CSBA

Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments

WHY IS THE WORLD SO UNSETTLED?

THE END OF THE POST-COLD WAR ERA AND THE CRISIS OF GLOBAL ORDER

HAL BRANDS
ERIC S. EDELMAN

Why Is the World So Unsettled? The End of the Post-Cold War Era and the Crisis of Global Order

The essence of a revolution is that it appears to contemporaries as a series of more or less unrelated upheavals. The temptation is great to treat each issue as an immediate and isolated problem which once surmounted will permit the fundamental stability of the international order to reassert itself. But the crises which form the headlines of the day are symptoms of deep-seated structural problems.

--Henry Kissinger, 1969[1]

During Donald Trump's presidency and after, both U.S. foreign policy and the international system are likely to be wracked by crises. The instability and violence caused by a militarily resurgent Russia's aggressive behavior in Ukraine and elsewhere; the growing frictions and threat of conflict with an increasingly assertive China; the provocations of an insecure and progressively more dangerous North Korea; the profound Middle Eastern instability generated by a revolutionary, revisionist Iran as well as by persistent challenges from non-state actors—these and other challenges have tested U.S. officials and the basic stability of international affairs in recent years, and they are likely to do so for the foreseeable future. The world now seems less stable and more perilous than at any time since the Cold War; both the number and severity of today's global crises are on the rise.

Yet as Henry Kissinger wrote nearly a half-century ago, during another time of great upheaval in the international environment, making sense of crises requires doing more than simply viewing them—or seeking to address them—individually, for all are symptomatic of deeper changes in the structure of international relations. Accordingly, the responses of the United States and the broader international community to these crises will be unconnected, ill-informed, and astrategic unless a deeper conception of the current moment is formed and U.S. policymakers come to grips with the evolving nature of global politics.

The geopolitical changes at work today are often framed in terms of debates about "polarity"—the question of whether America's "unipolar moment" is now over, and the world has reached a new age of bi- or multipolarity.[2] Such speculation reached fever pitch in the wake of the Great Recession of 2007–2009, when declinist thinking became the conventional wisdom among international relations analysts. The frustrations of inconclusive irregular wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the sharp downturn in the U.S. economy, and the undeniable rise of Asia's economic power convinced many observers that American primacy in the international system was at an end. The National Intelligence Council suggested that the world was witnessing the birth of a global multipolar system; others spoke of, and even welcomed, a dawning "post-American world" and "the twilight of Pax Americana."[3]

---

1 Henry Kissinger, "Central Issues of American Foreign Policy," in Henry Kissinger, *American Foreign Policy: Three Essays* (New York: Norton, 1969), available at https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/nixon/i/20700.htm.

2 See Christopher Layne, "This Time It's Real: The End of Unipolarity and the *Pax Americana*," *International Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 1, 2012. The advent of a multipolar international system was also forecast in the National Intelligence Council (NIC) quadrennial report, *Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World* (Washington, DC: NIC, November 2008).

3 See NIC, *Global Trends 2025*; Paul Kennedy, "American Power is On the Wane," *Wall Street Journal*, January 14, 2009; Christopher Layne and Benjamin Schwarz, "Twilight of Pax Americana," *Los Angeles Times*, September 29, 2009; and Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-*

Yet in reality, the polarity debate was—and is—a highly misleading way of assessing the contemporary state of the international system, because it simultaneously overstates and understates the extent of the challenge to America's international position and the post-Cold War global order. On the one hand, discussions of polarity frequently exaggerate American decline, obscuring the fact that, even though the United States now exerts a lesser degree of international dominance than it did 25 or even 15 years ago, its global lead over any single challenger remains impressive. On the other hand, discussions of polarity can obscure both the degree and breadth of the ongoing changes in the international system, and of the challenges facing the United States.

The fundamental fact of international politics today is that the post-Cold War era has reached its end. That period was defined by uncontested U.S. and Western primacy, a pronounced decline in ideological struggle and great power conflict, and a historically remarkable degree of global cooperation in addressing the relatively mild forms of international disorder that persisted following the superpower conflict. Now, however, global politics are changing in epochal, if often misunderstood, ways.

The core characteristics of the emerging international era—for lack of a better term, the post-post-Cold War era—are the gradual but unmistakable erosion of U.S. and Western primacy, the return of sharp great power competition across all three key regions of Eurasia and beyond, the revival of global ideological struggle, and the empowerment of the agents of international strife and disorder. Each of these phenomena is powerful and deeply problematic in its own right; what makes the present period so difficult and dangerous to navigate is that these forces often compound one another's effects. Moreover, the impact of these forces is magnified by a final characteristic of our current era—the growing uncertainty about whether the traditional defenders of the post-Cold War system (and the postwar system before that) will be willing and able to play that role in the future.

American primacy may not be dead, in other words, but that primacy is far more contested and uncertain today than at any time in a quarter century, and the generally friendly contours of the post-Cold War system have given way to the more adverse conditions of the post-post-Cold War era.[4] Dealing with the dangers and dilemmas posed by the new global politics will be a generational task. Yet simply apprehending the basic nature of the age—and the way that ongoing structural changes inform the crises of today and tomorrow—is the critical first step.

American World (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008). For contrary assessments, see Josef Joffe, *The Myth of America's Decline: Politics, Economics, and a Half Century of False Prophecies* (New York: Liveright, 2013); Joseph Nye, *Is the American Century Over?* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2015); Robert J. Lieber, *Power and Willpower in the American Future: Why the United States is not Destined to Decline* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); and Eric S. Edelman, *Understanding America's Contested Primacy* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2010).

4 The notion of "contested primacy" was earlier developed in Edelman, *Understanding America's Contested Primacy*.

Those Were the Days...

Perhaps the best way to understand the present era is to compare it to the period that preceded it—the post-Cold War era. That era lasted 25 years—far longer than many observers initially predicted—and was defined by a convergence of fortuitous phenomena that made the period uniquely and historically favorable to American interests.[5]

The first phenomenon was uncontested U.S. and Western geopolitical primacy. The United States emerged from the Cold War with clear economic dominance, possessing nearly 25 percent of global GDP in 1994. That amount was more than twice the share of the next richest nation—and several times the share of any conceivable geopolitical competitor. The United States controlled an even larger share of global military power—roughly 40 percent of world defense outlays, along with utterly unrivaled advantages in global power-projection capabilities and the tools and aptitude needed to control the global commons.[6] In the 19th century, the British ship of the line had symbolized London's global reach and sway. In the late 20th century, the American carrier strike group symbolized an even more imposing international preeminence.

Crucially, this preeminence was manifest not just globally, but in all key geopolitical regions. In essence, the United States was the dominant military and diplomatic power not just in its own neighborhood but also in virtually all other neighborhoods; it could overawe any regional challenger even on that challenger's geopolitical doorstep, and it could do so at remarkably low human cost. Saddam Hussein learned this fact of geopolitical life the hard way in 1990–1991, when the United States brought over 500,000 troops, dozens of warships, and hundreds of combat aircraft into the Persian Gulf region following his invasion of Kuwait, then subjected the Iraqi armed forces to one of the most humiliating drubbings in the history of modern warfare.[7] U.S. officials made this point just as explicitly in 1995–1996 by sending two carrier strike groups into the waters near Taiwan in response to China's efforts to intimidate that island in the run-up to its first democratic presidential election. As Secretary of Defense William Perry bluntly stated, "Beijing should know, and this [U.S. fleet] will

---

5 For early expectations that unipolarity would quickly fade, see Kenneth Waltz, "The Emerging Structure of International Politics," *International Security* 18, no. 2, 1993. The failure of other states to meet these expectations and aggressively balance U.S. power led some scholars to invent the heretofore unknown category of "soft balancing." See Robert Pape, "Soft Balancing Against the United States," *International Security* 30, no. 1, 2005; and T.V. Paul, "Soft Balancing in the age of U.S. Primacy," *International Security* 30, no. 1, 2005. For a critique, see Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "Hard Times for Soft Balancing," *International Security* 30, no. 1, 2005.

6 Unless otherwise stated, all statistics on military spending are taken from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Military Expenditure Database, as of January 2017. Unless otherwise stated, all statistics on percentages of global GDP are taken from the Economic Research Service (ERS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, "GDP Shares by Country and Region Historical," available at www.ers/usda.gov/data-products/international-macroeconomic-data-set/aspx, as of January 2017.

7 The standard accounts are Michael R. Gordon and General Bernard E. Trainor, *The General's War: The Inside Story of the Conflict in the Gulf* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1995); Rick Atkinson, *Crusade: The Untold Story of the Persian Gulf War* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1993); Robert Scales, *Certain Victory: The U.S. Army in the Gulf War* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College Press, 1993); and Thomas G. Mahnken, *Technology and the American Way of War Since 1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), pp. 157–193.

remind them, that while they are a great military power, the strongest, the premier military power in the Western Pacific, is the United States."[8]

Nor was American dominance purely unilateral, because it was significantly accentuated by the power of the broader Western coalition. In 1994, America's core treaty allies in Europe and the Asia–Pacific region accounted for some 47 percent of global GDP and 35 percent of global military spending, meaning that the United States and its closest geopolitical friends possessed—in total—upward of 70 percent of global economic power and military spending.[9] This was an utterly remarkable geopolitical situation; it was not a balance of power but one of the most pronounced "overbalances" the world has ever seen.[10]

Indeed, the strengths of American allies allowed the "hyperpower" to punch above its own tremendous geopolitical weight.[11] Allied involvement lent added force to U.S. diplomacy on key issues of international order, and allied contributions reinforced the U.S. ability to project military power overseas. In the Persian Gulf War of 1990–1991, for instance, Washington's allies and partners contributed over 200,000 troops and myriad other capabilities to the anti-Saddam coalition. In other instances of multilateral intervention, from Bosnia in 1995–1996 to Afghanistan from 2002 onward, American allies provided tens of thousands of personnel for missions that were effectively selected and led by the United States.[12] The post-Cold War system was thus something like a "unipolar concert"—the sole superpower led a vibrant community of democracies that more often assisted than obstructed the use of American might.[13]

U.S. dominance was also evident in a second defining characteristic of the post-Cold War era—the dramatic decline of international ideological competition. Francis Fukuyama's "end of history" thesis has been critiqued and even derided, but it captured three indisputable facts of the years following the Soviet collapse: that democracy and market economics were spreading more widely than ever before; that there was no longer any credible global competitor to the liberal-capitalist model; and that even former U.S. enemies, such as Russia, and authoritarian states, such as China, were making unprecedented efforts to integrate into the liberal, post-Cold War international order either economically or politically—or both.[14]

---

8 Art Pine, "U.S. Faces Choice on Sending Ships to Taiwan," *Los Angeles Times*, March 20, 1996. It seems probable, in retrospect, that this episode was one of the factors leading to China's subsequent, two-decade long military buildup.

9 SIPRI Military Expenditure Database; ERS, "GDP Shares by Country and Region Historical."

10 The idea of an "overbalance" is drawn from Richard Rosecrance, "The Emerging Overbalance of Power," *The American Interest* 10, no. 1, 2014.

11 The term "hyperpower" was coined by French Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine to define "a country that is dominant or predominant in all categories." See "To Paris, U.S. Looks Like a 'Hyperpower'," *New York Times*, February 5, 1999.

12 These and other benefits of the Western overbalance are discussed in Hal Brands, *Dealing with Allies in Decline: Alliance Management and U.S. Strategy in an Era of Global Power Shifts* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2017).

13 On the idea of a unipolar concert, see Thomas Wright, "The Rise and Fall of the Unipolar Concert," *The Washington Quarterly* 37, no. 4, 2015.

14 Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?" *The National Interest* 16, 1989; and Stephen M. Walt, "Two Cheers for Clinton's Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs* 79, no. 2, 2000.

To be clear, Western concepts of human rights and political democracy were far from fully accepted in these and other countries, and Russian and Chinese leaders—among others—sooner or later came to see U.S. proselytism of liberal concepts as a threat to be resisted.[15] But the intense ideological struggles that had characterized the 20th century were conspicuous in their absence, and the liberal model seemed incontestably ascendant. To provide just one statistic, the number of electoral democracies in the world rose from 76 in 1990 to 120 at the turn of the millennium.[16] When George W. Bush asserted, in 2002, that "the great struggles of the twentieth century" had ended with a "decisive victory for the forces of freedom," he captured the post-Cold War zeitgeist precisely.[17]

This decline of ideological competition went hand-in-hand with the increasing strength and prominence of what might be considered Western rules of the game: greater protection of human rights and political freedoms; a decreasing international tolerance for interstate aggression; and increased respect for—or at least acquiescence to—the idea that states should be allowed to make their own political, economic, and security choices free of coercion or intimidation. These norms did not achieve universal acceptance, of course, but with the backing of U.S. and Western power they achieved greater currency and vindication than, perhaps, at any previous time. The increasing frequency of humanitarian military intervention, for instance, testified to the ascendancy of Western concepts of human rights and good governance—and to the willingness of Washington and its partners to make retention of domestic sovereignty contingent on respect for those concepts. Similarly, the expansion of NATO into Eastern Europe and even the former Soviet Union demonstrated that nations that had formerly been subject to great power domination now enjoyed significantly enhanced freedom of geopolitical choice. As the scholar James Cronin has observed, what happened during the post-Cold War period was that "Western rules" were now applied on a vaster global scale than ever before.[18]

These first two defining characteristics were related to a third, which was the remarkable great power comity of the post-Cold War era. The end of the Cold War did not see a fragmenting of America's Atlantic and Pacific alliances or a resurgence of Japanese and German revisionism, despite what a number of contemporary observers had predicted at the time.[19] Rather, the major Western powers remained firmly aligned with the United States, both out of habit and because Washington continued to provide the crucial global public goods of security, stability, and leadership of the international economic system. Moreover, the demise of the Soviet Union, the sheer geopolitical dominance of the Western coalition, and the extent to which Russia and China were integrating—in various ways, and to various degrees—into the U.S.-led liberal system meant that there were no serious great power

---

15 On U.S.–Chinese and U.S.–Russian relations during the 1990s, see James Goldgeier and Michael McFaul, *Power and Purpose: U.S. Policy toward Russia after the Cold War* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2003); and Robert Suettinger, *Beyond Tiananmen: The Politics of U.S.–China Relations 1989–2000* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2003).

16 *Freedom in the World 2013* (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2013), p. 29, available at https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FIW%202013%20Booklet.pdf.

17 See Bush's introductory letter to the *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: The White House, 2002).

18 James Cronin, *Global Rules: America, Britain, and a Disordered World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014).

19 See John Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War," *International Security* 15, no. 1, 1990; and Samuel P. Huntington, "Why International Primacy Matters," *International Security* 17, no. 4, 1993.

challenges from these countries, either. As William Wohlforth recognized in 1999, unipolarity suppressed sources of great power conflict. It ensured that there was no prospect of "hegemonic rivalry over leadership of the international system," and it dissuaded even those countries wary of American predominance from taking "any step that might invite the focused enmity of the United States."[20]

Admittedly, there remained sometimes-serious disagreements between the United States and second-tier powers such as Russia and China, on issues ranging from NATO expansion to Kosovo and Taiwan. And those disagreements would grow more pronounced as time passed and the global balance of power began to shift. But the crucial points are that the danger of great power war was historically low during the 1990s, that there emerged no meaningful anti-hegemonic coalition dedicated to counterbalancing the United States, and that on an array of critical international issues—from confronting Saddam Hussein in 1990–1991 to dealing with ethnic cleansing in Bosnia or the threat of international terrorism in the years thereafter—the level of multilateral cooperation among the key actors in the international system was actually quite high. John Mearsheimer had famously predicted in 1990 that, after the breakdown of bipolarity, the international system would soon revert to the historical norm of vicious great power rivalry. What actually happened was the onset of a period in which such rivalries were more muted than at any time since the Concert of Europe in the 19th century.[21]

All these characteristics of the post-Cold War environment made it easier to address a fourth and final characteristic of that environment—the relatively mild forms of disorder that afflicted international relations following the end of the superpower conflict. With great power conflict and other truly existential dangers dormant, the emphasis of both U.S. foreign policy and the international community was focused largely on combating the remaining—and lesser—forms of disorder that could threaten the smooth functioning of a prosperous, liberal global order: addressing humanitarian disasters, transnational epidemic diseases, and ethnic cleansing in key areas; halting the spread of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) to irresponsible or aggressive states; preventing aggressive autocracies (such as Saddam's Iraq) from exploiting the fluidity of the post-Cold War order to pursue expansionist aims; and, particularly after 9/11, countering mass-casualty international terrorism. In essence, the overriding thrust of U.S. and Western security policy was to address the geopolitical "spoilers" that might disrupt such a relatively benign historical moment.[22]

Doing so, in turn, was greatly facilitated by the relatively tranquil state of the post-Cold War international system. During the Cold War, superpower conflict had generally stalemated the UN Security Council, rendering it little more than an international debating society. Yet as great power tensions declined dramatically at the close of the Cold War and after, it became far less difficult to

---

[20] William Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World," *International Security* 24, no. 1, 1999, especially pp. 7–8; Hal Brands, "The Not So Bad Superpower," *The American Interest* 12, no. 3, January/February 2017; Eric S. Edelman, "The Strange Career of the 1992 Defense Planning Guidance," in Melvyn P. Leffler and Jeffrey W. Legro, eds., *In Uncertain Times: American Foreign Policy After the Berlin Wall and 9/11* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), pp. 63–77; and Alexandra Homolar, "How to Last Alone at the Top: U.S. Strategic Planning for the Unipolar Era," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 34, no. 2, April 2011.

[21] John Mearsheimer, "Why We Will Soon Miss the Cold War," *Atlantic Monthly*, August 1990.

[22] See the various *National Security Strategy* reports issued during the 1990s and early 2000s. See also the seminal work on post-Cold War disorder: Robert Kaplan, "The Coming Anarchy," *Atlantic Monthly*, February 1994.

organize multilateral coalitions to confront malevolent actors, whether Saddam Hussein in 1990–1991 or al-Qaeda after 9/11. "We are seeing international cooperation that is truly historic," George H.W. Bush remarked during the former episode. "The Soviets, the Chinese, our traditional allies, our friends in the Arab world—the cooperation is unprecedented."[23] Indeed, whereas in earlier eras the Kremlin might well have sought to stymie U.S. action against Iraq, a longtime Soviet client state, through diplomatic or even military means, in 1990 a Soviet leadership that was desperate for U.S. and Western support and diplomatic acceptance resolved—after some initial hesitation—to support a strong, U.S.-led international response to the invasion of Kuwait. In the aftermath of Saddam's invasion of Kuwait, Secretary of State James Baker and Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze issued a joint statement condemning Saddam's aggression, clearing the way for strong multilateral action against Iraq. "The Soviet Union was standing alongside us, not only in the United Nations, but also in condemning and taking action against Iraqi aggression," National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft noted. Moscow's position, in turn, led China to fall into line—in Beijing's case, by simply abstaining from the resolutions allowing the multilateral intervention to pass. The outcome suggested to some contemporary observers that the UN Security Council might finally emerge as a mechanism for maintaining global order. At the very least, it demonstrated how great power comity was easing concrete cooperation on key security issues.[24]

In the same vein, great power peace allowed the United States and its allies to devote increasing resources and attention to dealing with other forms of post-Cold War disorder. The fact that NATO could focus on "out of area" interventions for roughly two decades after the Soviet collapse, for instance, was directly related to the paucity of more traditional geopolitical threats. Similarly, the George W. Bush administration's 2002 *National Security Strategy* was most notable for advocating aggressive military action to address the most threatening type of global disorder—mass casualty terrorism. What the document also argued, however, was that multilateral counter-terrorism cooperation and other forms of international security collaboration were substantially aided by the great power convergence of the post-Cold War era. "Today, the international community has the best chance since the rise of the nation-state in the seventeenth century to build a world where great powers compete in peace instead of continually prepare for war," Bush's introduction to that document stated. "Today, the world's great powers find ourselves on the same side—united by common dangers of terrorist violence and chaos."[25]

Just as it was foolish for post-Cold War observers to look back with nostalgia on the supposed simplicity and clarity of the superpower conflict, of course, so too would it be a mistake to exaggerate how benign and favorable the post-Cold War environment really was. The "global disorder" of the period hardly seemed mild for the victims of catastrophic terrorism or ethnic cleansing, or even for the

---

23 Quoted in Hal Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Rise of the Post-Cold War Order* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016), p. 304.

24 On these issues, see Dennis Ross, *Statecraft and How to Restore America's Standing in the World* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007), pp. 82–88; and James A. Baker III with Thomas M. DeFrank, *The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War, and Peace, 1989–1992* (New York: Putnam, 1995); Scowcroft in George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), pp. 354–355. See also Lawrence Freedman and Efraim Karsh, *The Gulf Conflict, 1990–1991: Diplomacy and War in the New World Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), especially pp. 76–80.

25 *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, 2002, especially Bush's introductory letter.

U.S. officials who had to deal with these challenges. And primacy was not omnipotence; great power status—and great power peace—hardly ensured that the United States would grapple successfully with the global problems it confronted, as Washington's travails in places from Mogadishu to Anbar and Helmand amply demonstrated.[26] But grappling with those problems was undoubtedly less difficult than it would have been under a different structure of international politics, a fact that is increasingly coming into focus as the global system changes in significant ways.

Primacy Eroded

The transition from the post-Cold War to the current era was not marked by a single iconic moment, such as the way that the passage from Cold War to post-Cold War was so dramatically encapsulated in the opening of the Berlin Wall. Although there have been a number of episodes—from the international financial crisis of 2007–2008 to the Russian invasion and annexation of Crimea in 2014—that have symbolized the more contested state of international politics in the last decade, this transition has been marked by gradual but accumulating shifts in the underlying structure of international politics.

The first shift is the erosion of U.S. and Western primacy. It is a mistake to think of this change as a transition from unipolarity to multipolarity, for true multipolarity—in the sense of a rough balance between multiple centers of global power—will not arrive for many years, if ever. In 2015, the United States had an $18 trillion GDP, which was more than $7 trillion larger than that of its closest competitor, China, and America's per capita GDP was around four times that of China.[27] As detailed empirical work by Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth indicates, in fact, the U.S. economic lead may even be bigger than such numbers reflect. If one uses a more holistic measure such as "inclusive wealth," for instance, America possessed as much as a 4.5-to-1 advantage over China as recently as 2010.[28]

In military capabilities, too, any sort of meaningful global balance is still a long ways off. U.S. annual defense spending remained around three times that of China as of 2015, and Washington maintains enormous advantages in the power-projection capabilities—aircraft carriers, advanced tactical aircraft, nuclear-powered submarines, and logistical support capabilities, among others—that allow it to command the global commons and exert disproportionate influence in regions around the world. On a global basis, American primacy remains a fact, and because the U.S. lead reflects enormous and accumulated investments over a period of many years, that lead will likely endure for some time to come. "Rather than expecting a power transition in international politics," Brooks and Wohlforth have

---

[26] For a critique holding that U.S. grand strategy was largely unsuccessful during the post-Cold War era, see Michael Mandelbaum, *Mission Failure: America and the World in the Post-Cold War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[27] For these figures, see World Bank, "GDP (Current US$)," available at http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD; and World Bank, "GDP per Capita, PPP (Current International $)," available at http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.PP.CD?order=wbapi_data_value_2013+wbapi_data_value+wbapi_data_value-last&sort=desc.

[28] See Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, "The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers in the Twenty-First Century," *International Security* 40, no. 3, Winter 2015/2016.

written, "everyone should start getting used to a world in which the United States remains the sole superpower for decades to come."[29]

What has happened, however, is that the extent of U.S. and Western primacy has diminished. The U.S. shares of global wealth and military spending have declined—modestly but non-trivially—from their post-Cold War peak, falling, respectively, from over 25 percent and 42 percent in 2004 to around 22 percent and 34 percent in 2015. And if America's lead is thus not as imposing at it once was, the drop-off in the relative wealth and military power of America's allies has been considerably more severe. Core U.S. allies in Europe and the Asia-Pacific commanded some 47 percent of global GDP and 35 percent of global military spending in 1994; those shares fell to 39 percent and 25 percent, respectively, by 2015.[30] In other words, although Western overmatch remains fairly impressive by most historical standards, the global playing field is less dramatically slanted than it was in the halcyon days of the post-Cold War era.

Nor is this merely a story of relative decline, because many of America's most powerful and influential allies have undergone astonishing absolute declines in their military might. Due to factors ranging from unfavorable demography and sluggish economic growth to the aggressive re-weighting of government expenditures from defense to social programs, European military capabilities have veritably fallen off a cliff in the two decades since the mid-1990s. The Royal Navy may once have ruled the waves, but having lost roughly half of its principal surface combatants, one-third of its submarines, and all three of its aircraft carriers between 1997 and 2015, it now struggles to maintain a credible presence even around the home islands.[31] Germany was once a major land power in Europe; its army now consists of just 63,000 personnel (down from 240,000 in 1997), and it faces equipment and readiness shortfalls so severe that German forces have reportedly been forced to exercise with broomsticks in place of machine guns. Even France, which remains among the most militarily vigorous of America's NATO allies, has seen its force structure and readiness decline significantly.[32] If usable military power is a key enabler of global influence, then allied contributions to Western global influence and primacy have waned dramatically.

And as the relative position of the United States and—especially—its allies has slipped, the positions of its principal adversaries and competitors have improved. Russian economic power is hardly impressive, and the country remains a long-term economic and demographic basket-case. Yet Moscow

---

29 Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, "The Once and Future Superpower: Why China Won't Overtake the United States," *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 3, May/June 2016), especially pp. 91–92; Brooks and Wohlforth, "The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers in the Twenty-First Century"; and SIPRI Military Expenditures Database.

30 SIPRI Military Expenditure Database; and ERS, "GDP Shares by Country and Region Historical."

31 As part of its 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review, the United Kingdom did commit to fielding two operational aircraft carriers within the next few years. Whether those carriers will in fact carry a full complement of planes remains somewhat unclear.

32 On the military capabilities of France, the United Kingdom, and Germany, see International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *The Military Balance 1997* (London: IISS, 1997), pp. 50–55, 69–73; and IISS, *The Military Balance 2015* (London: IISS, 2015), pp. 90–100, 147–153; see also F. Stephen Larrabee et al., *NATO and the Challenges of Austerity* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2012); "Germany's Disarmed Forces: Ramshackle Military at Odds with Global Aspirations," *Der Spiegel International*, September 30, 2014; and Justin Huggler, "German Army Used Broomsticks Instead of Guns During Training," *The Telegraph*, February 18, 2015. For a more thorough examination of the diminishing capabilities of U.S. allies, see Hal Brands, *Dealing with Allies in Decline: Alliance Management and U.S. Strategy in an era of Global Power Shifts* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2017).

has undertaken an aggressive military modernization program that has roughly doubled defense spending over the course of a decade, and it has significantly improved the capabilities needed to compete more effectively with the West—airborne assault units, special operations forces, ballistic and other missile systems, and anti-access/area-denial capabilities, among others. Russian military advances have created a far more contested and dangerous environment in Eastern Europe and elsewhere along Russia's periphery; Russian intervention in Syria has reminded Western observers that it is not just Washington that can project significant power extra-regionally.[33]

China, meanwhile, has surged forward both economically and militarily. Double-digit economic growth rates allowed Beijing to expand its share of global wealth more than three-fold, from 3.3 to 11.8 percent, between 1994 and 2015. That growing wealth, and the growing ambition that comes with it, has led China to increase its share of world military spending more than five-fold, from 2.2 to 12.2 percent, over the same period.[34] And, as in Russia's case, the Chinese buildup has featured the tools—ballistic and cruise missiles, diesel-electric and nuclear submarines, advanced air defenses, and fourth-generation fighters—needed to offset longstanding U.S. advantages in the Asia-Pacific region, in addition to the capabilities—such as aircraft carriers—needed to project Chinese power even further afield in future decades.[35] The spectacular growth of Chinese economic and military power is unprecedented in the post-World War II period, pushing China rapidly up the global tables while contributing markedly to relative Western decline.

The structural power shifts at work in the international system are not all bad, of course. The distribution of global power is not shifting purely in the direction of American adversaries; it is also shifting to a broad array of formally non-aligned countries that enjoy close or improving defense and diplomatic ties with the United States and its allies. India, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, and the United Arab Emirates all fit within this diverse category; their economic growth and investments in military power offer a key potential advantage for Western policymakers to exploit in the future. And some U.S. allies, such as Australia and Japan, are seeking ways to increase their military capability. Yet although U.S. and Western primacy persists, the basic point remains that the global power advantages that Washington and its closest partners possess are less formidable than at any point in the post-Cold War era. The uncontested primacy of the 1990s has become the highly contested primacy of today.

We are already beginning to see the pernicious geopolitical effects of this shift. Allied decline and increasingly unbalanced burden-sharing within U.S. alliances have led to steadily increasing American frustration with its allies. This frustration has been most viscerally embodied by President Donald Trump's rhetoric during the 2016 presidential campaign, and to a lesser extent since his inauguration.

---

33 For discussions of Russian modernization, see IISS, *The Military Balance 2015*, pp. 159–167; Catrin Einhorn, Hannah Fairfield, and Tim Wallace, "Russia Rearms for a New Era," *New York Times*, December 24, 2015; and Eric S. Edelman and Whitney Morgan McNamara, *U.S. Strategy for Maintaining a Europe Whole and Free* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2017).

34 SIPRI Military Expenditure Database; and ERS, "GDP Shares by Country and Region Historical."

35 Evan Braden Montgomery, *Reinforcing the Front Line: U.S. Defense Strategy and the Rise of China* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2017); Eric Heginbotham et al., *The U.S.–China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996–2017* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2015); and Roger Cliff, *China's Military Power: Assessing Current and Future Capabilities* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

Trump has repeatedly labeled NATO and other U.S. alliances "obsolete" and suggested that U.S. allies are deadbeats who "owe vast sums of money" to Washington.[36] Yet this mood can be traced back several years prior to Trump's ascendancy, to the warning by then-Secretary of Defense Robert Gates in 2011 that NATO faced a "dim if not dismal future" if European will and ability to contribute to the common cause continued to fall.[37]

Indeed, the decline of allied military power has made it harder for those allies to defend themselves against growing security threats, just as it has made it more difficult for the United States to round up capable and effective coalitions to address global challenges such as the rise of the Islamic State. When Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter caustically referred to "our so-called coalition" in early 2016, he was giving vent to precisely this dynamic—the fact that so few U.S. allies had proven able to make more than token contributions to this campaign.[38] Most fundamentally of all, the fact that U.S. rivals and adversaries now have greater capacity and influence relative to Washington and its allies means that they also have a greater ability to attempt to shift the international order to suit their own preferences. That reality, in turn, speaks directly to a second key characteristic of global politics today.

Great Power Competition with Regional Characteristics

If great power comity was the norm during the post-Cold War era, then today's world features resurgent great power competition and revisionism. Relations between the most powerful states in the international system are increasingly defined by sharp and undisguised geopolitical rivalry; the balance between cooperation and competition in these relationships increasingly skews toward the latter. There is greater and more dangerous jostling for power and influence in key regions around the world; there is greater contestation over key norms in the international system more broadly, as rising adversaries contest the Western rules of the game.

Fortunately, this great power competition is still relatively mild by historical standards—it does not yet approach the vicious global struggles, whether hot or cold, of the 20th century. Moreover, the revival of great power competition does not mean that any one of America's principal state rivals has the ability to challenge the United States for global preeminence anytime soon. What has happened, however, is that a diverse assortment of revisionist actors—countries that were never fully reconciled to the post-Cold War order and accepted it only to the degree compelled by the realities of U.S. and Western primacy—are now using their greater relative power to push back against that order in key geopolitical regions from East Asia to Eastern Europe and the Middle East. Because Washington's principal adversaries can concentrate their resources regionally (rather than needing to distribute them globally), and because they enjoy interior lines and other blessings of geography within their own regions, the power shifts that have occurred in recent years are having outsized effects at the regional level. And because the regional orders that are now being challenged have been the foundation of the

---

[36] See Ashley Parker, "Donald Trump Says NATO is 'Obsolete,' UN is 'Political Game'," *New York Times*, April 2, 2016; and Allison Graves, "Fact-check: Donald Trump Says Germany Owes 'Vast Sums of Money to NATO'," *Politifact*, March 19, 2017.

[37] Thom Shanker, "Defense Secretary Warns NATO of 'Dim' Future," *New York Times*, June 10, 2011.

[38] Aaron Mehta, "Carter Again Slams Anti-ISIS Partners on Lack of Assistance," *Defense News*, February 2, 2016. For a tally of the contributions made by coalition partners, see Kathleen J. McGinnis, *Coalition Contributions to Countering the Islamic State*, R44135 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, August 26, 2016).

broader post-Cold War system, these countries are effectively subverting that system from the bottom up.[39]

A case in point is Chinese behavior in East Asia. Famous for taking the long view, Chinese leaders have seemingly regarded America's post-Cold War dominance as a transitory condition to be endured for a time, rather than a benign phenomenon to be embraced—or even a lasting fact of international life to be suffered forever. Rather, Chinese leaders "see the United States as the most serious external threat to their continued rule"; they "feel the need to constrict its military presence and diplomatic influence in the Western Pacific" if a communist-led China is to achieve ideological security and geopolitical paramountcy in the East Asia.[40] And so as China's geopolitical potential has increased, Chinese leaders have taken progressively bolder steps to erect a Sino-centric regional order.

Beijing has aggressively asserted expansive (if sometimes imprecise) territorial claims in the East China Sea and the South China Sea. It has used subtle, gradualist techniques such as island-building and militarization of disputed geographical features to unmistakably shift the facts on the ground without risking a premature military clash with the United States in the process. It has steadily increased efforts to exert influence over its neighbors using an eclectic blend of political, economic, military, paramilitary, and informational means. It has challenged longstanding norms of regional and international behavior, such as freedom of navigation in the South China Sea and peaceful resolution of territorial disputes. It has probed and worked to undermine U.S. alliances and partnerships by simultaneously wooing and intimidating America's friends in the region, as well as by pressing for advantage where American commitments are undefined or ambiguous. Finally, and not least of all, China has conducted a major military buildup reaching back two decades. That buildup has focused precisely on the capabilities needed to give China uncontested dominance over its neighbors and prevent the United States from playing its traditional role as guarantor of the regional status quo.[41]

All of these efforts are now having a cumulative impact. Chinese coercion short of war has altered perceptions of power and momentum in the region, while the Chinese buildup has made the outcome of a Sino-American war far more doubtful from a U.S. perspective. "America has lost" the struggle for regional supremacy, President of the Philippines Rodrigo Duterte announced in late 2016; Manila must now reposition itself between Washington and Beijing.[42] Similarly, analysts with the nonpartisan RAND Corporation have assessed that "over the next five to 15 years, if U.S. and PLA forces remain on roughly current trajectories, Asia will witness a progressively receding frontier of U.S. dominance" as Washington's ability to project decisive power within the first island chain diminishes. The region

---

39 For a good synthesis, see Walter Russell Mead, "The Return of Geopolitics: The Revenge of the Revisionist Powers," *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 3, 2014.

40 Aaron Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia* (New York: Norton, 2011), p. 2.

41 See Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2016*, Annual Report to Congress (Washington, DC: DoD, 2016), available at http://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2016%20China%20Military%20Power%20Report.pdf; and Andrew S. Erickson and Conor M. Kennedy, "China's Maritime Militia: What It Is and How to Deal With It," *Foreign Affairs*, June 23, 2016, available at https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2016-06-23/chinas-maritime-militia.

42 Ben Blanchard, "Duterte Aligns Philippines with China, Says U.S. Has Lost," *Reuters*, October 20, 2016.

could soon hit a series of "tipping points" at which U.S. commitments to partners such as Taiwan become less credible and far harder to sustain.[43]

The resurgence of great power competition is even more pronounced in Europe, where a militarily revitalized Russia is now working to strengthen a geopolitical position that had eroded dramatically after the Cold War—and undoing key aspects of the post-Cold War settlement in the process. Moscow has undertaken flagrant acts of aggression and wars of conquest against Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014, in addition to its intervention in the Syrian civil war to prop up the regime of Bashar al-Assad since 2015. It has violated or effectively withdrawn from several arms control agreements with the United States and its allies. It has been probing the periphery of NATO and the European Union; it seeks to undermine the integrity of those institutions via efforts including paramilitary subversion; military intimidation by means of unlawful overflights, aggressive snap exercises, explicit threats, and nuclear saber-rattling; financial support for anti-EU and anti-NATO politicians; and other forms of intervention in the political processes of European countries as well as the United States. In 2016, Russian intelligence apparently tried to assassinate the prime minister of Montenegro and overthrow the government of that country to prevent it from joining NATO—another cold-blooded, if in this case unsuccessful, act of geopolitical competition with the West.[44]

In doing all of this, Russia has fundamentally challenged the notion of a post-Cold War Europe whole, free, and at peace. It has essentially overturned the presumption that European countries would have liberty to make their economic, political, and security choices free from coercion or intimidation. It has sought to erode—with some degree of success—those institutions that have maintained security and prosperity in the region for decades. Meanwhile, the Russian leadership has voiced a sharp hostility to Washington and NATO and called for the creation of a "post-West world order," leaving little doubt as to its revisionist aims.[45] And as with China, all of these actions have been underwritten by a significant military buildup that has restored a degree of local overmatch against NATO, particularly on its exposed eastern flank, and enhanced Russia's ability to project power not just in its "near-abroad" but as far afield as the Middle East.[46] The appropriateness of the Obama administration's characterization of recent Russian behavior as something straight out of the 19th century has been much disputed. What is indisputable is that Russia is again asserting its great power prerogatives in a way that only seems anomalous in contrast to the high degree of great power collaboration that marked the post-Cold War era.

Finally, geopolitical revisionism is also alive and well in the Middle East. Iran, the primary state author of that revisionism, is not in the same power-political league as China or even Russia. But it is a

---

43 Heginbotham et al., *U.S.–China Military Scorecard*, pp. xxxi, 342.

44 "Boris Johnson Claims Russia Was Behind Plot to Assassinate Prime Minister of Montenegro as He Warns of Putin's 'Dirty Tricks'," *The Telegraph*, March 12, 2017; and Edelman and McNamara, *U.S. Strategy for Maintaining a Europe Whole and Free.*

45 Lizzie Dearden, "Russia's Foreign Minister Calls for 'Post-West World Order' in Speech to Global Leaders," *Independent*, February 18, 2017; and James Kirchick, "The Road to A Free Europe Goes Through Moscow," *Politico Magazine*, March 17, 2017.

46 See David A. Shlapak and Michael W. Johnson, "Outnumbered, Outranged, and Outgunned: How Russia Defeats NATO," *War on the Rocks*, April 21, 2016; David A. Shlapak and Michael W. Johnson, *Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank: Wargaming the Defense of the Baltics* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016); Anna Borshchevskaya and Jeremy Vaughan, "How the Russian Military Reestablished Itself in the Middle East," *Policy Watch* 2709, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 17, 2016.

significant regional power that never accepted the U.S.-led order in the Middle East, and it is now seeking to assert its mastery over the area. It is doing so via the use of its own forces as well as proxies in the conflicts in Syria, Yemen, and Iraq; via the promotion of a sectarian agenda that seeks to increase Iranian influence by polarizing the region and stoking internal conflicts; and via investments in its nuclear program as well as important niche capabilities such as ballistic missiles and special operations forces. The nuclear program has at least been frozen, perhaps temporarily, since 2015, but other initiatives have continued apace. This agenda has led Tehran into conflict with traditional U.S. security partners such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia; it has been a significant—if hardly the sole—contributor to the instability and conflict that plagues much of the region. As Andrew Krepinevich has recently written, "Iran's leaders seek to establish Iran as the Middle East's dominant state," and they are increasingly acting on that conviction.[47]

Each of these geopolitical challenges is different, of course—each reflects the particular characteristics of the region in which it is occurring, and each reflects the particular aims and qualities of the revisionist state that is mounting the challenge. But there is a growing degree of cooperation between some of the countries that are challenging U.S. leadership and the post-Cold War system, even if that cooperation is more limited and transactional than sometimes assumed. Consider, for instance, the growing Russo-Chinese cooperation on issues such as energy, sales of military technology, opposition to additional U.S. military deployments on the Korean peninsula, and joint maneuvers in the South China Sea in 2016.[48] Russia and Iran have also collaborated in the effort to tilt the battlefield in Syria to the advantage of their common ally, Bashar al-Assad. And taken collectively, these challenges amount to a geopolitical sea change from the post-Cold War era.[49]

The revival of great power competition entails a higher level of international tension than the United States has known for the past 25 years, as well as the renewed salience of Cold War-era phenomena such as arms races and security dilemmas, albeit in a new context. It entails sharper conflicts over the rules of the road in regional—and, by extension, international—politics on issues ranging from freedom of navigation in the South China Sea to the illegitimacy of altering internationally recognized borders by force. It entails intensifying competitions for influence or dominance over states that reside at the intersection of rival great powers' spheres of influence, such as Taiwan, the Philippines, Ukraine, and Iraq. Finally, it necessitates contending seriously with the possibility that great power rivalry could lead to great power war—a prospect that seemed to have followed the Soviet Union onto the ash heap of history with the end of the Cold War. Chinese officials appear to be optimizing their forces for a possible "short, sharp war" involving U.S. allies—and presumably the United States—in East Asia; Russian military doctrine now emphasizes consideration of how nuclear weapons might be used to

---

47 Andrew Krepinevich, *Preserving the Balance: A U.S. Eurasia Defense Strategy* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2017), especially p. ii; Eliot Cohen, Eric S. Edelman, and Ray Takeyh, "Time to Get Tough on Tehran: Iran Policy after the Deal," *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 1, January/February 2016; and Eric S. Edelman and Whitney McNamara, *Contain, Degrade, and Defeat: A Defense Strategy for a Troubled Middle East* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2017).

48 See Bob Savic, "Behind China and Russia's Special Relationship," *The Diplomat*, December 7, 2016.

49 Paul Bucala and Genevieve Casagrande, "How Iran is Learning from Russia in Syria," Institute for the Study of War and the Critical Threats Project, February 3, 2017; and "Russia–Iran Cooperation in Syria Continues with the Same Pace—Iranian MoD," *Sputnik News*, February 1, 2017, available at https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201702011050233640-iran-russia-cooperation-syria/.

achieve escalation dominance in a conflict with NATO and Washington.[50] The United States, for its part, is responding to increased competition from great power rivals with its own efforts to sustain deterrence and conventional superiority in Eastern Europe and the Western Pacific.[51] The world has not yet returned to the epic clashes for global dominance and national survival that defined great power relations for much of the 20th century, but it is returning to the historical norm of great power competition—with all the dangers and dilemmas such competition involves.

History Renewed—The Return of Global Ideological Struggle

Revived great power competition relates to a third feature of the current era, which is the return of global ideological struggle. The post-Cold War era was defined, in part, by the widespread assumption that the dominance of the liberal political-economic model was incontestable, and that even as that model was still resisted in some benighted corners, its universalization was ultimately inevitable.[52] The current era is dramatically different. It is characterized by the stalling and perhaps reversal of democracy's global advance, the revival of authoritarian challengers to the liberal model, and the reemergence of ideological differences as both an aspect and a driver of intensified geopolitical competition. Today's world is rife with revisionism not just in a geopolitical sense, in other words, but in an ideological sense as well.[53]

To begin with, there is little doubt that the spread of democracy has halted and even begun to retreat. Between 1974 and 2000—the quarter century that constituted the "third wave" of democratization—the number of electoral democracies in the world tripled, going from 39 to 120.[54] Since then, however, the momentum has turned. The number of electoral democracies has remained roughly stagnant in the decade since 2006, and the number of democratic breakdowns—episodes in which political systems revert from democracy to authoritarianism—has increased.[55] Moreover, if one views democracy as a continuum rather than a binary variable, then the recent arc has been unmistakably downward. In every one of the years between 2006 and 2015, the number of countries that experienced declines in freedom outnumbered those that experienced increases in freedom. In 2015, the tally was not even close: 72 countries declined in freedom whereas only 43 increased.[56] Nor has this regression been

---

50 "Navy Official: China Training for 'Short Sharp War' with Japan," *USNI News*, February 18, 2014; and Max Fisher, "How World War III Became Possible: A Nuclear Conflict with Russia is Likelier than You Think," *Vox*, June 29, 2015, available at http://www.vox.com/2015/6/29/8845913/russia-war. It should be noted that some scholars have raised questions about how prepared the Russian military actually is to put this doctrine into practice. See Dima Adamsky, "Nuclear Incoherence: Deterrence Theory and Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons in Russia," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37, no. 1, 2014.

51 See Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert Work, "The Third U.S. Offset Strategy and Its Implications for Partners and Allies," speech at Willard Hotel, Washington, DC, January 28, 2015, available at http://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech-View/Article/606641/the-third-us-offset-strategy-and-its-implications-for-partners-and-allies.

52 Michael Mandelbaum, *The Ideas that Conquered the World: Peace, Democracy and Free Markets in the 21st Century* (New York: Public Affairs, 2002).

53 Arch Puddington and Tyler Roylance, "The Dual Threat of Populists and Autocrats," *Journal of Democracy* 28, no. 2, April 2017.

54 Statistics compiled from Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 25; and *Freedom in the World 2013*, p. 29.

55 Larry Diamond, "Facing Up to the Democratic Recession," *Journal of Democracy* 25, no. 1, 2015, especially pp. 142, 147–148.

56 *Freedom in the World 2016* (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2016), especially p. 3, available at https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FH_FITW_Report_2016.pdf.

confined to any single area or region. From the rise of anti-democratic leaders in Venezuela and Turkey, to the erosion of democratic norms within NATO member countries such as Poland and Hungary, to the sometimes shockingly authoritarian sentiments expressed in the U.S. presidential campaign of 2016, the travails of democracy are an increasingly global phenomenon.[57]

Authoritarian models, meanwhile, are making a comeback. Whereas dictatorships were clearly on the defensive in the period immediately following the Cold War, now autocracies have become smarter, more skillful, and more tenacious at clinging to power. In countries from Iran to China, authoritarians have mobilized the power of technology to monitor populations, enforce the loyalty of citizens, and identify and repress sources of dissent.[58] Moreover, the difficulties that democracies have encountered in producing robust and equitably distributed economic growth, as well as in solving other pressing societal problems, have created an opening for unabashedly authoritarian leaders not simply to pursue undemocratic models within their own states, but to market those models to the world. Hungary's Viktor Orban made global headlines in 2014 when he castigated the debilities of liberal society and proudly declared the ascendancy of the "illiberal state."[59] Likewise, and more significantly still, Russia and China have veered away from the liberalizing path that many observers assumed they were on in earlier decades. Russian and Chinese leaders now openly tout the virtues of authoritarian leadership and state capitalism in contrast to the supposed decadence, moral decay, and domestic gridlock seen in more liberal societies.

Moreover, these countries—as well as other U.S. geopolitical competitors such as Iran—are taking active steps to thwart and roll back democracy's advance. They are opposing the spread or survival of liberal political values in their own regions; witness China's erosion of democratic norms in Macau and Hong Kong or Russia's efforts to overthrow a democratic government in Montenegro. They are utilizing propaganda to undermine the integrity and self-confidence of democratic systems, and intervening—particularly in Russia's case—to support Western political candidates who espouse decidedly illiberal ideas. Not least, they are supporting besieged authoritarian regimes overseas while resisting efforts to promote democratic regime change or punish gross violations of human rights through international institutions such as the United Nations. In recent years, in fact, all three of America's major geopolitical competitors—Russia, Iran, and China—have come together to support Bashar al-Assad's murderous regime in Syria through measures ranging from intelligence and economic support to full-on military intervention. "Authoritarianism has gone global," one recent study concludes; "The authoritarian powers have taken more coordinated and decisive action to contain democracy at the *global* level."[60] Authoritarians, in other words, are no longer ceding ground or holding fire in the face of an ongoing democratic advance; they are pushing back, constituting a de

---

57 Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk, "The Democratic Disconnect," *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 3, July 2016.

58 William Dobson, *The Dictator's Learning Curve: Inside the Global Battle for Democracy* (New York: Doubleday, 2012).

59 Michael Boyle, "The Coming Illiberal Order," *Survival* 58, no. 2, 2016, especially pp. 35–36.

60 Larry Diamond, Marc Plattner, and Christopher Walker, eds., *Authoritarianism Goes Global: The Challenge to Democracy* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), introduction, especially p. 4; Christopher Walker, "How Anti-Democratic Propaganda is Taking Over the World," *Politico*, March 3, 2017; Michael Clarke and Raffaello Pantucci, "China is Supporting Syria's Regime. What Changed?" *The National Interest*, September 17, 2016; and Jonathan Saul and Parisa Hafezi, "Iran Boosts Military Support in Syria to Bolster Assad," *Reuters*, February 21, 2014.

facto Authoritarian International, and in doing so demonstrating that the ideological battle has been joined once more.

That ideological battle, in turn, has now reemerged as both a marker and a cause of great power geopolitical rivalry. In the 1990s and into the 2000s, the U.S. foreign policy community commonly assumed that as potential competitors such as Russia and China became more economically and politically liberal, they would also become more accepting of a U.S.-led international order with liberal values at its core.[61] Today, however, ideological divergence has reemerged as an issue of growing geopolitical salience.

The United States and its largely democratic allies increasingly find themselves in conflict with revisionist authoritarian governments in Russia and China. Nor is this a coincidence. Opposing domestic political structures fuels mistrust between geopolitical rivals; they make empathy and understanding more difficult. As political theorist Michael Doyle has written, the perception—not inaccurate—that "nonliberal states are in a permanent state of aggression against their own people" creates an "atmosphere of suspicion" in relations between democratic and non-democratic states.[62] Moreover, ideological differences promote divergent policy preferences on issues such as the fate of Assad's regime in Syria, and they create differing visions of what type of international order is legitimate and desirable. The United States has long sought to make the world safe for democracy—and, more recently, to create a world full of democracies—and it has viewed the persistence of powerful authoritarian states as a danger and affront to that project. Russian and Chinese leaders are necessarily determined to make the world safe for authoritarians. They view U.S. foreign policy as a significant—perhaps existential—menace to *that* project.[63]

Ideological differences do not rule out international cooperation, of course, and the geopolitical and ideological fault lines do not overlap precisely today, just as they did not overlap precisely even during the Cold War. But whereas a great hope—and assumption—of the post-Cold War world was that increasing ideological convergence would lead to greater geostrategic harmony, it is now increasingly the case that ideological struggle and power-political conflict go hand-in-hand. The end of history has ended. An international environment that has become more geopolitically contested has become more ideologically contested, as well.

---

61 This assumption, as well as other core assumptions of post-Cold War grand strategy that now stand challenged, are explored in Hal Brands and Peter Feaver, "Stress-Testing American Grand Strategy," *Survival* 58, no. 6, 2016.

62 Michael Doyle, "Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs, Part 2," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 12, no. 4, 1983.

63 See Friedberg, *Contest for Supremacy*, pp. 42–45; Robert Kagan, *The Return of History and the End of Dreams* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008); and Larry Diamond, "Russia and the Threat to Liberal Democracy," *The Atlantic*, December 9, 2016.

Disorder Intensified

These first three characteristics relate to and complicate efforts to address a fourth marker of the evolving international system: an intensification of general global disorder. Throughout the post-Cold War era, a primary fear of U.S. and Western policymakers was that the breakdown of bipolarity would unleash new or previously repressed forms of upheaval, from ethnic conflict to civil wars and terrorism. And although the post-Cold War era has now drawn to an end, the United States is seeing not an abatement of global disorder, but the exacerbation thereof. As Hedley Bull wrote in his classic book, *The Anarchical Society*, the international environment always features the interplay between the forces of order and the forces of disorder.[64] Today, as a result of factors such as the proliferation of advanced technology and the dislocations and disruptions caused by otherwise benign processes such as globalization, the forces of disorder and disruption seem relatively more empowered than at any time in a generation, if not longer.

That empowerment is evident in a variety of phenomena that might otherwise seem unconnected. There is the emergence of what might be termed "super-spoilers"—actors that cannot fundamentally *remake* the international order, but are nonetheless violently opposed to that order and can *disrupt* it in fundamental ways. North Korea, for instance, fits firmly into this category. It now boasts an increasingly robust nuclear arsenal, has embraced a military doctrine that emphasizes preemptive nuclear strikes against U.S. forces and allies in East Asia, and is developing an intercontinental strike capability with which to hold the continental United States at risk and backstop its perpetually provocative behavior. Pyongyang—like Tehran—thus increasingly possesses the ability to menace or destabilize an entire region (and soon, beyond), while using advanced weaponry and asymmetric tactics to threaten its opponents with greater damage than ever before.[65] The Islamic State, too, clearly merits this label. Although its military fortunes are now in decline, it has shown—in truly horrifying fashion—an ability, unprecedented among non-state actors, to foster chaos throughout the heart of a crucial geopolitical region, master the use of technology for propaganda and recruiting purposes, and command or inspire acts of terroristic violence around the globe. Concern with rogue actors is nothing new, of course, but at no time since Saddam Hussein's defeat in 1991 have the rogues been so powerful and so capable of profound geopolitical disruption as they are today.

The rise of the Islamic State also points to another manifestation of this shift, which is the intensification and interlinkage of the threats posed by non-state extremists. Al-Qaeda—the most dangerous non-state actor of the post-Cold war era—was menacing enough. The Islamic State—the epitome of the non-state or quasi-state threat today—is a threat of an entirely different magnitude. Its ideology is far more virulent than that of al-Qaeda, for Islamic State ideology encompasses an unmatched bloodlust, a routinization of medieval savagery for purposes of propaganda and political control, an embrace of practices such as industrial-scale sexual slavery, and an unwillingness to defer

---

64 Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977); and Richard Haass, *A World in Disarray: American Foreign Policy and the Crisis of the Old Order* (New York: Penguin, 2016).

65 See Barbara Staff and Ryan Browne, "Intel Officials: North Korea 'Probably' Has Miniaturized Nuke," *CNN*, March 25, 2016; David Albright, *Future Directions in the DPRK's Nuclear Weapons Program: Three Scenarios for 2020* (Washington, DC: US–Korea Institute at SAIS, Johns Hopkins University, November 2015); and John Schilling and Henry Kan, *The Future of North Korean Nuclear Delivery Systems* (Washington, DC: US–Korea Institute at SAIS, Johns Hopkins University, April 2015).

the dream of a jihadist caliphate. Its military capabilities are more advanced than those of any terrorist group before it, just as its territorial conquests are far more impressive. Meanwhile, the Islamic State's ability to marry an intoxicating if poisonous narrative with a high degree of technological sophistication has allowed it to achieve an impressive global reach, forging strategic alliances with like-minded groups from the Philippines to Nigeria and catalyzing a steady stream of attacks that law enforcement agencies around the world have found nearly impossible to forestall. Fortunately, it seems more likely with each passing day that the core of the self-declared caliphate in Iraq and Syria will soon be destroyed by the United States and its international coalition. But if the Islamic State is an indication of what non- or quasi-state actors can accomplish in the contemporary environment, then even its military defeat in Iraq and Syria will not be particularly reassuring.[66]

The fortunes of the Islamic State illuminate yet another aspect of intensifying disorder, which is that contemporary instability is now manifesting itself on a scale not seen for many years. During the post-Cold War era, U.S. officials worried about upheaval and violence in key regions such as the Balkans and the Middle East. But in recent years, the United States and its allies have had a terrifying glimpse of how profound such upheaval and violence can actually become.

Consider the current state of the Middle East. To say that today's Middle East is in crisis is a laughable understatement; the region, or at least large swaths of it, is suffering a generalized breakdown of order comparable to what befell Europe in the Thirty Years' War.[67] There are significant military conflicts being fought in the Arabian Peninsula, Iraq, the Levant, and Libya; there is violent instability of varying degrees almost from one end of the region to the other. The traditional authoritarian Arab state model has been undermined in some countries and simply collapsed in others; international borders have crumbled or been rendered irrelevant. This instability and conflict, in turn, has both been driven by and served as a magnet for non-state actors such as the Islamic State and al-Qaeda; it has also invited great power competition more pronounced than anything the region has seen for perhaps 30 years. Whether—let alone when—the Middle East will be put back together is anyone's guess. In the meantime, instability in that region has spread to neighboring areas such as Europe, with refugee flows and terrorist attacks significantly upsetting the politics of that continent. Instability may be nothing new, but turmoil of this magnitude and pervasiveness is more original.

The final manifestation of intensified global disorder is the proliferation of issues that are increasingly difficult to address through existing international fora. In recent years, global governance has worked fairly well on a number of issues—containing the effects of the 2007–2008 financial crisis, for instance; dealing with the threat of piracy off the Horn of Africa; and even generating initial action to

---

66 See William McCants, *ISIL Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (New York: Picador, 2015); James Fromson and Steven Simon, "ISIS: The Dubious Paradise of Apocalypse Now," *Survival* 57, no. 3, May/June 2015; Michael Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (New York: Regan Arts, 2015); Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror* (New York: Harper-Collins, 2015); David Kilcullen, *Blood Year: The Unraveling of Western Counterterrorism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Charles R. Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, The Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Brian H. Fishman, *The Master Plan: ISIS, Al Qaeda, and the Jihadi Strategy for Final Victory* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016); and Fawaz A. Gerges, *ISIS: A History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

67 On this analogy, see Brendan Simms, Michael Axworthy, and Patrick Milton, "Ending the New Thirty Years War," *New Statesman*, January 26, 2016.

address the problem of climate change.[68] But on other emerging issues—threats posed by cyberespionage and cyberwarfare, the question of how to balance the protection of human rights with the imperatives of national sovereignty, the challenges of making globalization work for communities and people that often feel themselves battered by economic and technological forces they cannot control—the complexity of transnational problems seems to be outpacing the capacity of extant institutions and mechanisms to cope. It has become common to speak of a "global governance gap"—the distance "between what is desirable when it comes to meeting the challenges of globalization and what has proven possible."[69]

What connects all of these issues is that they each contribute to an international environment in which instability has proliferated and taken on dangerous dimensions. And whereas the post-Cold War era was characterized by a relatively high degree of global cooperation in addressing such challenges, in today's environment the contested nature of global politics frequently stands athwart more constructive multilateral responses. It was hard enough for the international community to address issues such as catastrophic terrorism, ethnic conflict, and nuclear proliferation at a time of remarkable great power comity in the 1990s and early 2000s. It is becoming harder still at a time of surging great power competition.

Compare, for instance, the painfully slow but ultimately effective international response to ethnic cleansing in Bosnia during the 1990s with the utterly ineffective efforts to address a far greater humanitarian catastrophe in Syria today. In the former case, U.S. dominance and relatively warm relations with Russia made possible a high degree of international consensus on the problem and its necessary solution, as reflected in a UN Security Council Resolution authorizing the use of force in Bosnia. Moscow even participated in the subsequent U.S.- and NATO-led peacekeeping mission.[70] In the latter case, resurgent Russian ambitions in the Middle East and rivalry with Washington have consistently frustrated international efforts to force Assad from power or otherwise bring the Syrian civil war to an end. Vladimir Putin even took the occasion of his address to the United Nations General Assembly in September 2015 to lambaste previous U.S. attempts to promote political liberalization in the Middle East: "Instead of the triumph of democracy and progress, we got violence, poverty, and social disaster."[71] Since that time, in fact, the Kremlin has been directly using its own restored military capabilities in Syria to prop up Assad's regime.

Similar patterns can be seen on other issues. International cooperation to combat terrorism has encountered greater obstacles in recent years, as U.S.-Russian geopolitical competition has impeded the sort of collaboration and exchanges that occurred in the aftermath of 9/11. Intelligence and military cooperation between the two countries has been sharply curtailed since Russia's invasion and

---

68 For an optimistic view of global governance today, see Daniel Drezner, *The System Worked: How the World Stopped Another Great Depression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

69 Haass, *A World in Disarray*, p. 150.

70 See Strobe Talbott, *The Russia Hand: A Memoir of Presidential Diplomacy* (New York: Random House, 2002), chapters 7–8; and Hal Brands, *From Berlin to Baghdad: America's Search for Purpose in the Post-Cold War World* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2008), pp. 177–179.

71 "Read Putin's U.N. General Assembly Speech," *Washington Post*, September 28, 2015.

annexation of Ukraine. U.S. and Russian officials both allege that the other's policies toward Syria and the Middle East are creating rather than countering terrorism.[72] Likewise, the sharpening confrontation between the United States and China has only tightened the Gordian knot of issues surrounding the North Korean nuclear program.[73] Finally, great power conflict has complicated efforts to develop international norms regarding cyberspace. In fact, as demonstrated by aggressive Russian and Chinese hacking of U.S. infrastructure and systems—including Russia's audacious effort to influence the outcome of the 2016 presidential election—cyberspace has become an increasingly contested arena for geopolitical competition.[74] The contested nature of the new global politics is thus exacerbated by the fact that the various sources of international upheaval often exacerbate one another.

Trouble Within

If these disruptions were the only things happening in the world today, the international system would still be in for a rough ride in the years to come. Yet these disruptions are being magnified by a fifth vital characteristic of contemporary global politics—pronounced uncertainty about the policies and intentions of the chief defenders of the post-Cold War system. International stability or the lack thereof is not simply the product of some objective correlation of forces in the international environment. It also reflects less tangible factors such as the purpose, effectiveness, and cohesion of the key players and coalitions. And today, unfortunately, these characteristics are increasingly in doubt when it comes to the United States and its traditional geopolitical partners.

Consider, for instance, the state of Europe. The European allies have long represented America's most crucial partners in upholding international stability not just in Europe but beyond, and in promoting the liberal rules of the road. Yet Europe is now suffering from a profound and deepening malaise, one that has significantly exacerbated the effects of its declining relative power. The fate of the European Union—and thus the basic cohesion of Europe—is uncertain at best, in view of the impending departure of the United Kingdom and the strong anti-integration sentiment roiling countries from the Black Sea to the Atlantic. Beneath a superficial unity, moreover, the continent is increasingly divided on geopolitical issues. Countries like Greece and Italy urge a return to normalized relations with a revisionist Russia; recent polls indicate that populations in many NATO member countries are decidedly unenthusiastic about coming to the defense of the alliance's easternmost members if they are attacked. Illiberal parties and movements are on the rise, in part because of issues such as immigration and refugee flows, and democratic practices are, too frequently, being eroded. Whether the international community is, in fact, seeing "the end of Europe" remains hard to determine. But it is

---

72 See W.J. Hennigan, "White House Opens Door to Military Cooperation with Moscow, but it Would Be Illegal," *Los Angeles Times*, January 23, 2017; and Hal Brands and Colin Kahl, "The Strategic Suicide of Aligning with Russia in Syria," *Foreign Policy*, February 7, 2017.

73 See Adam Taylor, "Why China is So Mad about THAAD, a Missile Defense System Aimed at Deterring North Korea," *Washington Post*, March 7, 2016.

74 See Thomas Rid, "How Russia Pulled Off the Biggest Election Hack in U.S. History," *Esquire*, October 20, 2016; and Ellen Nakashima, "Chinese Breach Data of 4 Million Federal Workers," *Washington Post*, June 4, 2015.

impossible to deny that as the international environment has become more ominous in recent years, Europe's ability to act as a stabilizing influence in that environment has been undermined.[75]

And what about the United States? The post-Cold War system, like the postwar system before it, always hinged on the assumption that the United States would continue to act vigorously in support of an open, positive-sum global order. But American leadership is now facing its greatest crisis in decades.

That crisis is arguably of deeper origins than many observers recognize. A certain ennui with American globalism was always likely after the Cold War, for the threat that had originally catalyzed that globalism—the Soviet Union—had ceased to exist. As far back as 1993, then-National Security Advisor Anthony Lake warned of resurgent "neo-know nothing isolationists."[76] That resurgence was temporarily beaten back by the missionary zeal that followed 9/11, but it returned with a vengeance after two long, frustrating, and inconclusive wars in the years thereafter. By 2013, a majority of Americans—52 percent, the highest share in decades—thought that the country should "mind its own business internationally and let other countries get along the best they can on their own."[77] That sentiment was sometimes amplified by the Obama administration, which framed "nation building at home" as an alternative to nation building overseas, talked about turning the page on an era of war and intensive U.S. involvement overseas, and frequently warned that the greatest danger to American power and international order was too much activism rather than too little.[78]

More recently, of course, the crisis of American leadership has been manifest in the election of a president whose campaign rhetoric assiduously stoked domestic grievances with respect to globalization and its byproducts, who cast—misleadingly—trade as the primary source of economic insecurity for displaced workers and communities, who critiqued U.S. allies as parasitic free-riders, and who framed America's traditional international responsibilities as a collection of sucker bets that had allowed other nations to enrich themselves at Washington's expense. To be sure, Trump also promised to increase military spending, intensify the campaign against the Islamic State, take a harder line against North Korea, and pursue a more confrontational approach (at least on economic issues) toward China. But one of the overriding themes of Trump's campaign, as well as many of his early statements as president, was his seemingly instinctual aversion to the idea that the United States should support some nebulous conception of international order at great—and very tangible—expense to the American taxpayer. What Trump's rise thus augurs, in the eyes of many American internationalists, is not necessarily a return to isolationism, but simply a retreat from the sort of historically exceptional role that the United States has played in the postwar and now the post-Cold

---

75 James Kirchick, *The End of Europe: Dictators, Demagogues, and the Coming Dark Age* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017); Craig Winneker, "For Europe's NATO Allies, Attack on One Isn't Attack on All," *Politico Europe*, June 10, 2015; and Ronald F Inglehart and Pippa Norris, *Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash*, RWP16-026 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Kennedy School, August 2016).

76 Thomas Friedman, "Clinton's Foreign Policy: Top Adviser Speaks Up," *New York Times*, October 31, 1993.

77 Paul Lewis, "Most Americans Think U.S. Should 'Mind Its Own Business' Abroad, Survey Finds," *The Guardian*, December 3, 2013.

78 For a critique of Obama, see Colin Dueck, *The Obama Doctrine: American Grand Strategy Today* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). For a more positive assessment, see Derek Chollet, *The Long Game: How Obama Defied Washington and Redefined America's Role in the World* (New York: Public Affairs, 2016).

War eras—a role in which Washington bears the primary burdens of global stability and prosperity out of a belief that doing so best serves its own interests.[79]

Predictions of such an American retreat have been made before, admittedly, and they have repeatedly been proven wrong. The Trump administration may be pulled toward the historical mainstream of U.S. policy, at least on some issues—there is, in fact, some evidence that this is already happening.[80] Future administrations may re-solidify an internationalist political consensus by more effectively addressing the underlying anxieties—about the impact of globalization on American economic security, for instance, or imbalanced burden-sharing within U.S. alliances—that Trump so effectively evoked. But the fact remains that there is now greater uncertainty about the future of U.S. foreign policy than there has been at any time in at least a generation. That uncertainty is itself an important—and destabilizing—factor in international relations today.[81]

It may well promote hedging on the part of U.S. allies who no longer believe that America's security commitments are quite so ironclad, thereby weakening the cohesion of these alliances over time—and accelerating the geopolitical turmoil in regions such as Eastern Europe and East Asia. It may lead U.S. security partners in the Middle East to seek alternative patrons as insurance against American withdrawal.[82] It may hasten the decay of liberal institutions like the EU—an organization that seems to draw particular hostility from the Trump administration.[83] It may provoke sharper revisionist challenges from aggressors who assess that the restraining forces arrayed against them are no longer so purposeful or unified. Most broadly, if the United States begins to behave more erratically on the international stage—and there are already signs, such as Trump's withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and his berating of traditional U.S. allies, that this is happening—then the perception of U.S. steadiness of purpose that has served as a sort of backstop for the international order could be eroded. A period of growing international turmoil and danger is a bad time to inject greater uncertainty about America's global role into the situation, but this is precisely what is happening today. The effects on international politics are unlikely to be either trivial or benign.

---

79 See Thomas Wright, "Trump's 19th Century Foreign Policy," *Politico*, January 20, 2016; Robert Kagan, "Trump Marks the End of America as the World's 'Indispensable Nation'," *Financial Times*, November 19, 2016; and Colin Kahl and Hal Brands, "Trump's Grand Strategic Train Wreck," *Foreign Policy*, January 31, 2017.

80 See A. Trevor Thrall and John Glaser, "America First? Not So Fast! What We've Learned from 100 Days of Trump Foreign Policy," *War on the Rocks*, April 27, 2017.

81 The point is made in Van Jackson, "Reading Trump: The Danger of Overanalyzing His Tweets," *Foreign Affairs*, January 25, 2017.

82 See Susan Glasser, "Can Iraq Survive Trump?" *Politico*, March 13, 2017.

83 Laura Hughes, "Senior Donald Trump Aide Warns European Union It Can Expect 'Hostility' after Brexit," *The Telegraph*, February 21, 2017.

Conclusion

"The current international environment is in turmoil," Kissinger wrote in 1968, "because its essential elements are all in flux simultaneously."[84] This diagnosis is just as apt with respect to the international system today. The Trump administration and its successors will undoubtedly face numerous crises in the years ahead on issues from great power relations to nuclear proliferation and counter-terrorism. Yet underlying these challenges is the fact of an international system that is changing in myriad fundamental ways. That system is still characterized by a relatively high degree of American primacy, contrary to what many observers claim. But it is nonetheless being shaken by declining U.S and Western overmatch, resurgent geopolitical revisionism, renewed ideological conflict, intensified global disarray, and sharpening questions about whether the leadership exercised by the United States and its key international partners will endure. During the post-Cold War era, the primary—and generally positive—characteristics of international affairs were mutually reinforcing; in the current era, these *destabilizing* factors are now compounding one another's adverse effects. Crises are commonly symptoms of deeper, foundational upheaval. The crises of today and tomorrow are symptoms of the shift from the post-Cold War world to a more competitive, contested, and disordered age.

Each of the issues identified here will be difficult enough to resolve on its own—dealing with a resurgent Russia or rebuilding stronger domestic support for American globalism are great challenges in and of themselves. Positioning the United States to grapple effectively with the broader array—and frequent interaction—of structural changes at work today will be a task extending beyond any single presidency. Offering fully elaborated policy recommendations for this task is beyond the scope of this essay, which is intended primarily to provide the diagnosis upon which successful prescription depends. But we would offer three preliminary observations.

First, it would be a grave mistake to see the current challenges as so overwhelming that they justify a retreat into something like a "Fortress America" form of retrenchment or the "continentalism" that many U.S. national security planners embraced before World War II.[85] It is still premature to say with any certainty which of the trends and developments described will ultimately prove to be transient and which will become lasting, structural elements of the international order. Moreover, a U.S. withdrawal from the international system would hardly mitigate or insulate Americans from the disorder and revisionism at work; it would simply exacerbate the disruptive trends and increase the prospect that those trends would eventually have devastating effects on the United States itself.[86] Finally, the United States retains many comparative strengths over its adversaries and challengers, and those strengths still give it an enormous—albeit relatively reduced—capacity to shape the international system.[87] It is the art of statesmanship for policymakers to exploit the weaknesses of U.S. adversaries and maximize

---

84 Kissinger, "Central Issues of American Foreign Policy."

85 For the shift away from "continentalism" during World War II, see Mark Stoler "From Continentalism to Globalism: General Stanley D. Embick, the Joint Strategic Survey Committee and the Military View of National Policy During the Second World War," *Diplomatic History* 6, no. 4, September 1982.

86 See Robert Kagan, "Backing into World War III," *Foreign Policy*, February 6, 2017.

87 Brooks and Wohlforth, "The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers in the Twenty-First Century"; Lieber, *Power and Willpower in the American Future*; Robert J. Lieber, *Retreat and Its Consequences: American Foreign Policy and the Problem of World Order* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

the nation's advantages. Doing so, however, requires a prior judgment that maintaining U.S. primacy—even the kind of contested primacy described—is worth the candle; it requires a commitment to actively influence global affairs rather than retreat from them.[88] It remains to be seen whether President Trump, who seems consumed by concerns about America's weaknesses rather than its inherent strengths, is willing to make such a commitment.

Second, making such a commitment requires confronting the question of whether or not the American public is itself willing to sustain such a role. There are many reasons it should be willing to do so; as we have argued elsewhere, the costs of America's global role are actually eminently affordable by historical standards, and they are far lower than the costs the country would eventually have to pay if it pulled back from global engagement.[89] Yet the public mood is, today, quite ambivalent—it gives indications of world-weariness, on the one hand, but also shows dissatisfaction with the disorder that has resulted from the trends described.[90] Whether a consensus in support of a robust American internationalism can be re-solidified remains to be seen. What is clear is that supporters of that tradition will have to go back to first principles if they are to make a compelling case for continued engagement; they must once again articulate the basic logic of policies and arrangements that American internationalists have long taken for granted. And making that case, in turn, will require a national leadership that is willing to recognize and bet on the resilience and resourcefulness of the American people and the American nation—that is to say, it will require leaders who recognize and will bet on the things that have always made America great in the past and continue to make it great today.

Third and finally, addressing the current state of affairs will require recognizing the fullness of what the United States is up against. The entire history of American leadership since World War II suggests that both U.S. leadership and the liberal international system itself have been capable of reforming and regenerating themselves when necessary. Indeed, the United States and its geopolitical partners have rebounded successfully from situations that looked far worse, as was the case in the 1970s.[91] But as we have argued, doing so again today will require more than pursuing specific policies aimed at particular policy problems. It will require, perhaps above all else, forming a broader conception of just how much global politics have changed since the early post-Cold War era—and the way in which particular issues or dangers are rooted in this larger structural transformation. Only once the intellectual work of accurately diagnosing the nature of the current international environment is complete can the essential policy work—and political persuasion—required to constructively tackle its challenges proceed. "In the field of foreign policy," Kissinger wrote almost a half-century ago, "we will never be able to contribute

---

88 The reference here is to Robert Jervis, "International Primacy: Is the Game worth the Candle?" *International Security* 17, no. 4, 1993. The case for primacy was argued in Huntington, "Why International Primacy Matters." for a recent bipartisan effort that argues that the U.S. should continue to use its predominant position in the international system to promote the liberal order, see Derek Chollet et al., *Building "Situations of Strength:" A National Security Strategy for the United States* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, February 2017).

89 Hal Brands and Eric S. Edelman, *Avoiding a Strategy of Bluff: The Crisis of American Military Primacy* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2017).

90 See "Public Uncertain, Divided Over America's Place in the World," *press release*, Pew Research Center, May 5, 2016, available at http://www.people-press.org/2016/05/05/public-uncertain-divided-over-americas-place-in-the-world/; and Hal Brands, "Is American Internationalism Dead? Reading the National Mood in the Age of Trump," *War on the Rocks,* May 16, 2017.

91 See Joffe, *The Myth of America's Decline: Politics, Economics, and a Half Century of False Prophecies*; and Daniel Sargent, *A Superpower Transformed: The Remaking of American Foreign Relations in the 1970s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

to building a stable and creative world order unless we first form some conception of it." The necessity of such intensive and holistic intellectual engagement is every bit as pressing today.[92]

---

[92] Kissinger, "Central Issues of American Foreign Policy."

ABOUT THE CENTER FOR STRATEGIC AND BUDGETARY ASSESSMENTS (CSBA)

The Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments is an independent, nonpartisan policy research institute established to promote innovative thinking and debate about national security strategy and investment options. CSBA's analysis focuses on key questions related to existing and emerging threats to U.S. national security, and its goal is to enable policymakers to make informed decisions on matters of strategy, security policy, and resource allocation.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Hal Brands is a Senior Fellow at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments and a Henry A. Kissinger Distinguished Professor of Global Affairs at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS). In 2015–2016, he was a Council on Foreign Relations International Affairs Fellow. In that capacity, he served as an adviser to the Secretary of Defense, working on a range of strategic planning and policy issues. He has also consulted with a range of government offices and agencies in the intelligence and national security communities, as well as the RAND Corporation, and provided research and analysis for the Office of Net Assessment in the Department of Defense. He received his B.A. from Stanford University (2005) and his Ph.D. from Yale University (2009). He previously worked as an Assistant and Associate Professor at Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy and as a researcher at the Institute for Defense Analyses.

Eric S. Edelman is Counselor at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments. He retired as a career minister from the U.S. Foreign Service on May 1, 2009. He has served in senior positions at the Departments of State and Defense as well as the White House, where he led organizations providing analysis, strategy, policy development, security services, trade advocacy, public outreach, citizen services, and congressional relations. As undersecretary of defense for policy (August 2005–January 2009), he was DoD's senior policy official, overseeing strategy development with global responsibility for bilateral defense relations, war plans, special operations forces, homeland defense, missile defense, nuclear weapons and arms control policies, counterproliferation, counternarcotics, counterterrorism, arms sales, and defense trade controls. He served as U.S. ambassador to Finland in the Clinton administration and Turkey in the Bush administration and was Vice President Cheney's principal deputy assistant for national security affairs. He was chief of staff to Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott, special assistant to Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Robert Kimmitt, and special assistant to Secretary of State George Shultz. His other assignments included the State Department Operations Center, Prague, Moscow, and Tel Aviv, where he was a member of the U.S. Middle East delegation to the West Bank/Gaza autonomy talks. Ambassador Edelman has been awarded the Department of Defense Medal for Distinguished Public Service, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Joint Distinguished Civilian Service Award, the Presidential Distinguished Service Award, and several Department of State Superior Honor Awards. In 2010, he was named a knight of the French National Order of the Legion of Honor. Ambassador Edelman serves on the National Defense Panel, on the bipartisan board of directors of the United States Institute of Peace, and on the board of the Foreign Policy Initiative. He received a B.A. in History and Government from Cornell University and a Ph.D. in U.S. Diplomatic History from Yale University.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank Thomas Mahnken for his support and comments and Kamilla Gunzinger for creating the cover and her care and attention to detail in preparing the manuscript for publication. The opinions and analysis in this study are those of the authors; any shortcomings are solely their responsibility. CSBA receives funding from a broad and diverse group of funders, including private foundations, government agencies, and corporations. A complete list of these organizations can be found on our website at www.csbaonline.org/about/contributors.

Cover: An M1A2 Main Battle Tank in Swietozow, Poland, January 16, 2017—U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Micah VanDyke; The USS Porter conducts strike operations against a target in Syria, April 7, 2017—U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Ford Williams; F/A-18 Hornets and Super Hornets fly over the Republic of Korea destroyers and USS Carl Vinson, May 3, 2017—U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Sean M. Castellano.

CSBA
Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments

1667 K Street, NW, Suite 900
Washington, DC 20006
Tel. 202-331-7990 • Fax 202-331-8019
www.csbaonline.org