, to succeed in the intensifying

63 Yeganeh Torbati, “Sanctions ‘Overreach’ Risks Driving Business from U.S.: Treasury’s Lew,” *Reuters*, Mar. 30, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-sanctions-jacklew/sanctions-overreach-risks-driving-business-from-u-s-treasurys-lew-idUSKCN0WW1VM>; and Aaron Arnold, “Watch Out for the Blowback of Secondary Sanctions on North Korea,” *Diplomat*, Apr. 28, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/04/watch-out-for-the-blowback-of-secondary-sanctions-on-north-korea/>.

64 Robert G. Kaiser, “U.S.-Soviet Relations: Goodbye to Détente,” *Foreign Policy* 59, no. 3 (America and the World 1980), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/1981-02-01/us-soviet-relations-goodbye-d-tente>.

65 Steven Pifer, “Arms Control, Security Cooperation, and U.S.-Russian Relations,” Brookings Institution, Nov. 17, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/arms-control-security-cooperation-and-u-s-russian-relations/>; and Strobe Talbott, “U.S.-Russian Arms Control Was Possible Once — Is It Possible Still?” Brookings Institution, Dec. 12, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/12/12/u-s-russia-arms-control-was-possible-once-is-it-possible-still/>.



competition now underway, the United States will have to face the reality that if it does not get its own economic, political, and social house in order, it will be increasingly weak and vulnerable regardless of its military prowess. Americans have now elected four presidents in a row who claimed that making America strong internationally meant, first and foremost, attending to the domestic sources of national power. Yet pressing issues like exploding debt, entitlement reform, a crumbling infrastructure, criminal justice reform, climate change, political polarization, and information security, to name a few, continue to beg for solutions. But that will require the political will to conceive of bold answers. Major progress on several of these issues would do more to set back the ideological challenge of China and Russia and reaffirm the American model as the one to emulate, than any conceivable addition to the defense budget.

The strategic moment, in other words, demands a lighter and more flexible touch abroad combined with bold action at home. Left unattended, however, the missionary mindset of U.S. foreign policy is likely to drive the nation in precisely the opposite direction.

America's experience in creating and then managing the post-World War II international order has repeatedly disproven the idea that it must choose between appeasement and war, or between value promotion and compromise. In his seminal 1961 speech, John F. Kennedy rejected these rigid formulations, arguing that

each of these extreme opposites resembles the other. Each believes that we have only two choices: appeasement or war, suicide or surrender, humiliation or holocaust, to be either Red or dead. Each side sees only 'hard' and 'soft' nations, hard and soft policies, hard and soft men.

Instead, he believed that "diplomacy and defense are not substitutes for one another" and that "as long as we know what comprises our vital interests and our long-range goals, we have nothing to fear from negotiations at the appropriate time, and nothing to gain by refusing to take part in them."⁶⁶ This is the vision that America must rekindle, and it is this kind of America that is missing from the world stage. 🇺🇸

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66 John F. Kennedy, "Address in Seattle at the University of Washington's 100th Anniversary Program," Nov. 16, 1961, available at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=8448>.