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Charting A Different Course

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ABSTRACT: The failure of liberal internationalism in the post–Cold War period requires the United States to adopt a clear-eyed approach to competition that promotes regional balances of power, emphasizes reciprocity, and creates mission-driven coalitions.

Writing in *Foreign Affairs* last year, then presidential candidate Joe Biden promised to “address the world as it is” in his effort to restore American leadership.¹ President Biden’s team faces an uphill battle as they translate the president’s vision into policy. The emergence of powerful rivals coupled with the erosion of US capabilities has led to a decline of American agency in the world. Ultimately this trend stems from a series of long-standing illusions about the sources of American power and what it can reasonably accomplish.

Since the end of the Cold War, US policymakers have been beguiled by a set of illusions about world order. Contrary to the optimistic predictions made in the wake of the Soviet Union’s collapse, widespread political liberalization and the growth of transnational organizations have not tempered rivalries among countries. Likewise globalization and economic interdependence have not been unalloyed goods; often they have generated unanticipated inequalities and vulnerabilities. And although the proliferation of digital technologies has increased productivity and brought other benefits, it has also eroded the US military’s advantages and posed challenges to democratic societies.

Given these new realities, Washington cannot simply return to the comfortable assumptions of the past. The world has moved beyond the unipolar moment of the post–Cold War period and into an age of interdependence and competition calling for different policies and tools. To navigate this new era properly, the United States must let go of old illusions, move past the myths of liberal internationalism, and reconsider its views about the nature of the world order.

A Promise Unfulfilled

As the twentieth century drew to a close, waves of global democratization inspired optimism in the West. Ultimately a consensus

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1. This article is adapted from Nadia Schadlow, “The End of American Illusion: Trump and the World as It Is,” *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/americas/2020-08-11/end-american-illusion>. Joseph R. Biden Jr., “Why America Must Lead Again: Rescuing U.S. Foreign Policy after Trump,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again>.

formed that a convergence on liberal democracy would lead to a stable international political order. As the Soviet Union withered and the Cold War ended, US President George H. W. Bush called for a “new world order,” a “Pax Universalis” founded on liberal values, democratic governance, and free markets.² Several years later, US President Bill Clinton’s 1996 National Security Strategy articulated a policy of engagement and democratic enlargement that would improve “the prospects for political stability, peaceful conflict resolution, and greater dignity and hope for the people of the world.”³

This presumption of liberal convergence motivated the decision to allow China to join the World Trade Organization in 2001. As Clinton said at the time, such an opening would have “a profound impact on human rights and political liberty.”⁴ The rest of the world would get access to Chinese markets and cheap imports, and China would get the chance to bring prosperity to hundreds of millions of its citizens, which many in Washington believed would improve the prospects for democratization—a win-win situation.

But China had no intention of converging with the West. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) never intended to play by the West’s rules; it was determined to control markets rather than open them and did so by keeping its exchange rate artificially low, providing unfair advantages to state-owned enterprises, and erecting regulatory barriers against non-Chinese companies. Officials in both the George W. Bush and the Obama administrations worried about China’s intentions. But fundamentally they remained convinced the United States needed to engage with China to strengthen the rules-based international system, and that China’s economic liberalization would ultimately lead to political liberalization. Instead, China has taken advantage of economic interdependence to grow its economy and enhance its military, thereby ensuring the long-term strength of the CCP.

While China and other actors subverted the liberal convergence overseas, economic globalization was failing to meet expectations at home. Proponents of globalization claimed in an economy lubricated by free trade, consumers would benefit from access to cheaper goods, lost manufacturing jobs would be replaced by better jobs in the growing service industry, foreign direct investment would flow to every sector, and companies everywhere would become more efficient and innovative. Organizations such as the World Trade Organization, meanwhile, would help manage this freer and more integrated world (never mind its 22,000 pages of regulations).

2. Reuters, “MIDEAST DIPLOMACY; Excerpts from Bush’s Address to General Assembly: For a ‘Pax Universalis,’” *New York Times*, September 24, 1991, <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/09/24/world/mideast-diplomacy-excerpts-bush-s-address-general-assembly-for-pax-universalis.html>.

3. William J. Clinton, *A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement* (Washington, DC: The White House, February 1996), <https://fas.org/spp/military/docops/national/1996stra.htm>.

4. “Chinese Politics and the WTO: No Change: Hopes of Sparking Political Change Have Come to Nothing So Far,” *Economist*, December 10, 2011, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2011/12/10/no-change>.

But the promise that globalization's rising tide would lift all boats went unfulfilled: some rose to extreme heights, some stagnated, and others simply sank. Liberal convergence was not in fact win-win; there were winners and losers. A populist backlash against this reality caught elites off guard. This reaction intensified as malfeasance on Wall Street and the US Federal Reserve's misguided monetary policies helped bring about the 2008 global financial crisis. The generous bailouts banks and financial firms received in its wake convinced many Americans that corporate and political elites were gaming the system—a theme Donald Trump would seize on in his 2016 presidential campaign.

Primacy Denied

Although liberal internationalism encouraged interdependence and multilateralism, it also rested on a faith in Washington's ability to maintain indefinitely the uncontested military superiority the United States enjoyed after the Cold War. Today, however, US military dominance is challenged in virtually every domain. The United States is no longer able to operate freely in the traditional spheres of land, sea, and air, nor in newer ones such as outer space and cyberspace. The spread of new technologies and weapon systems and the pursuit of asymmetric strategies by adversaries have limited the ability of the US military to find and strike targets, supply and safeguard its forces abroad, freely navigate the seas, control sea lines of communication, and protect the homeland.

In the 1990s, space and cyberspace emerged as new domains for strategic competition, and 30 years later the United States finds itself challenged in both areas. America's dependence on the domain of space for its myriad military and intelligence assets make the United States vulnerable to the potent anti-satellite weapon systems now fielded by China, Russia, and other states. Likewise in cyberspace, hardware and software vulnerabilities have emerged across military supply chains, potentially reducing the effectiveness of important platforms. In 2018, General David Goldfein, the US Air Force's chief of staff, described the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter as "a computer that happens to fly"—and thus, like all computers, it is vulnerable to cyberattacks.⁵

At the same time, bureaucratic requirements have made it harder for the military to innovate. More than 20 years passed from when the Joint Strike Fighter program was envisioned to when the first combat squadron of F-35s was declared operational. The military demands unrealistically high levels of performance, which defense companies, hungry for contracts, promise to deliver. Former US Defense Secretary Robert Gates has bemoaned the armed forces' unwillingness to settle for solutions that could actually be built and fielded in a reasonable time frame.

5. Valeria Insinna, "Inside America's Dysfunctional Trillion-Dollar Fighter-Jet Program," *New York Times Magazine*, August 21, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/21/magazine/f35-joint-strike-fighter-program.html>.

In addition, America's adversaries have developed so-called anti-access/area-denial weapons systems that reduce Washington's ability to project power in key regions. China, for example, has developed and modernized its strategic and tactical nuclear weapons and has invested heavily in technologies to improve its conventional forces. Russia has built an array of exotic "doomsday weapons" and low-yield tactical nuclear weapons, and smaller rivals such as Iran and North Korea continue to develop and refine their nuclear programs. Despite visions of a world in which no one could challenge American force, the era of US military dominance proved to be relatively short.

Orwell's Nightmare

Misplaced faith in the advantages of new technologies was not confined to military affairs. As the digital revolution began, policymakers and business leaders were optimistic these technologies would accelerate the spread of liberal democratic values—so that "the age of information can become the age of liberation," as President George H. W. Bush put it in 1991.⁶ A few years later, Clinton predicted in the twenty-first century "liberty [would] spread by cell phone and cable modem."⁷

Over time, however, it has become clear the same technologies that connect and empower people can also imperil freedom and openness and limit the right to be left alone—all elements of a flourishing democracy. Authoritarian countries have deployed digital technologies to control their citizens. The CCP has developed the most sophisticated surveillance system in the world, using facial and voice recognition technologies and DNA sequencing to create a social credit system that monitors China's 1.4 billion people and rewards or punishes them based on their perceived loyalty to the party-state.

These practices are not limited to authoritarian governments, partially because Huawei, the Chinese telecommunications giant, has exported surveillance tools that use artificial intelligence (AI) to 49 other countries.⁸ But democracies have also adopted these technologies without Chinese assistance; according to the Carnegie Endowment's AI Global Surveillance Index, virtually all the countries in the G-20 have deployed AI-enabled surveillance technology, including facial recognition programs.⁹ Meanwhile, even as the CCP banned Twitter

6. George H. W. Bush, "Address to the United Nations General Assembly by President George H. W. Bush" (address, UN General Assembly, New York City, September 23, 1991), <https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/io/potusunga/207269.htm>.

7. "Clinton's Words on China: Trade Is the Smart Thing," *New York Times*, March 9, 2000, <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/03/09/world/clinton-s-words-on-china-trade-is-the-smart-thing.html>.

8. Ross Anderson, "The Panopticon Is Already Here: Xi Jinping Is Using Artificial Intelligence to Enhance His Government's Totalitarian Control—and He's Exporting This Technology to Regimes around the Globe," *Atlantic*, September 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/09/china-ai-surveillance/614197/>.

9. Steven Feldstein, "The Global Expansion of AI Surveillance," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 17, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/09/17/global-expansion-of-ai-surveillance-pub-79847>.

in its own country, Beijing uses the platform to conduct disinformation campaigns abroad aimed at weakening democracies from within.

Global Governance

A final illusion that absorbed US policymakers was the idea Washington could depend on international organizations to help it confront major challenges and that these institutions, with the aid of American leadership, would provide for the emergence of global governance.

This view presumed since other countries were progressing inexorably toward liberal democracy, they would share many of Washington's goals and would play by Washington's rules. This belief tended to minimize the importance of national sovereignty and the fact countries differ in how they organize their own communities. Even among democracies, there exists a high degree of variation when it comes to cultural, institutional, and political values.

Nevertheless, international institutions grew more expansive and ambitious. In 1992, UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali's *An Agenda for Peace* envisioned a world in which the United Nations would maintain world peace, protect human rights, and promote social progress through expanding peacekeeping missions. Between 1989 and 1994, the organization authorized 20 peacekeeping missions—more than the total number of missions it had carried out during the previous four decades.

Mission creep extended to individual agencies as well. The World Health Organization (WHO)—created in 1948 to prevent the spread of infectious diseases—pioneered great accomplishments such as the eradication of smallpox. But over the years its scope grew dramatically. By 2000 the World Health Organization had begun to issue warnings on everything from food safety to cellular phone usage to air quality. This tendency spread staff and resources too thin, crippling the organization's ability to respond to genuine crises such as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The institution's robust defense of China's response to the pandemic also demonstrated the CCP had used its clout to co-opt the WHO rather than support its missions.

Looking Ahead

Over the past four years these assumptions, long cherished in Washington, have been shown to be faulty. America has left behind the halcyon days of liberal internationalism and the unipolar moment and entered an era of strategic rivalry. As President Biden crafts his policy agenda, it would be a mistake to return to the flawed premises of a bygone era. Great power competition will remain a central feature of the international environment for the foreseeable future, and economic interdependence does not obviate this reality. Whatever the term of art—academics and pundits love to debate terms and definitions—several key features of great power competition will endure. States with sufficient

power and resources will remain at the core of the international system, and states field military forces, provide economic aid, and emit carbon. Great power competition will determine how we live domestically and internationally, because the more powerful states—those that can exert their influence more effectively—are able to set the rules of the road. And we will be directly affected by those who determine those rules.

Today's multidimensional rivalries will not end in conventional victories. More broadly, policymakers and strategists need to move past their emphases on achieving particular end states, since that springs from a mechanistic and ahistorical view of how politics works. In reality as the historian Michael Howard argued, human acts create new sets of circumstances that, in turn, require new judgments and decisions.¹⁰ Competition persists because geopolitics is eternal. A main objective of US strategy, therefore, should be to prevent the accumulation of activities and trends that harm US interests and values rather than to pursue grand projects such as dictating how China or other countries should govern themselves. This strategy requires the United States craft policies that aim to maintain regional balances of power and deter aggression by revisionist powers.

Those who favor restraint or retrenchment will be reluctant to embrace the idea of constant competition because they tend to discount the aspirations of other powers. If the United States is restrained, the argument goes, then others will follow suit. But the patterns of history suggest otherwise. Others will be reluctant to accept the idea of a rolling end state because they remain convinced the arc of history is progressing toward a liberal convergence, and they view the push and pull of a competitive world as overly aggressive and likely to lead to war.

Recognizing the centrality of competition does not mean favoring the militarization of US foreign policy nor does it mean a drive to war. A wider acceptance of the competitive nature of geopolitics requires a foundation of military power, but this acceptance also accentuates the need for diplomatic and economic tools of statecraft. Precisely because so much of today's international competition happens below the threshold of military conflict, civilian agencies need to take the lead in maintaining order and shaping a landscape favorable to US interests and values. But civilian agencies can only adopt this leadership role once the mindset and culture of all US government agencies change to allow for a broader recognition of the competition now underway.

Going forward, US foreign policy success will hinge on a clear-eyed approach to cooperation. Rather than viewing cooperation with other countries as an end in itself, policymakers should recognize it as a means to crafting a stronger competitive strategy. Genuine cooperation requires reciprocity. Reciprocity means urging other powers to take more responsibility for their own security and contribute more to the strength of the US-led order. As a result of the Trump administration's

10. Michael Howard, *The Invention of Peace: Reflections on War and International Order* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000).

pressure on NATO allies, between 2016 and 2018, defense spending by other member states increased by \$43 billion, and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has predicted by 2024 such spending will increase by another \$400 billion.¹¹

In the economic domain reciprocity also means preventing other countries from taking advantage of American goodwill, including the requirement that China and other countries open their markets to US products and services to maintain access to American markets. Reciprocity also entails no longer tolerating Beijing's unfair practices, such as forced technology transfer and intellectual property theft. Experts estimate that since 2013, the United States has suffered over \$1.2 trillion in economic damage as a result of these abuses—the “greatest transfer of wealth in history.”¹² Margrethe Vestager, executive vice president of the European Commission for a Europe Fit for the Digital Age, perhaps put it best when she expressed the essence of reciprocity in 2020: “Where I grew up in the Western part of Denmark, if you invite people over and they don't invite you back, eventually you stop' inviting them.”¹³

In addition Washington needs to accept that global problems are not necessarily best solved by global institutions. This viewpoint will not be popular over the next four years. But as the WHO's failure to combat COVID-19 demonstrates, international organizations are accountable primarily to internal bureaucracies and nation-state clients, rather than to external constituencies. Such institutions can play useful roles as conveners and centers for information sharing, but they lack the operational capacity to act at scale; bureaucratic complexity prevents them from accomplishing broader missions.

Reconsidering global governance does not require rejecting liberal principles or abandoning an order based on them. But because only a handful of countries are committed to those principles, the goal should be to foster what the scholar Paul Miller has described as a “smaller, deeper liberal order” of industrialized democracies that would defend liberal values and serve strategic and economic purposes.¹⁴ The focus might be on creating mission-driven coalitions—as Biden's team has suggested—that could construct redundant supply chains, fund research in emerging technologies, promote fair and reciprocal trade, and cooperate on security issues. Such coalitions would be open to new members provided they shared US interests and values and could bring capabilities to bear on key problems.

11. “NATO Secretary General Announces Increased Defence Spending by Allies,” NATO, November 29, 2019, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_171458.htm.

12. Josh Rogin, “NSA Chief: Cybercrime Constitutes the ‘Greatest Transfer of Wealth in History,’” *The Cable*, *Foreign Policy*, July 9, 2012, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/07/09/nsa-chief-cybercrime-constitutes-the-greatest-transfer-of-wealth-in-history/>.

13. Ryan Heath, “EU Pushing Ahead with Digital Tax Despite U.S. Resistance, Top Official Says,” *POLITICO*, June 23, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/06/23/eu-digital-tax-united-states-336496>.

14. Paul Miller, “Make the Free World Free Again: It's Time for a Smaller, Deeper Liberal Order,” *Dispatch*, June 9, 2020, <https://thedispatch.com/p/make-the-free-world-free-again>.

Washington also needs to refresh its thinking on political economy and improve the capacity of US government agencies to address the interplay of politics and economics. The United States will never be able to integrate its economic policies and political strategies as China does. But Washington should invest more in economic intelligence and make it easier to share such information across departments and agencies by establishing a national center for economic intelligence, perhaps modeled on the National Counterterrorism Center, as the scholar Anthony Vinci has advocated.¹⁵

Moreover, the US government must counter China's massive investments in research and development in emerging technologies. Congress must fund public and private sector research in AI, high-performance computing, synthetic biology, and other strategically important technology sectors. And the State Department should also put economics front and center by giving economic officers more responsibility at embassies and by opening more consulates around the world to improve business and commercial relationships.

The goals of the liberal international order were laudable—and, in many cases, they were achieved against daunting odds. The world is safer, more prosperous, and more just than it once was. But the unexpected consequences of globalization and the unfulfilled promises of global governance cannot be overlooked. Liberal internationalists have a penchant for prioritizing processes, including multilateralism and globalization, over tangible objectives. In order to fulfill President Biden's "build back better" agenda, his administration must resist these temptations. Pursuing the illusions of liberal internationalism at the expense of US interests will hasten, not reverse, American decline. In a world of great power competition, economic inequality, and dazzling technological capabilities, where ideologies as well as pathogens spread with viral ferocity, the stakes are too high and the consequences too dire simply to stick with what worked in the past and hope for the best.

15. Anthony Vinci, "Competitive Climate: America Must Counter China by Investing in Economic Intelligence," *National Interest*, February 4, 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/competitive-climate-america-must-counter-china-investing-economic-intelligence-120356>.