America at a Global Crossroads

by G. John Ikenberry

U.S. President Joe Biden and First Lady Jill Biden welcome President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky to the White House on December 21, 2022. President Zelensky was meeting with President Biden on his first known trip outside of Ukraine following the Russian invasion, and the two leaders discussed continuing military aid. DREW ANGERER/GETTY IMAGES

The U.S., polarized and divided, faces a world overflowing with challenges, dangers, and uncertainties. Conflict and disorder have become defining features of world politics. Wars have erupted in Europe and the Middle East, and tensions are rising in East Asia. China and Russia have stepped forward to challenge American leadership and the Western-oriented international order. The world economy is threatened by rising economic nationalism and protectionism, a retreat from globalization. Growing transnational threats, such as climate change and pandemic disease, call out for new forms of cooperation, but cooperation is halting at best. The liberal internationalist system of rules and institutions, underwritten for decades by the U.S. and the other major democracies, seemingly triumphant at the end of the Cold War, has weakened and fragmented. Today's world order is at a crossroads. It is a moment of great uncertainty in which it is possible to imagine many different global futures.

These upheavals in international relations are happening precisely at a moment when the U.S. is itself in political turmoil. Not since the 1930s have the two political parties been so deeply split on the most basic questions of American identity, principles, and policies. The Republican Party,

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On November 14, 2020, thousands gathered in Washington, DC, in a MAGA rally to support President Trump and cast doubt on the 2020 election results. TOBIAS EVERKE/AGENTUR FOCUS/REDUX

dominated by Donald Trump and the Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement, offers an agenda that contests core elements of postwar American liberalism. In foreign policy, the postwar consensus on America's role in the world, long embraced by both political parties, has been shattered by Trump's American First agenda. On issues ranging from trade, alliances, immigration, climate change, multilateralism, and solidarity among liberal democracies, Trump and the current America First movement seek a sharp break with the American tradition of liberal internationalism. To be sure, contentious debates have always marked American foreign policy over the decades, but these debates remained "centrist" in the sense that the importance of America's linchpin role in a Western-centered international order was essentially not questioned by the international community. Leaders in both parties shared the conviction that the nation's interests were best advanced through American leadership of an expansive coalition of liberal democracies within an open and loosely rules-based international order. Today, this core conviction is no longer shared by the Republican Party and newly reelected President Donald Trump.

These international and domestic developments combine to make the debate on America's foreign policy particularly fraught. The most basic questions about the character and direction of world politics are open for debate. What are the sources of a stable and cooperative global order? Can the liberal democracies make a comeback? Can China and the U.S. find a way to avoid war and coexist? Can new forms of multilateral cooperation be generated to address the threats and opportunities posed by ongoing technological revolutions in areas such as artificial intelligence and bioengineering?

As debates on these questions unfold, the U.S. is also forced to debate basic questions about its place and role in world politics. Should—and, if so, can—the U.S. defend and rebuild the liberal-oriented international order it has presided over for the past 80 years, or is this American era of leadership over? Should the U.S. continue to be the dominant security provider for allies in Europe, Asia, and other parts of the world? Should the U.S. continue to lead and uphold the postwar system of open multilateral trade? Should the U.S. continue to defend and advance liberal democracy in far-flung parts of the world, including in Ukraine and Taiwan? Or, should the U.S. begin to trim its sails and pull back from these longstanding economic, security, and political roles and commitments? Should the U.S. begin to work with non-Western and illiberal states, starting with China and Russia, to build a post-liberal international order, organized around multipolarity, sovereign equality, and great power spheres of influence? Should the U.S. end its long embrace of foreign policy internationalism and "deep engagement" in favor of a narrower—more nationalist and populist—conception of the national interest?

In this essay, I provide a portrait of the great challenges and transformations that are confronting the U.S., followed by a survey of America's grand strategic choices. I begin by looking at three types of global crises that are shaking the foundations of the American-led international order. These are what I call the crises of geopolitics, the crises of modernity, and the crises of liberal democracy. What makes the current moment so fraught and dangerous is that these crises tend to interact and negatively reinforce each other. Together, these crises both call out for more international cooperation and make that cooperation more difficult. The "demand" for global governance has grown, but the "supply" has declined. What is most striking about these crises of the global order is that they reveal a world that has lost its optimistic belief that states around the world can work together to find common solutions for common problems.

I next look at the growing fragmentation of world politics, which has been both illuminated and deepened by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In the wake of this war, the world has increasingly found itself divided into "three worlds." There is the Global West, led by the U.S. and Europe, the Global East, led by China and Russia, and the Global South, led by India, Brazil, and other developing countries. In this fractured global system, the ability of the U.S. to achieve its foreign policy goals will increasingly depend on its ability to compete with the Global East and build alignments and coalitions with

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the Global South. These geopolitical divisions present the U.S. with both constraints and opportunities. It is a world in which the U.S. is not able to act, as it often did in the past, as a global hegemon that imposes its ideas and organizational designs on the international system. But the U.S. remains uniquely constituted to play an outsized global role as a coalitional leader.

Finally, I identify three visions—or grand strategies—that currently compete to guide American foreign policy. One is the longstanding tradition of American hegemonic leadership and liberal internationalism that has informed U.S. presidents since the 1940s. The U.S. pursues its interests through the building and leadership of an open and multilateral system of rules and institutions, anchored by a coalition of leading liberal democracies. It is an internationalist vision of American foreign policy, organized around U.S.-led security cooperation, extended deterrence, and deep engagement with allies in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. At the other extreme is the grand strategy of America First, advanced by Donald Trump and the MAGA movement. Informed by populist and nationalist impulses, this is a foreign policy in which the U.S. pulls back from its leadership of a system of security cooperation, open trade, multilateral cooperation, and solidarity with the community of liberal democracies. These two grand strategies are more or less embraced, respectively, by the Democratic and Republican political parties. A third vision, which combines elements of both these traditions, might be called a grand strategy of Westphalian internationalism or progressive realism. Here the U.S. works with other states across ideological and geopolitical divides, including China and Russia, to promote peace and stability through compromise and restraint. It is a foreign policy not built on American hegemony, alliance leadership, or liberal democratic solidarity, but on great power cooperation within a multipolar world in which the U.S. operates as a more modest and restrained state.

The November election has elected Donald Trump as the next president, and this will tip foreign policy in the direction of America First populism, nationalism, and unilateralism. But the election and choice of a president does not eliminate the debate over the direction of foreign policy. The crises are too severe and the U.S. is too divided to orient itself around a single coherent grand strategy. I will end this essay with reflections on how the debate on American foreign policy might evolve in the years ahead. Importantly, the U.S. may remain divided and tempted to turn inward, but the world's threats and crises will not go away. If America First ultimately turns into America Alone, the U.S. will find itself in a self-inflicted position of weakness to defend its interests. The challenge for American foreign policy will be to find a type of internationalism and global engagement that is sustainable at home and fosters coalitions of like-minded states of sufficient size and weight to solve global problems.

Three global crises

The world is facing a series of escalating and deeply destabilizing global crises. Three are most profound and global in scope, and together they pose challenges to liberal democracy and liberal internationalism.

First is what might be called the crises of geopolitics. This is what some commentators call the "return of great power politics." This is the global-scale crisis that is triggered as the major states rise and fall and contest hegemony within and across the regions of the world. The crisis of geopolitics is not new; it is as old as international relations has existed. In each historical era, the distribution of power has constantly shifted and diffused. Great powers have risen up to contest the old order, and older great powers have lost their dominance and struggled to hold on to their power and influence. Today, this global power transition is playing out with the rise of China and other non-Western developing states. The U.S. and its allies are seeking to protect the international order they have built and led for 80 years, while China and the emerging Global South are seeking to gain positions of authority within this shifting order. China may or may not seek to overturn the existing global system of rules and institutions. More likely, it is picking and choosing its targets for revisionist order building. But the overall result of power shifts and rising non-Western challengers is to open up the foundational norms and arrangements of global order to a great power struggle.

In historical perspective, China is both more and less of a great power challenger than those in past eras. On the one hand, it is more. Since the Industrial Revolution, the power transitions that have rocked the global system

U.S. President Joe Biden greets Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador at the White House in 2021. WORLD POLITICS ARCHIVE (WPA)/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

have been largely Western, and primarily European. France, Great Britain, Germany, Russia, and the U.S. have been the dominant contestants. With China, however, the rising power is now emerging from outside this Western great power system. It is the first Asian power to find itself in a position to contest the global power structure, apart from Japan's mid-20th century regional imperial aggrandizement. It is also a rising power bringing state socialist and anti-liberal regime principles to the global contestation over rules and institutions. On the other hand, China is deeply embedded in the world economy, and, ironically, its rising wealth and power are intimately tied to trade and investment within the Western-centered capitalist system. The result might not best be seen as a new cold war, but it does appear to be increasingly a competitive great power system where the basic direction of modernity is up for grabs.

The second global crisis is what might be called the crisis of modernity. This involves the intensification of economic, security, and environmental interdependence. Technological revolutions, industrial modernity, and planetary environmental changes are altering the ways societies operate in new and unprecedented ways. The most dramatic and potentially far-reaching is climate change, which is unleashing irreversible changes in the biosphere in which human life exists. These environmental changes are highly interactive with political and social systems within and between countries. Agriculture, migration, economic development, civic order, and state capacity are all increasingly challenged by climate change. Technological revolutions are also altering the basic parameters of modern society. Artificial intelligence, bioengineering, weapons of mass destruction—the technologies of advancement and destruction are raising the stakes in world politics, forcing states to invent new forms of scientific and political cooperation, even while these states increasingly compete within the old great power world.

Finally, there is the crisis of liberal democracy. The liberal international order has been built, rebuilt, and expanded over the last two centuries on a foundation of liberal democracy. The western liberal states have been the durable core of this order. But today, liberal democracy, both within and outside the West, is facing new and dangerous challenges. Within the U.S. and other democracies, the old postwar framework of liberal capitalism has broken down. The growth coalitions of capital and labor have unraveled, and the decisions of elites have been undermined by rising economic inequality, globalization, and technological change. Along the way, the old centrist political order—of center-right and center-left—has eroded. In the U.S., the result has been intensified polarization of the two political parties, and the rise of extremist politics on the right. Governance itself has been called into question.

There are even deeper sources of worry about the future of liberal democracy. The Enlightenment values that form the foundation of the liberal ascendancy have weakened in an age of social media and fake news. The basic features of modern liberalism—openness, rule of law, freedom of speech, rationality and science, civil society—are not as firmly fixed in place as in earlier periods. The rise of AI and machine learning raise deep questions about human intelligence and the humanistic imagination. As these foundational values and assumptions weaken, the opportunities for authoritarianism and anti-liberalism grow stronger.

Family members of Ukrainian serviceman Anton Savytskyi mourn over his coffin during a funeral ceremony near Kyiv on August 13, 2022. DIMITAR DILKOFF/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Three worlds

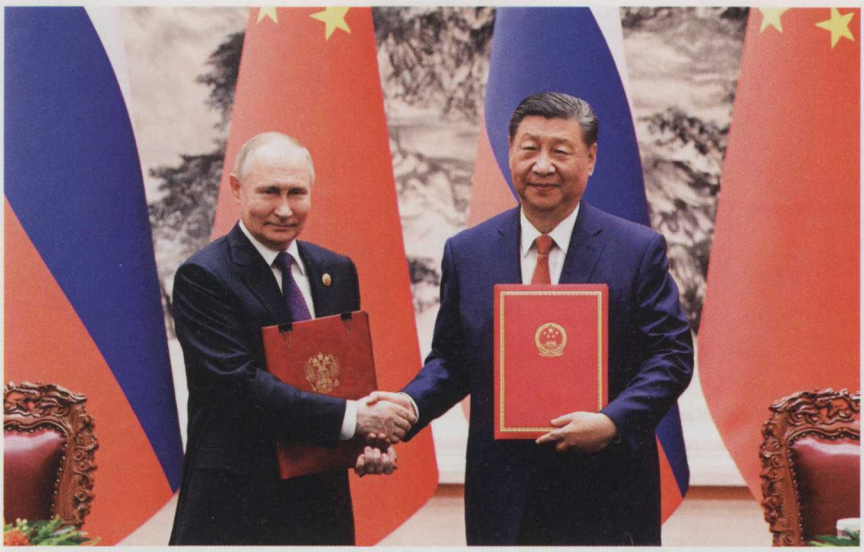
These global crises are unfolding in a world that is increasingly divided, as groupings of states across the world compete to shape global rules and institutions. In the aftermath of the Cold War, there was a moment when the world looked to be united around liberal democracy, market capitalism, and a "one-world" system of multilateral cooperation. The Soviet Union had collapsed, China was yet to begin its decades of double-digit growth, and liberalism and democracy were seen as the most successful models of government. The U.S. emerged as a "unipolar" power in a world without geopolitical or ideological rivals. But two decades later, this global consensus disappeared. The Iraq War (2003–2011), the 2008 financial crisis, and China's growing embrace of authoritarianism and rejection of Western liberalism have all contributed to this breakdown. But it was perhaps the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 that has most clearly

illuminated—and partly triggered—the fracturing of world politics.

One might have thought that the Russia invasion of a sovereign country would actually unite the world. It was a United Nations (UN) Charter moment in which the most basic global norm—the prohibition of the use of armed force to redraw internationally recognized borders—was at stake. But instead, the world retreated to their geopolitical and ideological corners. Specifically, the world seems increasingly divided into three groups—or what might be called "three worlds." We might call these three groupings the Global West, the Global East, and the Global South. One is led by the U.S. and Europe, the second by China and Russia, and the third by an amorphous grouping of non-Western developing nations, led by India, Brazil, and others. Each "world" offers grand narratives of what is at stake in the war in Ukraine and how it fits into the larger problems and prospects for 21st century world order. Each offers ideas and programs for the reorganization and reform of global rules and institutions. Each has its own constructed history, its own list of grievances and accomplishments. Each has its leaders, projects, and ideological visions.

These three worlds are not blocs or even coherent negotiating groups. They might best be seen as loose, constructed, and evolving global factions, and not as fixed or formal political entities. These groupings are rooted and animated by their divergent locations within the prevailing structure of power. When and how states within these three worlds actually see themselves as part of the West, East, or South—and act accordingly—is contingent on a myriad of shifting circumstances. The Global West is the oldest and most coherent of these political groupings, and the American-led alliance system is its most formal and durable manifestation. But for the most part, the markers of these three coalitions are more situation-specific, activated by the conflicts and controversies of the moment.

The main line of conflict is between the Global West, led by the U.S. and its democratic allies, and the Global East, led by China and Russia. At its core, this is a struggle between alternative logics of world order. The U.S. and China each seek to promote and defend a distinctive type of international order. Each brings with it allies and partners, assembling the groupings that comprise the Global West and Global East. The U.S. defends an international order it has led for three-quarters of a century—open, multilateral, and anchored in security pacts and partners with other liberal democracies. China and Russia seek an international order that dethrones Western liberal values—one that is more hospitable to regional blocs, spheres of influence, and autocracy. The U.S. seeks an international order that protects and advances the interests of liberal democracy. China and Russia, each in its own way, seek an international order that protects authoritarian rule from the threatening forces of liberal modernity. The U.S. sees itself offering the world a vision of a post imperial global system. The current leaders of China and Russia increasingly offer foreign policies rooted in visions of an older geopolitical and imperial past. The Global West seeks to make the world safe for democracy, and the Global East seeks to make the world safe for illiberalism and autocracy.



Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping sign and issue a joint statement on deepening their countries' comprehensive strategic partnership on the 75th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties between the two countries after talks in Beijing on May 16, 2024. RAO AIMIN/XINHUA VIA GETTY IMAGES

The Global West has a long tradition of liberal order building. This liberal internationalist tradition of world politics is inextricably tied to the rise and spread of liberal democracy, and across two centuries it has established a long and grand lineage of ideas and projects. After World War II and again after the end of the Cold War, liberal order building—in the hands of the U.S.—came to define the Western logic of international relations. The essential goals of liberal order building have not changed: creating an environment—a sort of cooperative ecosystem—in which states, starting with liberal democracies, can operate by providing tools and capacities for their governments to manage their mutual economic and security relations, balance their often-conflicting values, and secure rights and protections for their citizens.

In the years after World War II, in the shadow of the Cold War, the U.S. and its allies built a new type of international order. It was a far-flung and complex system of intergovernmental relations and institutions—global, regional, economic, political, security. The order was built around institutions, alliances, bargains, partnerships, and shared values and interests. Liberal order building sought to chart a "third way" between two extremes—order defined by anarchy and the balance of power, and order defined by empire and domination.

Russian President Vladimir Putin meets with President Filipe Jacinto Nyusi of Mozambique during the second Russia-Africa summit in Saint Petersburg on July 27, 2023. ALEXEY DANICHEV/POOL/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

The result was a sort of "world system" that provided layers of institutions—functional and political—that provided platforms for states to come together and seek mutual gains and protections. After the Cold War, the Global West became the dominate political formation in world politics, built around a critical mass of liberal democracies. The Global West can be seen as an expansive membership association. It is multilateral and decentralized, and because of this it tends to be open to new members. To be in the liberal order is to gain access to "club goods"—security protection, economic assistance, and other resources and tools to navigate the global system. Importantly, this American-led liberal system is not a geographically defined order. It is not a territorial region. Instead, it is an order defined by its political principles and rules of admission. Nor is it simply a grouping composed of the world's liberal democracies. Various non-liberal states have been part of this order over the decades, playing roles as clients, strategic partners, and balancing allies.

China's vision of international order is not as long-standing or perhaps as coherent. But as it grows stronger in wealth and military power, China has increasingly defined itself as a global leader that offers an alternative to the Global West. Deep forces are at work that have turned China into a systemic rival of the U.S. We might think of these forces as a "triple power transition." It is a power transition in the traditional sense in that the rise of China is creating a powerful rival that might soon become a peer competitor of the U.S. But, in addition, the rise of China is also a power transition in the sense that it is the first non-Western great power to emerge as a truly global superpower. It is a power transition from West to East. Finally, the rise of China is a power transition in the sense that it is a transition from a liberal hegemonic leader to an illiberal hegemonic leader. These triple dynamics reinforce the profundity of the rivalry between the two global powers.

The main axis of the struggle over world order runs between the Global West and the Global East. These two groupings each have a superpower in addition to a coalition of great powers to drive their agendas. The Global South is weaker. It is not led by an established great power. No state in the Global South has a permanent seat or veto in the UN Security Council. It is an amorphous and diverse coalition of states with a wide range of ideologies and agendas. Its members exist on the world's periphery, outside the inner circle of leading great powers. The Global South is also defined by its collective aspirations for development, voice, and status. The Global South operates from a position of weakness, looking for opportunities to join coalitions and movements aimed at the reform of international order.

Nonetheless, the Global South is not without its capacities. After all, it is where most of humanity resides. Specifically, as a global grouping of states, the Global South has at least two types of capacities to assert itself in world order struggles. One is simply its ability—in various regional and global configurations—to join larger coalitions linked to the Global West or Global East. It is a sort of "swing group," available to join other states in ways that tilt world politics in one direction or the other. Both China and the Global South and the U.S. and the Global West acknowledge and act upon this situation. The U.S. and Europe are actively trying to cultivate support from the Global South for the defense of Ukraine, as is Ukraine itself. This support may come in the form of direct military assistance or participation in the sanctions program. Or, more likely, it may come in symbolic ways, such as in votes on resolutions in the UN General Assembly that condemn Russia's actions in Ukraine. Russia is also courting Global South support, sending its diplomats to countries in Africa, Latin America, and Asia in search of trade, investment, and favorable public relations. In turn, Brazil and other leaders of the Global South are seeking to use their political clout as independent swing states to promote diplomatic solutions to the war. This sort of Global South coalitional politics can also play out in regional settings. For example, the influence of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the most enduring regional organization in the Global South, has long been seen to be tied to its ability to play off and maneuver between the powerful states in the region. China and the U.S. have both stepped up efforts to cultivate ties

with ASEAN countries in recent years, attempting to tilt public opinion across the region in their direction.

Second, and relatedly, states from the Global South can also confer "legitimacy" on moves by one or the other superpower bloc. This is not to say that the countries from the Global South necessarily hold more "enlightened" views about the proper organization of world order. As one scholar has put it, "for both analytical and political purposes, it is important not to simplify or romanticize the idea of the Global South." But the Global South can act as a sort of third party—a global audience—that can weigh in to help shape global narratives about what passes for proper and acceptable behavior in world politics. As global powers, the U.S. and China both have an incentive to shape global public opinion. The Chinese have called this "narrative power," a strategy to increase their standing on the world stage by promoting pro-Chinese narratives and critical opinion about their rivals.

This type of coalitional politics is increasingly front and center in the competition between the U.S. and China. Both superpowers seek to establish the centrality of their grouping in the evolving global order. Neither superpower can do it alone. They need allies and partners. This is true in security relations, but also in areas across economic, technological, and environmental spheres. China leads the Global East, but this grouping is mostly just China and Russia, and Putin's Russia is a shrinking geopolitical presence with little global appeal. China needs support from large swatches of the Global South. Likewise, the U.S. and its Global North partners are less of a dominant global presence than in earlier decades. The G7 coalition of rich capitalist democracies is a smaller fraction of world gross national product (GNP) than even a decade ago. The U.S. is still considered the largest military power in the world, and its security ties to countries in all regions put it in a league of its own. But Chinese power is growing, and economic and technological competition with Beijing is intensifying. In these competitive circumstances, larger coalitions are better than smaller coalitions, and the Global South is where these potential partners exist.

A Thai space rocket sits in the Startup Launchpad booth at the Fair Sci-Power For Future Thailand in Bangkok on July 23, 2024. The fair showcases innovative solutions developed by Thai government agencies and higher education institutions to enhance national economic and social development. NATHALIE JAMOIS/SOPA IMAGES/LIGHTROCKET VIA GETTY IMAGES

In cultivating ties with the Global South, both China and the East and the U.S. and the West have something to offer. China offers various attractions. First, partnership with China, together with Russia, can create groupings of states that serve to tilt the world away from American hegemony. These might be balancing coalitions that play out at the UN, or they might be more ambitious projects, such as the Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) Bank, to create alternatives to Western trade and finance. Countries in the Global South have not shown great interest in switching security ties with the U.S. to China, but they have been eager to strengthen economic and financial ties. Moreover, China is only a decade or two away from its earlier position—proclaimed by Mao—as a leader of the Global South, and indeed Chinese diplomats still talk in these terms. As such, it is a natural partner in efforts to counterbalance American and Western dominance. Beyond this, China is a growing source of trade and investment for the developing world. Almost all leading countries in the Global South trade more with China than with the U.S. Quite apart from any ideological affinities they might have with China, these countries have pragmatic incentives to strengthen ties with Beijing.

The U.S. and Global West also offer various attractions. They remain the richest and most powerful countries in the world, and they are the core sponsors of the postwar liberal international order. At the very least, for these reasons, it is impossible to simply "work around" the West. On the contrary, countries need to engage the West and seek the best deals possible with them. But more than this, the Global West is the repository of global rules and principles that are attractive to developing countries. After all, it is the U.S. and its Western partners that put open and multilateral rules and institutions at the center of the modern world system. The U.S. championed the founding of the UN, which has long been the most important international platform for elevating the voice and authority of the Global South. Not all countries in the Global South are drawn to China's brand of authoritarian rule. There are large factions and constituencies across the Global South that seek to strengthen the rule of law, build democratic institu-

tions, and attack autocratic corruption. To the extent they are looking for international allies in this cause, they may find it in the Global West and not in the Global East.

Three grand strategies

In this shifting, fragmented, and uncertain international system, the U.S. has various grand strategic choices. Three strategic visions for American foreign policy are most prominent.

One is the grand strategy of liberal international leadership, dating back to the World War II and pursued in one way or another by American presidencies until the 2016 election of Donald Trump. Under this strategy, the U.S. champions and seeks to uphold the postwar system of alliances, multilateral institutions, and strategic partnerships, anchored in a grand coalition among liberal democracies. The Biden administration has embraced this strategic tradition, adapting it to today's evolving geopolitical and economic circumstances. This grand strategy can be seen most clearly in the American response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. As noted above, the Biden administration responded to Putin's aggression by rallying Western and international support for Ukraine, framing the conflict as the leading edge of a global struggle between liberal democracy and autocracy. At stake in the conflict were UN Charter principles and the integrity of the postwar rules-based international order. The American role in the world is today what it has been since the 1940s, operating as the leading state in a coalition of allies and partners that work together to uphold global rules and institutions that support liberal democracy, economic openness, and multilateral cooperation.

There are six core assumptions that form the intellectual underpinnings of this American postwar grand strategy. One is that the U.S. should, and successfully has, advanced its interests—economic, political, and security—by building and leading an open and liberal-oriented international order. Second, this international order is unique in world history, offering a sort of middle way between older forms of order based on either empire or the balance of power. Third, it is an international order organized around support for the rule of law, open and reciprocal trade, and a commitment to democratic government and human rights. Fourth, the U.S. has unique responsibilities for leading and upholding this order, which include generating public goods, providing security, operating markets, and fostering political transition in the direction of liberal democracy. Fifth, alliances, partnerships, and institutional commitments do not hinder American power. Quite the contrary, properly pursued, these commitments make American power more effective, legitimate, and durable. Finally, deep engagement in all regions of the world—through forward defense, trade, and diplomacy—are necessary to sustain this order and protect American interests.

In the hands of the Biden administration, this liberal internationalist strategy evolved. The U.S. is not as overtly economically and militarily powerful as it was in earlier decades, and so American leadership has increasingly needed to be tied to the building of coalitions of like-minded states. It is not an accident that the words "allies and partners" heavily lace almost all Biden administration foreign policy speeches. The Biden administration has backed off from America's long-standing liberal commitment to free and open trade. Where earlier administrations tied American leadership to the project of trade liberalization and economic openness, the Biden administration, with an eye on economic and technological competition with China, has pivoted to an approach that mixes in trade restrictions and industrial policy.

A second grand strategy is the America First agenda of President Trump, which seeks to make a sharp break with this long-standing tradition of American liberal internationalism. The America First strategy, rooted in populist and nationalist politics, offers an agenda that reduces U.S. security commitments to Europe and East Asia and pulls back from maintaining leadership of multilateral economic, environmental, public health, and human rights regimes. An America First foreign policy would end, or at least sharply reduce, the longstanding U.S. tradition of strategic solidarity with democratic countries abroad. The strategy is not isolationist as such. For example, Trump and other America First enthusiasts have advocated the unilat-

U.S. President Joe Biden, Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky and other heads of state pose for a photo at the Ukraine Compact meeting during the 75th NATO Summit in Washington, DC, on July 11, 2024. BEATA ZAWRZEL/NURPHOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES

eral use of force in various instances, such as targeting foreign terrorists and deploying military forces against Mexican drug lords. Many foreign policy figures in the Trump orbit are also vocal China hawks, which presumably would require an activist foreign policy in at least the Asia-Pacific area. But the overall strategy entails shrinking America's global military footprint and disengaging the country from key global institutions and regimes.

A third grand strategy offers a vision of the U.S. operating as one of a larger grouping of great powers in a multipolar world organized on Westphalian principles. As such, this strategy seeks to navigate a middle path between America First and America as a liberal hegemonic leader. It is a strategy where the U.S. would help lead the world in a historic transition from a Western-dominated system that champions liberal internationalist principles to a multipolar system where a concert of major powers—liberal and illiberal—work together to uphold peace and security. The U.S. would no longer be the indispensable power, using its power and position to provide global public goods and "make the world safe for democracy." Instead, the U.S. would begin to cede authority and influence to a wider grouping of Western and non-Western states, organizing global order around new bargains, institutions, and shared responsibilities. A global-scale version of the 1815 Congress of Vienna model of international order is one model, in which the great powers meet as a sort of "club of major states" to jointly preside over global rules and geopolitical controversies. Another model might be an updated version of the UN, with a reformed Security Council composed of leading states from all regions. In the long run, this grand strategy would envision a world in which the American-led system of alliances would give way to a more multipolar system of regional-based security. America would pull back and retrench, forging new shared understandings with China, Russia, India, Brazil, and the European powers on rules and institutions of shared governance.

U.S. President Joe Biden talks with Mauritanian President Mohamed Ould Ghazouani at the 50th G7 summit on June 14, 2024, in Fasano, Italy. Discussion topics included Africa, climate change, development, the Middle East, Ukraine, migration, Indo-Pacific economic security, and artificial intelligence. ALESSANDRA BENEDETTI /CORBIS VIA GETTY IMAGES

This Westphalian internationalist strategy is premised on the assumption that the successful tackling of global problems, such as climate change and pandemic disease, requires new and intensive forms of cooperation between states currently divided along ideological and geopolitical lines. The expectation is that the Global West, Global East, and Global South would work together on existential global challenges.

America's choices

These rival grand strategies evaluate the costs and benefits of American foreign policy leadership and commitments differently, and they make different bets about the future. Advocates of U.S.-led liberal internationalism argue that the U.S. is a vital—indeed, indispensable—linchpin for the survival and functioning of an open and cooperative international order. American deep engagement in the other regions of the world is essential for the maintenance of a global balance of power that favors liberal democracy. These advocates for liberal internationalism make a bet that the U.S. still has the power and capacity to lead a coalition of like-minded states to drive the global reform agenda and serve as an anchor for a wider and more inclusive global system.

America First strategists and Westphalian internationalists both see more costs than benefits of a U.S.-led liberal international order, and argue, regardless of the costs and benefits, that the shifting distribution of power makes it necessary for the U.S. to reduce its global military footprint and extended foreign commitments. America Firsters argue that decades of internationalist-oriented foreign policy and open trade have made the U.S. weaker and poorer. The U.S. has been left paying the bills for other countries' security and prosperity. A foreign policy built around leading a coalition of allies and partners has made the U.S. less focused on what ultimately matters: securing the country's borders and protecting its jobs. In contrast, Westphalian internationalists do think the U.S. should engage in wide-ranging cooperation with other countries, but they also argue that a grand strategy of American hegemonic leadership that privileges cooperation with other liberal democracies is an obstacle to building a global system of cooperation, which must include China and other non-Western and illiberal states.

The election of Donald Trump opens the way for a new leadership team and the return to an America First foreign policy, but the deep debate on America's capacities, interests, and role in the world will continue.

Discussion questions

1. What set of global problems do you think should be prioritized in the next administration's foreign policy?

2. The Western states and the Global South, broadly speaking, have different views of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the global principles that are at stake in the conflict. What explains these differences?

3. Does the U.S. still have the power and interests to play a linchpin role in the global system, or should it begin to yield to leadership by other states?

4. Is the U.S. completely responsible for all that it takes on within the realm of foreign policy? If not, who is responsible?

5. What are some possible outcomes that could arise if either of the world's superpowers were to lose its power?

6. What are some of the individual, national, and international dangers that could come from the America First perspective?

Suggested readings

Richard N. Haass and Charles A. Kupchan, "A New Concert of Powers: How to Prevent Catastrophe and Promote Stability in a Multipolar World," *Foreign Affairs* (March 23, 2021). https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2021-03-23/new-concert-powers

G. John Ikenberry, *A World Safe for Democracy: Liberal Internationalism and the Crises of Global Order* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020).

Robert O'Brien, "The Return of Peace Through Strength: Making the Case for Trump's Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs* (July/August 2024).

Stewart Patrick, "Rules of Order: Assessing the State of Global Governance," Working Paper (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 2023). https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/09/rules-of-order-assessing-the-state-of-global-governance?lang=en

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