

American Grand Strategy for an Emerging World Order

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Abstract

Since the end of the Second World War, the United States has secured its core national interests primarily through the creation and maintenance of the liberal international order. Today, this order is being challenged in ways that will define the twenty-first century context. America's most pressing foreign policy challenge is finding strategies to counter a potentially illiberal global order. Neo-authoritarian states are seeking to establish spheres of influence by violating territorial norms, undermining the liberal order via coercive economic measures, and weakening democratic regimes through unconventional political warfare. The current liberal order is ill-equipped to face these challenges because of two global trends: the erosion of its legitimacy and the shifting global balance of power. In a changing environment such as this, where the ends of American grand strategy remain fixed while its relative means are eroding, the US must revise the ways in which it seeks to achieve its strategic objectives. The shifts in geopolitics today necessitate a revitalization of American grand strategy and the establishment of a new security order—namely, a Concert of Democracies—to secure American interests, reestablish liberal legitimacy, and shape the emerging international order toward a stable future.

The liberal international order that emerged triumphant over fascism and communism during the twentieth century is a testament to the institutions, alliances, and norms US statesmen established to avoid the revival of great power conflict. Though these structures have granted the United States and its allies several decades of unparalleled security and prosperity, it is unclear as to what is invoked by the term *liberal international order*. The modern world is characterized by what is referred to as the *international system* or the global assemblage of sovereign nation-states that is the primary structuring mechanism for interstate relations. *Order*, however, requires that this international system operates within two basic conditions: “a set of commonly accepted rules that define

the limits of permissible action and a balance of power that enforces restraint where rules break down.”¹ Rather than being a monolithic structure with which the United States has promoted stability, economic opportunity, and freedom around the world, the liberal order exists as a collection of many *suborders* depending on the type of interactions taking place. The liberal order includes three suborders—the *security order*, the *economic order*, and the *political order*—that have come to define the nature of international relations. Yet today, each of these areas is being challenged in ways that will define the emerging context, and countering strategies to subvert the liberal order is our most pressing foreign policy dilemma.

The liberal security order implies that the international system is inherently rules based and not simply determined by power relations. Rather, international laws and norms restrain the action of states to bring an end to global disorder that has too often been “organized into rival blocs or exclusive regional spheres.”² The economic order builds upon this notion of rules-based interaction and embraces international markets defined by openness, manifesting “when states trade and exchange on the basis of mutual gain.”³ Moreover, the economic order is increasingly becoming difficult to distinguish from globalization or the “breaking down of artificial barriers to the flow of goods, services, capital, knowledge, and people across borders.”⁴ Lastly, the political order is “a kind of fusion of two distinct order-building projects.”⁵ The first dates back to the creation of the modern state system. Encapsulated within the treaties known as the Peace of Westphalia were the concepts of state sovereignty, the inviolability of national borders, and noninterference in another state’s domestic affairs. The second element is built upon the ascension of liberal values, such as political, civil, and universal human rights as a collective standard, characterized by the rise of liberal democracies across the world.⁶ Thus, the liberal order we conceive of today was defined by the formation of the Westphalian system, “on top of which various forms of order have developed that have become gradually more liberal over time.”⁷

Challenges to the Evolving Liberal Order

After the Cold War, many American strategists envisioned a world in which former communist states, devoid of their ideological foundation, would converge with the West, facilitating the “end of history” and the emergence of a “new world order.”⁸ In such a world, geopolitical rivalries would dissolve as states would converge around universal values and a united conceptualization of global order. Though much of the world continues to benefit from the liberal order the United States champions, the

global order is evolving and not necessarily in the predicted or desired direction. Countries espousing neo-authoritarianism, the belief that societies are best served by stability rather than political and economic liberalization, are actively subverting the current liberal order. According to Will Marshall, president of the Progressive Policy Institute, “for much of the 20th century, the main threat to liberal and democratic societies came from militant and totalizing ideologies: fascism and communism, or revolutionary socialism.”⁹ However, the current context is characterized by the active targeting of liberal societies “to undermine [them] from within and overwhelm [them] from without,” thereby stripping “liberal democracy of its moral allure” and elevating authoritarianism as “a plausible, alternative path to national development and prosperity.”¹⁰ While authoritarianism is nothing new, the objective and tactics wielded by neo-authoritarian regimes today define the twenty-first century context and pose new strategic quandaries. Altogether, what authoritarians seek is the creation of an illiberal and multipolar global order—thereby making the world safe for neo-authoritarian regimes—by establishing spheres of influence, undermining the liberal order, and weakening democratic regimes. It is essential, then, to identify the specific ways in which the liberal order is being challenged to devise a sound counterstrategy.

Security Challenges

The liberal order faces a number of security challenges from both revisionist and revanchist neo-authoritarian states. Most notably, the current context is “characterized by [a] decline in the long-standing rules-based international order—creating a security environment more complex and volatile than any we have experienced in recent memory.”¹¹ Russia has violated the sovereignty of Georgia and annexed Crimea, all the while breaching arms control treaties and modernizing its nuclear arsenal. Putin has thrust himself into conflicts in the Middle East and South America to support dictators and to revive Russia’s standing on the international stage. Meanwhile, China continues to militarize the South China Sea so as to facilitate implementing an antiaccess/area denial (A2/AD) strategy. Both Russia and China are attempting to carve out spheres of influence through the “acquisition and consolidation of territory using force and in violation of international law.”¹² Iran and Saudi Arabia continue to support proxy wars in the Middle East in their bout for regional hegemony while North Korea has developed nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities able to threaten two of America’s strongest allies. Each of these states is undermining and seeking to alter the security order to “shape a world consistent

with its authoritarian model—gaining veto authority over other nations’ economic, diplomatic, and security decisions.”¹³

Economic Challenges

Economic statecraft has always been a tool to influence foreign policy; however, the methods being used today undermine the economic order by overtly coercive measures. Countries like China have experienced successes in this regard due to the relative size and importance of the Chinese market, and “it does so to bolster its territorial claims and national sovereignty or to advance other core interests.”¹⁴ States are employing “hybrid economic measures” including “politically conditioned loans and business deals” and coercive business, trade, and investment restrictions to target those competitors espousing critical political perspectives. China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is using conditional loans, deals in the form of development projects, and other economic measures as its principal foreign policy tool in Eurasia. Moreover, China often utilizes predatory trading practices such as import and export restrictions, popular boycotts, and tariff and nontariff trade barriers directed toward democratic states to “target politically influential constituencies.”¹⁵ The effectiveness and scale of these tools make it likely that neo-authoritarian states will continue to supplement their security strategies with coercive economic measures to undermine the liberal order.

Political Challenges

The liberal order faces political challenges that involve unconventional political warfare to weaken democratic regimes as well as a “clash of social models” between liberal and neo-authoritarian states.¹⁶ Political warfare “refers to the employment of military, intelligence, diplomatic, financial, and other means short of conventional war to achieve national objectives.”¹⁷ Its current “hybrid” adaptation is unconventional in that it involves tactics such as the weaponization of traditional and social media, sophisticated propaganda, and the widespread use of disinformation campaigns to sway public opinion, discredit liberal politicians, and sow distrust for democratic institutions. Russia, for instance, is actively “exploit[ing] European and transatlantic fissures and support[ing] populist movements to undermine European Union and NATO cohesion.”¹⁸ Meanwhile, China is targeting the United States’ companies, government, and allies as part of its ongoing cyber-espionage campaign to steal trade secrets, intellectual property, and advanced technology. What’s more,

the political order is experiencing a clash of social models in which states such as Russia and China “believe in the virtues of a strong central government and disdain the weaknesses of the democratic system.”¹⁹ Thus, collective political convergence has never been realized because autocratic leaders “concluded that if the liberal order succeeded globally, it would pose an existential threat to their regimes.”²⁰

Legitimacy and Power

However, neo-authoritarian states are not solely responsible for the evolving context in which we find ourselves. The current liberal order is experiencing a lack of cohesion from a combination of two global trends: the erosion of its legitimacy and a shift in the perceived balance of power. The first occurs “when the values underlying international arrangements are fundamentally altered, abandoned by those charged with maintaining them.”²¹ As the leader of the liberal order, the United States is experiencing a crisis of legitimacy on the world stage. The overt hostility with which the Trump administration regards the liberal order and its utility is illustrated by the administration’s withdrawal from numerous international agreements, opposition to multilateralism more broadly, and its “conditional approach to once inviolable US alliance commitments in Europe and Asia.”²² However, this sentiment—defined by disdain for globalism and president Trump’s rise as the paragon of American nationalism—is a reflection of a rationale that has been fraying since the end of the Cold War. President Trump is not an aberration in American foreign policy; rather, he is the culmination of a 30-year trend toward American disengagement in global affairs.

Orders are created by powerful states to suit their interests, and the same is true for the United States in its creation of the liberal order. Throughout the Cold War, the United States opened US market to foreign exports, ensured the freedom of navigation to protect free trade, and established security guarantees in Europe and Asia. These were American investments made to subsidize a global alliance with the primary aim of combating and deterring the Soviet Union. However, once the Cold War ended, these various security commitments no longer seemed indispensable. Without the Soviets lurking as an existential threat to the United States, justifications for the continuation of the liberal order began to be challenged. Thirty years later, the liberal order is being contested by an American populace that views these commitments as burdensome and costly without any tangible benefits. However, the various suborders are not eroding at equal pace. While the economic and political orders still

maintain incentives for further integration, the global security order is fracturing in part due to US disinterest. A new global order is emerging in which the United States has enduring global reach but waning global interests. This slow retreat from its role as the guarantor of global security spreads doubt about US reliability moving forward, and its foreign policy missteps since the end of the Cold War have only exacerbated and eroded its legitimacy.

Though the West claims to operate within an open, rules-based liberal order, it was the US that often “broke the rules” of the security order during the post–Cold War era. NATO’s military intervention in Kosovo, without authorization from the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), was perceived as a violation of international law by Russia and China. Western military action in Iraq and Libya, as well as the passivity with which the West stood by and permitted the invasions of Georgia and Ukraine, undermined the stated core principles of the political order such as the preservation of sovereignty and inviolability of national borders. Additionally, the UNSC has largely failed in its mission “to maintain international peace and security and . . . to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace.”²³ As a result of increasing American disinterest and a breakdown in a rules-based security order, neo-authoritarian leaders are forecasting a world in which the United States continues to disengage and are choosing to become the guarantors of their own well-being.

The second trend occurs when a global order “proves unable to accommodate a major change in power relations. In some cases, the order collapses because . . . a rising power may reject the role allotted to it by a system it did not design, and the established powers may prove unable to adapt the system’s equilibrium to incorporate its rise.”²⁴ The US-dominated unipolarity of the post–Cold War era is slowly transitioning to increasing multipolarity, defined by a more equal distribution of global power. This emerging multipolarity is characterized by a “militarily and economically dominant, but not all-powerful, United States; a rising China and India; a resurgent Russia; an economically potent but militarily declining Europe; an unstable and violence-prone Middle East; and a proliferation of weak and failed states.”²⁵ States such as Russia are relying on its increasing military capabilities to intimidate and coerce political concessions from its neighbors while China, due to its economic successes, is more inclined to challenge the economic and political orders. What’s more, the emergence of multilateral institutions such as the Eurasian Economic Union, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the Asian Infrastructure Invest-

ment Bank signifies that these states seek to establish spheres of economic and military influence at the exclusion of the liberal West. These tactics are being utilized with the intent of creating a multipolar global order in which neo-authoritarianism has a more influential role within the global balance of power. Due to these two global trends, the liberal order will continue to face meaningful structural opposition in the twenty-first century. However, through a clear-eyed realization that the global balance of power is shifting as well as an honest effort to restore its legitimacy according to liberal principles, the United States may be able to usher in a more sustainable global order.

An American Grand Strategy for the Emerging World Order

Whether we like it or not, a new global order is emerging: one that is increasingly multipolar and characterized by a growing number of neo-authoritarian states seeking to expand their influence. The current liberal order is ill-equipped to face these primary challenges. Neo-authoritarian states are carving out spheres of influence through the violation of territorial norms because the West has also broken the established rules of the security order, thereby diminishing its legitimacy. Economic coercion undermines the openness of the economic order while still operating within it to build exclusive economic relationships and to exert further political influence. Meanwhile, unconventional political warfare is effective because it erodes confidence in liberal institutions and democratic governance, allowing for the prospect of alternative political models to take root and spread. In light of these realities, our objective cannot simply be promoting the current liberal order in a context where it is deemed illegitimate and is actively being undermined. Instead, “the world’s democracies need to begin thinking about how they can protect their interests and defend their principles in a world in which these are once again powerfully challenged.”²⁶ The shifts in world politics today necessitate a revitalization of America’s grand strategy for the twenty-first century by redefining its legitimacy as the leader of the liberal order and leveraging its power and influence to shape the emerging global order in its favor. What we seek is an evolution in American foreign policy, and the “current reflexive opposition to multilateralism needs to be rethought” to make sure the transition from one order to another does not result in crisis.²⁷ Just as the creation of the liberal order thwarted the totalizing ideologies of fascism and communism, our current strategy must reflect the emerging threats to free societies and evolve alongside them.

Grand strategy is “the use of all instruments of national power to secure the state.”²⁸ An effective strategy encompasses the desired political *ends* to be achieved through the utilization of societal *means* and *ways*, and it must be “based on a set of overarching premises and principles that will allow us to chart a consistent general course in the world.”²⁹ The ends of American grand strategy, otherwise known as core national interests, have remained consistent since the establishment of the liberal order, namely the protection of the American people and way of life by securing the homeland, preserving an open and dynamic global economy, and fostering a stable international environment. Means, however, involve all manifestations of a society’s power, including but not limited to military, economic, political, and cultural influence. Examples of traditional American means include “a strong and survivable nuclear deterrent, capable military forces that can project power globally, and intelligence services that can ensure global situational awareness.”³⁰ Moreover, these are “intrinsically linked to a powerful economy and industrial base, advanced technology, an educated and technically skilled population, and a political system based on classically liberal democratic values.”³¹ Most notably, the ways in which a society chooses to resist threats to its core national interests are the most vital aspect of grand strategy because these involve effectively understanding the political environment and employing prudent action when seeking to alter it. For the past 70 years, the principal way in which the United States has secured its core national interests has been through the creation and maintenance of the liberal order. The first step to revitalizing a grand strategy is to put the ends in context and assess how the remaining elements either prevail or transform accordingly.

Securing the Homeland

The primary aim of any grand strategy should and must be the security and defense of the homeland. This encompasses several vulnerabilities that are increasingly threatened. An effective strategy must be able to safeguard the United States from territorial conquest by a foreign adversary, attacks against its citizens and infrastructure—both physical and virtual, and assaults to its institutions vital to sound governance and the advancement of civil society.³² In an era characterized by the return of great power rivalry, conventional military capabilities continue to threaten the homeland while unconventional political warfare will become more prevalent. Moreover, the threats associated with international terrorism have not subsided with the relabeling and the de-emphasizing of the war on terrorism. In fact, the “threat of nuclear terrorism looms greater than any other nuclear threat

because of the limits of traditional concepts of deterrence.”³³ Beyond the purview of direct and violent attacks, various infrastructure networks are more vulnerable than ever before, including “our economy, our utilities, our health care system, and our principal means of communication from a catastrophic cyber-attack.”³⁴ What’s more, rival states will continue to utilize virtual platforms to erode confidence in democratic forms of governance, our constitutional values, and multilateral institutions promoting a rules-based security order.

Preserving an Open and Dynamic Global Economy

Essential to both US national security and the prosperity of its citizenry is the preservation of a global economy characterized by openness and dynamism. Of all the suborders that have emerged since the end of World War II, the global economic order is most ubiquitous, having expanded to nearly every state. The lessons learned from the interwar period are that “economic hardship can be immensely destabilizing” and, by contrast, that “global economic development and international economic integration contribute to stability and peace within countries and regions.”³⁵ The inclusiveness of this order has brought about an era of unprecedented economic growth and bound states to practices enshrined within global economic institutions. Increasingly, however, states that consider these rules to be inherently beneficial to American and Western interests seek to undermine regulations they deem illegitimate. Moreover, with the share of American economic influence in decline, the rise of new economic powers such as China and India is cause for concern. Ensuring that these states continue to seek mutually beneficial opportunities through an open economic order rather than exclusive economic advantages will be a central challenge of the twenty-first century. Also, the economic development of growing economies such as Brazil, Mexico, Nigeria, and South Africa offers “enormous opportunities to the world’s consumers and producers alike . . . [,] but managing these countries’ growth, integrating them fully into evolving regional and global economic institutions, and addressing their concerns will be a challenge that we must meet.”³⁶

Fostering a Stable International Environment

Following the calamity of the Second World War, the United States learned an important lesson that it had been grappling with since its founding. Americans learned that the security of the homeland and the American way of life are not isolated from circumstances around the

world. Rather, “we learned that aggressors in faraway lands, if left unchecked, would someday threaten the United States.”³⁷ We decided once and for all to play a leading role in global politics. In doing so, we used the nascent liberal order to build a stable international community, understanding that security and prosperity for the nations of the world would help shape “a world environment in which the American system can survive and flourish.”³⁸ We implemented this vision through the establishment of worldwide alliances to alleviate regional security anxieties, the building of international economic institutions to assist in revitalizing the global economy, and the advancement of liberal democratic values to extend the breadth of like-minded states—all making it easier to pursue our interests. However, if states like Russia, China, Iran, and the United States continue to violate principles of international law that prohibit the “use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state,” then the rules-based security order we have come to appreciate will soon devolve into a more volatile global arena where states once again resort to unbounded power relations to secure their interests.³⁹

With our ends put in context, it is clear that the American advancement of the liberal order as a grand strategic imperative has produced profound and lasting benefits. Not only has it sustained the primary interests of the US, but it has bestowed international legitimacy to American efforts and leadership. At the broadest level, there is no reason not to retain the defense of the liberal order as the foundational goal. However, the global order is changing, and what is needed to secure the liberal order is changing with it. For this reason, the United States must reformulate how it achieves its strategic objective, that is, how it pursues its grand strategy.

Strategic Options: Selective Retrenchment versus Engagement

The first strategic question then is, Do global trends necessitate restraint and the curtailment of US international commitments, or are these trends more favorable for effectively sustaining the liberal order to secure American interests? One possible answer is that due to the adverse effects of American overreach, the path to preserving the liberal order lies not in expansion but in crafting more prudent strategic choices to ensure liberal outcomes and legitimacy, albeit limited in scope. Another advocates for a concerted effort by the US and its liberal partners to make the world safe for democracies by deepening and advancing the liberal order. These two responses encompass the debate regarding US selective retrenchment versus further engagement.⁴⁰

The central argument for selective retrenchment is that the US, while still preeminent, faces limits on what it can achieve in a more challenging international environment. Thus, supporters of the liberal order must be more prudent in selecting when, where, and how to engage. Pursuing a strategy that advocates a scaled-back US presence overseas might “undercut support for anti-American terrorism and reduce the need for other powers to develop their own weapons of mass destruction.”⁴¹ Moreover, proponents of selective retrenchment look to the failures of Iraq and Libya, “where liberal inclinations produced decidedly illiberal and counterproductive results,” as case studies for overreach and the erosion of US legitimacy.⁴² Though the preservation of the liberal order is in the best interest of the United States and the world, “liberal overreach . . . is likely to generate damaging blowback that will weaken the liberal order abroad and undermine its political support at home.”⁴³ Instead, according to champions of retrenchment like John Mearsheimer, the United States should engage militarily only when local powers are unable to effectively balance against an emerging regional hegemon, particularly in Europe, Northeast Asia, and the Persian Gulf due to the strategic significance of these regions.⁴⁴

There are, however, detrimental side effects to retrenchment that may be worse than the risk of overreach. Initially, paring down the US defense posture around the world not only would make it more difficult to preserve existing security commitments but also could further embolden states inimical to US interests.⁴⁵ As Robert Gilpin claims, “retrenchment by its very nature is an indication of relative weakness and declining power, and thus retrenchment can have a deteriorating effect on allies and rivals. . . . Rivals are stimulated to ‘close in,’ and frequently they precipitate a conflict in the process.”⁴⁶ Most importantly, the signaling of retrenchment to US allies could douse their support for maintaining the liberal order, thereby exacerbating instances of regional instability as well as emboldening the encroachment of neo-authoritarian social models. Retrenchment might simply accelerate the challenges to the liberal order, generating an erosion of rules-based behavior that will prove costlier to address in the future. Without the United States leading a global order that assures stability and inclusiveness, it runs the risk of creating power vacuums that other, less benign forces will happily fill.

Proponents of an engagement strategy argue that though American predominance has indeed declined since the early post-Cold War era, states that support the liberal order maintain geopolitical dominance. The “liberal coalition still commands a clear majority of that power in economic and military terms alike, and at a share far greater than that of any

conceivable illiberal counter-coalition.”⁴⁷ Additionally, engagement advocates assert that the global allure of liberal ideas and values remains substantial and more resilient than critics claim. The “democratic recession” the world has experienced over the past decade does not “represent a fundamental historical turn away from the liberal ascendancy, but rather a set of difficulties that can be overcome via a sufficient investment of effort and resources by the United States and its liberal partners.”⁴⁸ Further engagement, therefore, builds upon the many successes we have achieved and plays to our strengths. But to do so effectively, states within the liberal order cannot simply rely on their collective power to serve as a mandate for action in international affairs. Rather, power must be perceived as legitimate if it is to yield a sustainable global order.

Thus, the proponents of retrenchment are correct in that the key to preserving the liberal order is for the United States to be more prudent in its strategic choices, thereby mitigating the consequences of overreach and exhaustion. Careless US interventions without much strategic foresight have validated this main critique of engagement by needlessly inviting the condemnation of much of the international community. But the liberal order need not retrench. Instead, it could take this critique into account when devising a more thoughtful, deliberate engagement strategy—one that seeks to reestablish domestic and international legitimacy. Such a foreign policy agenda would strive to avoid past pitfalls to yield more liberal results. In doing so, not only would more tangible and realistic successes strengthen the liberal order, but collective participation could mitigate domestic exhaustion, enhance engagement’s legitimacy globally, and increase the likelihood of pushing back the proliferating influence of neo-authoritarianism. Consequently, “a reinvigorated liberal offensive appears a plausible and potentially rewarding course.”⁴⁹

There are inevitable trade-offs with any strategic approach. However, “in the end a forward strategic presence . . . is very useful for American interests,” and the US must continue to engage the global order to thwart the challenges of the emerging context.⁵⁰ Though the ends of American grand strategy have essentially remained unchanged, the means required to implement them are indeed evolving. American advantages in the global share of economic and military power, though significant, are diminishing relative to regional powers and revanchist regimes.⁵¹ Thus, in a changing environment such as this, with our ends fixed and our relative means eroding, the US must become more clever in its ways to achieve the objectives of its grand strategy. The United States must reform and reinvigorate the liberal order so that it may adapt to the myriad challenges of the twenty-

first century. Success in this endeavor will enable the United States to leverage the full influence of the various suborders in a way that restores domestic and international legitimacy to its foreign policy. Therefore, the US must establish a new and transformational security order, namely a *Concert of Democracies*, as part of a renewed engagement strategy to simultaneously sustain, deepen, and advance the liberal international order.⁵²

Concert of Democracies

A Concert of Democracies is not a new idea. During President Clinton's second term, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright established an international coalition known as the Community of Democracies with the principal aim of strengthening democratic institutions, norms, and values around the world. Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay advocated for a Concert of Democracies during the George W. Bush administration to bring together "the world's most capable states in terms of military potential, economic capability, and political weight . . . to prevent and, when necessary, respond to threats to international security."⁵³ Even Senator John McCain during the 2008 presidential campaign proposed the creation of a global League of Democracies that would largely focus on bringing together "like-minded nations in the cause of peace."⁵⁴ However, rather than concentrating on values promotion or interstate aggression, this league would tackle a range of issues including deepening economic ties, managing humanitarian and health crises, and implementing environmental policies to mitigate the harm caused by climate change. Each of these initiatives is admirable and warrants the attention of the global democratic community. However, taking on such an extensive range of issues runs the risk of creating an institution that is utterly ineffectual. Instead, a Concert of Democracies should concentrate on the most immediate threat facing the liberal order: the disintegration of the global security order.

Building the Concert

In its efforts to secure its interests, reestablish legitimacy, and shape the emerging international order, the United States must spearhead the creation of a new global institution capable of reducing the volatility in the security environment it cannot and does not seek to solve unilaterally. The establishment of a Concert of Democracies would serve as the vanguard of a reinvigorated liberal order as US predominance gives way to a more equitable, multilateral global order. Such an institution would collectively manage security in a multipolar world and facilitate burden sharing among

democratic nations. Currently, the international community lacks institutions that are capable of prompt and effective action, and the states of the free world require new means of gauging and granting international legitimacy to its endeavors. Existing institutions like the United Nations Security Council fail to serve this purpose because “they have become hopelessly paralyzed by the split between its autocratic and democratic members.”⁵⁵ However, the creation of a concert would not replace the authority or influence of current multilateral institutions such as NATO or the United Nations. It would ideally operate within these existing forums, but if they fail to defend and advance the liberal order—as they have often done—then the concert must act independently.

Characterized by shared values, decision-making procedures, and threat perceptions, states within this concert would constitute a “guiding coalition of states at the heart” of the emerging order, a “critical mass of like-minded states that form the center of gravity in international politics.”⁵⁶ Such a coalition, representing a majority of global defense expenditure and GDP, would reinforce global security guarantees and diminish regional strategic anxieties. Moreover, the concert would serve as a collective forum to more effectively employ competitive and coercive measures to stem neo-authoritarian influence. It could help bestow the desired legitimacy the emerging order requires “on actions that democratic nations deem necessary but autocratic nations refuse to countenance.”⁵⁷ Conversely, a concert may attempt to shape the behavior of revisionist states through cooperative initiatives as well. It must continue to engage challengers in both regional and global aspects of the liberal order. However, if the chance at cooperation proves unconvincing, the United States can rely on the members of the concert, with their shared interests and values, to make the world a safer place for free societies. It is the case that “orders grow out of broader realities in world politics,” and it is time for the states comprising the free world to collectively defend and advance their interests.⁵⁸

A Concert of Democracies would initially encompass a selective group of member states that are not only dedicated to the principles supporting liberal democracy but would also agree to a number of obligations, such as “pledg[ing] not to use force or plan to use force against one another; commit[ting] to holding multiparty, free-and-fair elections at regular intervals; [and] guarantee[ing] civil and political rights for their civilians enforceable by an independent judiciary.”⁵⁹ This selective group could initially include the United States, NATO and non-NATO European democracies, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand. Although these initial members are the most integrated into the security, economic,

and political suborders and will seek to further engage in order-building behavior, the concert need not be exclusionary. Mechanisms must be in place to facilitate the inclusion of emerging democracies seeking to join the liberal community. These emerging democracies might include Brazil, Argentina, India, South Africa, Mexico, Indonesia, and others. The concert's inclusion of these states would garner further legitimacy in that it would "constitute a major effort to integrate non-Western democratic powers into a global democratic order."⁶⁰ Though an ever-increasing membership would only benefit the concert, it must be able to enforce penalties or excommunication if member states fail to uphold the obligations outlined within its charter. Thus, the long-term strength of the concert would lie in its legitimacy as an institution to ensure democracy as the foundational element of membership rather than power or historical ties. These measures might serve as a structural framework for an effective concert. However, for it to reduce volatility in the security environment and restore order, a new set of commonly accepted rules would be required that define the limits of permissible behavior. Such a set of directives must be made explicit to garner legitimacy and signal to opposing states the concert's intentions and expectations. What follows is an outline of the specific roles required of such an institution and the strict guidelines for using military force.

A Renewed Security Order

The security role for our concert is twofold. It must sustain alliances by promoting security cooperation among liberal democracies to discourage neo-authoritarian states in their attempts to carve out spheres of influence. Furthermore, it must underwrite the reconstruction of a rules-based security order, one in which the concert serves "as the core military capability of a global veto on interstate aggression."⁶¹ Consequently, several courses of action must follow. First, the United States should "sustain the military predominance of liberal democracies and encourage the development of military capabilities by like-minded democracies in a way that is consistent with their security interests."⁶² Maintaining this military predominance is necessary to avert the military adventurism with which revisionist states like Russia, China, and Iran have conducted their foreign policies. Thus, reinforcing the global balance of power in favor of liberal democracies will require elevated defense budgets on behalf of all member states to prevent aggression. Additionally, to legitimately serve as a global veto on aggression, the concert must become an acceptable forum "for the approval of the use of force in cases where the use of the veto at the Security Council

prevented free nations” from defending the liberal order.⁶³ Codified within its charter, the concert could approve of the use of force by a supermajority of member states, with no veto power. Rather than undermining the Security Council in its efforts to maintain international peace and security, the concert would serve as a legitimate and viable alternative without the obstructionism often employed by neo-authoritarian states.

Though the security roles taken on by the concert will assist in protecting the American people, there will be instances in which the United States acts unilaterally to secure its fundamental interests. Within any institutional relationship there exists a trade-off between the advantages of independent engagement and the benefits of united action. However, the United States must not abuse this prerogative if it seeks to further its interests over the long term. In keeping its decisions to use military force closely tied to concert action, the US will demonstrate its credibility and bestow further credence to the concert as a whole. However, it is beyond the scope of this strategy to outline the utility of unilateral American action. Rather, it is important to stipulate under which circumstances the concert should authorize the use of military force. The concert must be capable of answering several questions provided by Henry Kissinger “to play a responsible role in the evolution of a twenty-first-century world order”:

What do we seek to achieve at all costs, and if necessary, alone?

What do we seek to achieve, even if not supported by any multilateral effort?

What do we seek to achieve only if supported by an alliance?

When should we avoid military force, even if urged by multilateral groups or alliances?⁶⁴

It is helpful to think of these questions under the framework of Miroslav Nincic’s three functions of military power: defense, deterrence, and compellence.⁶⁵ Each of these functions serves to answer one of Kissinger’s questions in a way that ensures the legitimacy of concert or US unilateral action while remaining true to the intent of the concert. Defense can be understood as simply the “repelling of foreign aggression” and involves the destruction of an adversary’s capacity to do harm once its intent has been made clear by the application of force. Deterrence focuses on affecting an adversary’s intent to use force by “ensuring through threatened retaliation . . . [or denial] . . . that acts against the country’s national interest and security are not attempted.” Compellence, then, is employed once a provocation has occurred and seeks to “alter, by force, an existing state of affairs in

pursuit of a policy objective.”⁶⁶ With the functions defined, we can now answer questions in a manner that ensures prudent action.

First, what the concert seeks to achieve at all costs and alone, if necessary, is the *defense of concert members from foreign aggression*. Second, what it seeks to achieve, even if not supported by any non-concert multilateral effort, is *deterrence against foreign aggression through the sustainment of alliances, the promotion of security cooperation, and the adherence to its defense pact obligations*. Subsequently, what it seeks to achieve only if supported by an alliance is *compellence against foreign aggression toward non-concert states, if called upon by said states, to ensure international peace and security*. Lastly, the concert should avoid military force—even if urged by multilateral groups or alliances—*during calls for offensive engagement or cases of intrastate conflict, including civil war, regime change, or humanitarian intervention*. Under these circumstances of intrastate conflict, the concert would preferably intervene by other means, including the provision of economic and political assistance, to facilitate the reconciliation between warring parties. Thus, there is only utility in the application of military force under these limited circumstances where international legitimacy is preserved and power is wielded responsibly to achieve the reinvigoration of the liberal order.

While the three functions of military power justify the use of force to defend concert members, deter against neo-authoritarian aggression, and forcibly coerce states into abiding by the rules-based security order, there are limitations to its utility regarding offensive engagements and intrastate conflicts for several reasons. To start, if a concert were to become involved in these conflicts, it would result in an asymmetry of motivations and political will.⁶⁷ The justification for concert engagement would involve ends that it deemed limited, or “discrete policy goal[s] affecting some aspect of the [concert’s] interest, not its core purposes.”⁶⁸ Conversely, the adversary would be fighting for existential reasons such as territorial integrity, national survival, or political survival.⁶⁹ This would inevitably lead to a considerable difference in cost tolerance throughout the conflict and limit a concert’s ability to achieve its ends. Secondly, there could be consequences resulting from conflicts that involve powerful states pitted against weaker opponents. Such asymmetries in relative power would result in strategic decisions that typically do not favor a powerful coalition. According to Ivan Arreguin-Toft, each side in an asymmetric conflict can choose either a “direct” strategy to eliminate an adversary’s armed forces or an “indirect” one that focuses on weakening the opponent’s political will. The more powerful state, especially a Concert of Democracies, is essentially incapable of adopting an indirect strategy because it would involve “depredations against

non-combatants,” and such “barbarism” would not be tolerated by the international community.⁷⁰ Consequently, the concert would face a constraint in its strategic choices and thus be likely to lose an asymmetric conflict. Finally, there is often the assumption that external intervention in internal conflicts can solve problems that do not capitulate to force. This perspective tends to “view military victory as an end in itself, ignoring war’s function as an instrument of policy.”⁷¹ This isn’t to say that the concert should never intervene in internal conflicts, but rather that the application of force will fail to produce desired political outcomes. Instead, the remaining dimensions of societal power (political, economic, and cultural) are better suited to attain policy goals that are resistant to coercive action.

Conclusion

While serving as secretary of state, John Quincy Adams famously declared on 4 July 1821 that America “goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy.” However, he insisted that America would always champion the pursuit of liberty and that “wherever the standard of freedom and independence has been or shall be unfurled, there will her heart, her benedictions, and her prayers be.”⁷² This message underscores the manner in which strategy for the twenty-first century should be conceived. Constructing and leading the liberal international order has been the focal point of American grand strategy since the end of the Second World War. However, the current global order faces immense challenges, and the emerging context will not privilege American strategic interests. Without addressing the erosion of liberal legitimacy and the emergence of a more multipolar global order, the liberal international order as a grand strategic project cannot survive. By striking the balance between legitimacy and power, the US can lead a guiding coalition that represents a critical mass of states seeking to further engage in liberal order building. To do so effectively, this Concert of Democracies must galvanize the world’s value-sharing democracies into action and seek deeper levels of cooperation with all states, depending on the issue and suborder at stake. It must work together to reconstruct a global order that is compellingly rules based, that is, free from interstate aggression. Only such an order can dissuade neo-authoritarian challengers, embolden the free world to advance its interests, and offer all states a critical and viable choice.

Reinhold Niebuhr often warned against the excessive use of American power in world affairs. Yet he also believed that “the world problem cannot be solved if America does not accept its full share of responsibility in solving it.”⁷³ In this sense, he and Adams recognize that the United States is

truly indispensable in the defense and pursuit of liberty. The establishment of a new security order would be a foundational step in accepting this global responsibility while ensuring America shares the responsibility and burden with the rest of the free world. Moreover, “the future international order will be shaped by those who have the power and the collective will to shape it.”⁷⁴ The creation of a coordinated, self-identifying Concert of Democracies would go a long way toward aggregating the necessary power and collective will needed to shape the emerging world order in our favor. **ISSQ**

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