

coalitional interests, and presidential leadership. This would amount to a reversal of Eisenhower's achievement. Another possibility is that while Trump has tapped into working-class concerns about globalization and free trade, having heard these concerns, future conservative leaders will try to strike responsible balances on trade policy without dismantling all the advantages of relatively open trading arrangements with US allies. Prudent Republicans should develop new ways of tackling trade policy that recognize existing frustrations and divisions; push back against China more effectively; and preserve the benefits of international trade for the United States. As with every other aspect of American foreign policy, factoring in domestic politics, there is more than one possibility here.

What the Trump phenomenon has clarified, above all, is that no version of liberal internationalism can be popularly sustained in the absence of an underlying nation-state felt by its own citizens to be prosperous, sovereign, and secure. And if the nation's leaders ever forget that again, the voters will be sure to remind them. In this sense, there is really no such thing as "Trumpism." There is only America.

Age of Iron

In his *Works and Days*, the ancient Greek poet Hesiod sketched an interpretation of history very different from the modern liberal one. He suggested that over time humanity had developed through a series of historic eras, beginning with a prehistoric golden age, then passing through silver, bronze, and heroic eras. Some earlier eras had been characterized by epic struggle on the part of preceding generations: "Their hearts were tough as steel." Only for Hesiod, the overall trajectory was not one of progressive improvement, but degeneration. The final era, his own, he described as an age of iron. He was hardly optimistic about this new era, in which "scoundrels will be honored . . . and shame will vanish." And he was quite realistic about describing its power dynamics. As he said of ordinary mortals in the new era: "Their lot will be a blend of the good and bad. . . . Only fools need suffer to learn." Nevertheless, he did not recommend the embrace of inequity. On the contrary, like the author of Ecclesiastes, Hesiod spoke out against abusive kings, and urged his readers to "follow justice," while keeping a keen eye on the new reality. The age of iron would require a close protection of those nearest and dearest: "Remember that neighbors come first." Above all, he recommended the cultivation of honest and effective labor toward constructive purposes: "Whatever your lot, nothing will be as good as work."¹

The great fear of many observers today is that the United States is voluntarily abandoning a kind of seventy-year golden age of liberal

internationalism. The months and years since Trump's election have seen an outpouring of concern that the United States is discarding what advocates call the rules-based liberal international order. According to its leading proponents, such as Princeton University's John Ikenberry, that order "is complex and sprawling, organized around economic openness, multilateral institutions, security cooperation, democratic solidarity, and internationalist ideals." It is "a strategic environment with rules, institutions, partners, and relationships," and the United States sustains it by providing "public goods" and agreeing to "restrain itself and operate within an array of regional and global institutions." In Ikenberry's view:

Underpinning US global leadership has been the United States' support for multilateral rules and institutions. This is what has made US power so unique—and legitimate. . . . As a result, other countries realized that they could benefit from US ascendancy. Global institutions fostered cooperation and allowed Washington to attract allies, making its global presence more acceptable and durable. These institutions helped the international order solve common problems. . . . countries gravitated toward a global liberal internationalist system.

For Ikenberry, "a hostile revisionist power has indeed arrived on the scene, but it sits in the Oval Office, the beating heart of the free world. . . . Trump has abdicated responsibility for the world the United States built. . . . Liberal democracy itself appears fragile, vulnerable in particular to far-right populism" that "disdains the multicultural and open character of American society." His solution is to reiterate the benefits of liberal internationalism "with more conviction," reclaim "the master narrative," and encourage US allies such as Germany to "push back" against the United States: Angela "Merkel, as the leader of the country that perhaps most embodies the virtues and accomplishments of the postwar liberal order, is uniquely positioned to speak as the moral voice of the liberal democratic world."²²

In outlining some of the many benefits of a US-led international order outside of the Soviet Union, Russia, and China since the end of World War II, Ikenberry is not wrong. The United States has indeed benefitted on the whole from a relatively open international trading order in which it is the leading guarantor. It is easy to take the benefits of this order for granted. Both allies and the United States have gained from it. Strategically, the backbone of that order has been a network of US peacetime commitments, military bases, defensive alliances, and force deployments around the Eurasian perimeter. This US forward presence contains and deters competitors; upholds balances of power in regions of vital interest; protects global sea lanes and thereby peacetime trade; reassures American allies; dampens regional security competition; permits humanitarian relief when appropriate; and allows the United States to protect its citizens from an advanced posture. That basic strategic posture has been a keystone support for an international order relatively benign, prosperous and democratic by historic standards. The United States still stands at the center of a broad system of partnerships and alliances that help solidify peaceful relations between dozens of nations. No other power has a set of alliances like this; it is a major asset.³

Since the end of the Cold War, however, a number of weaknesses in both the theory and practice of the liberal international order have become increasingly apparent. These can be clustered into three broad categories: economic, national, and geopolitical.

The *economic* challenge to liberal order emanates from perceived domestic and international shifts over the years in the relative material advantage to be gained from open global trading arrangements. A certain percentage of Americans in both parties simply do not view globalization or free trade as materially beneficial to them. Of course US voters have always had mixed feelings about economic globalization, and by some measures support for it has not actually declined. According to one Chicago Council poll from 2017, a majority of US citizens still agree that globalization brings net economic benefits to American consumers, US companies, and the American economy as a whole. Yet according to that same poll there is also a majority feeling that globalization has been bad

for the job security of American workers.⁴ Nor are these concerns entirely without merit. The relatively open international commercial system led by the United States since the 1940s has brought tremendous net economic benefits to the United States as well as other countries. But these gains have been uneven. There is considerable evidence that the greatest beneficiaries of economic globalization in recent decades have been the rising middle class in emerging economies such as China and India, along with the very wealthy worldwide. Working-class and middle-class Americans, in particular, have not benefitted to the same extent.⁵ Indeed the pattern for many Americans in the twenty-first century has been stagnant wages and job insecurity. This pattern is due to long-term technological changes, more than to US trade policy. But insofar as free-trade agreements and economic globalization are viewed as part of a package that chiefly advantages the wealthiest and most privileged of their fellow citizens, some voters will continue to cast ballots for populist candidates, regardless of expert admonitions to the contrary—and the notion of a liberal international economic order based upon free trade will continue to be buffeted.⁶

The *national* challenge to liberal order emanates from reassertions of nation-state sovereignty against internationalist norms, institutions, ideas and expectations. The pattern in recent years has been for commentators to lump together the nationalism of authoritarian regimes (Russia, China) with that of democratic ones (the United States, Great Britain) as part of a worrisome overall trend.⁷ Liberal internationalists clearly believe that nationalism, in itself, is a threat. But this belief elides some very different versions of nationalism, while bypassing or ignoring the powerful arguments in favor of popular self-government and democratic accountability at the global level. The United States was not founded as a sovereign nation only to see its independence submerged into a mishmash of global governance. It is perfectly reasonable for Americans living in a free polity to want to preserve their own particular national traditions, customs, and way of life. It is furthermore reasonable for Americans to insist that controversial domestic social issues be resolved by domestic and democratic processes, rather than through the backdoor of international jurisprudence. The fact that this is now viewed as controversial is in itself

astonishing, and revealing of the changes in liberal internationalism over time. For conservatives, of all people, local is better—and this applies to issues of global governance as well. International organizations should do only what national governments truly cannot.

In many cases of vital interest, multilateral organizations work at the edge of international power, not at its center, and their edicts are often unenforceable. There is really no such thing as a general reputation for multilateralism, and the greatest international-challenges are not problems of legality. US foreign policy elites should have modest and realistic expectations for what these institutions can achieve, rather than treating their empowerment as an end in itself. Any sensible American leader will want to choose between unilateral, bilateral, and multilateral solutions and approaches to specific US foreign policy challenges, case by case. In fact this is what the most successful presidents have done, from both political parties. To declaim that multilateral approaches are inherently morally and practically superior, or to insist upon them as a kind of religion, is not convincing. It is unclear, to say the least, why multilateral organizations with unelected leaders and dictatorships among their members should be considered morally superior to national governments democratically elected.⁸

The *geopolitical* challenge to liberal order emanates from long-term structural changes, power shifts, and persistent weak points inherent within the internationalist project. To understand why this is so requires a little elaboration as to what can be gained from a geopolitical analysis.

Geopolitics refers to the study of the relationship between international politics and geographic facts. These facts on the ground can include human and political realities like trade networks, national boundaries, and constellations of military or economic power, along with persistent natural features such as rivers, oceans, or mountains.⁹ Many of the key geopolitical insights were laid out by British parliamentarian Halford Mackinder and Dutch-American scholar Nicolas Spykman over the first half of the twentieth century. Broaching the subject in a 1904 *Geographical Journal* article, Mackinder suggested that the era of European maritime predominance established four hundred years earlier was coming to an end. Western

naval and colonial powers had previously been able to outflank and dominate the Asian landmass through superior technology. But the consolidation of great continental-sized land powers such as Russia and potentially China—combined with changes in land transportation—meant that insular maritime democracies such as Great Britain would have a more difficult time maintaining their global position. Mackinder asked his readers to envision continental Europe, continental Asia, and continental Africa as a single “World Island,” possessing most of the world’s population and industrial potential. The core of this world island he called the Heartland, inaccessible to sea power—essentially, Russia, Mongolia, Tibet, and Central Asia, including parts of China and Iran. If the world island were ever united under a single political entity, with a base in the Heartland, it would possess overwhelming economic and military advantages over the outer crescent of geographically insular maritime powers such as Great Britain, Japan, and the United States. Mackinder’s recommendation was for these maritime powers to encourage the creation of geopolitical buffer zones, for example in Eastern Europe. He viewed the League of Nations as well-intentioned but almost beside the point, if it did not embody a material determination on the part of the world’s great seagoing democracies to maintain favorable balances of power on the Eurasian continent.¹⁰

The League of Nations’ failure to prevent a second world war encouraged a new appreciation for geopolitics. Writing in the early 1940s, Nicolas Spykman modified Mackinder’s formulations by pointing to the existence of what he called an amphibious Rimland—located in between the Heartland and its great offshore islands—and stretching from Western Europe around the Middle East, across India, ending in coastal China: Spykman pointed out that most of the world’s productive potential was in the Rimland, not within the Heartland as such. Control of the Rimland therefore meant control of the world—precisely what was at stake during both world wars—and this would be determined by struggles between mixed alliances, rather than by simply lining up sea powers versus land powers straightforwardly. Spykman understood that Americans, as offshore islanders, are always tempted by an offshore strategic approach, but he did not view such an approach as viable. If the United States failed to

maintain control over vital sea and airspace in the Atlantic and Pacific, then some other power eventually would. Even a predominant US influence in South America’s southern cone could hardly be taken for granted, given the vast distances involved, and if that influence were lost then even a hemispheric defense would collapse into something more constrained and impoverished. Taken as a whole, the Rimland’s economic and military weight pointed to no secure resting place for Americans in the absence of internal Old World balances, and these balances would have to be actively upheld by the United States. As he put it, America’s “main political objective, both in peace and in war, must therefore be to prevent the unification of the Old World centers of power in a coalition hostile to her own interests.” Spykman was more sanguine than Mackinder that this could actually be done, both through a forward US strategic presence and through technological developments in American airpower properly deployed and maintained in bases far away from the United States.¹¹

What is the geopolitical situation in our own time? According to British scholar Barry Buzan, only superpowers have global military reach.¹² In geopolitical terms then, since the collapse of the Soviet Union—and even now—the United States remains the world’s only superpower. In fact the United States has possessed more broadly based economic and military capabilities than any other major power since the end of World War II. This condition is sometimes called primacy, and it is indeed a condition, not a strategy in itself.¹³ An objective net assessment of America’s material advantages today reveals a nation with a range of capabilities still unmatched by any other country. These include a gigantic national economy, deep financial markets, a favorable geographic position, vast natural resources, revolutionary advances in the domestic production of shale oil and gas, robust demographics, a large population, high per capita income, a scientific and technological edge in innovation, a strong civil society, worldwide alliance networks, the leading military capabilities on the planet, a continuing lead in precision strike technology, and an underlying political-constitutional order of tenacious strength. Other major powers possess some of these advantages, but none of them possess all, apart from the United States.¹⁴

Having said that, since the 1990s there have clearly been some very significant shifts within the international balance of power, in broad alignment with Mackinder's predictions over a century ago. The single greatest gravitational shift in relative economic and military weight has been from the Atlantic toward the Pacific, and from Europe toward Asia. As Robert Kaplan argues, we appear in some ways to be returning to the pre-modern world of Marco Polo, in which Western Europe was only one portion of a vast Eurasian commercial network encompassing roughly equal civilizations, centered on China as much as on other imperial powers.¹⁵ The Indo-Pacific, rather than Europe's Western half, is increasingly the focus of the world's greatest economies, militaries, and geopolitical ambitions. Obviously this long-term power shift has profound implications for America's interests, its allies, its primacy, and indeed the very idea of liberal world order.¹⁶

The power shift within the Eurasian Rimland, from west to east, has gone hand in hand with the stubborn persistence and even revival of authoritarian forms of government internationally, and this is probably not coincidental. Leading authoritarian regimes whose demise, reform, or transformation was confidently predicted during the heyday of post-Cold War optimism have managed to survive and adapt. The great "third wave" of democratization, stretching from the 1970s into the 1990s—and bringing Mediterranean Europe, much of Latin America, key portions of littoral Asia, and most of Central-Eastern Europe into the democratic fold—has long since ended. Now we live in an age in which autocratic regimes have discovered creative new techniques to extend their rule and push back on democratic opponents, worldwide and inside their own countries.¹⁷

Internationally, we see revisionist authoritarian forces pushing up against existing regional orders to assert alternative political-ideological visions, including their own increased influence, status, and external and internal security. Such forces take three main forms. First, there are the two great authoritarian continental-sized powers, namely Russia and China. Second, there are regional rogue states—primarily Iran and North Korea—with aggressive revisionist ambitions. Third, there are

salafi-jihadist terrorist groups such as ISIS and Al Qaeda, along with radical Islamist factions hostile to the West. These various autocratic forces do not necessarily cooperate; sometimes they compete with or combat one another. Moreover, their degree of enmity toward the United States varies considerably. China, for example, is a powerful challenger that benefits tremendously from open international economic arrangements and does not actively seek violent conflict with the West. Al Qaeda, on the other hand, is at perpetual war with the United States by its own choosing. Still, it is useful to understand that none of these authoritarian powers are actually genuine partners or friends of the United States.

In terms of sheer material capabilities, the weightiest of the authoritarian challengers is China. Over the past forty years, following Deng Xiaoping's reforms, China has transformed itself from a Maoist, impoverished Third World country into one of the two largest national economies in the world. Indeed when measured by purchasing power parity, China's gross domestic product surpassed that of the United States in 2014. This material growth has gone hand in hand with a vast expansion of Chinese trade and investment on every inhabited continent, including Africa and South America. Under its Belt and Road Initiative, the PRC funds large-scale infrastructure projects across Asia and beyond, tying diverse regions together economically under enhanced Chinese influence. In terms of its commercial and financial reach, the PRC is now a global power. Moreover, Beijing can and is using this newfound wealth to fund impressive modernizations of its army, navy, and air force, so as to lend itself better deterrent and coercive leverage in relation to any crisis around the country's vast perimeter on land, air, and sea. Under President Xi Jinping, the Chinese government has abandoned Deng's emphasis on biding time, and has announced an ambitious "China dream" whereby the nation reasserts itself as one of the truly great powers in the world. Beijing may ultimately attempt to supplant the United States as the predominant alliance leader within East Asia, a role it played for centuries before the arrival of Western and Japanese imperial influence, and a role the Chinese view as rightly theirs. Of course China also has serious weaknesses and vulnerabilities, both demographic, domestic political, economic, military,

and international. It does not yet have a global military or strategic presence to match that of the United States. Nevertheless, China's continuing rise offers a serious challenge to US interests, to American allies, and to the very concept of liberal international order.¹⁸

Vladimir Putin's Russia offers another great-power challenge to US interests in Europe and beyond. Under Putin, Moscow aims to reconstitute lost spheres of influence from the Soviet era, push against the West, and reassert itself as a major power within (what it hopes to be) a multipolar system. The various instruments used include disinformation, covert action, oil and gas pressure, cyberattacks, realpolitik diplomacy, economic and military pacts, weapons sales, and direct armed intervention, as in Syria, Georgia, and Ukraine. Its re-entry as a major player within the Middle East has been especially striking, as was the 2014 seizure of Crimea. Putin looks to cut an imposing figure on the world stage, break up distinctly Western institutions, reassert Russia's status, secure its buffer zones, and maintain his own regime in power against any "color revolution" at home. The United States is viewed as a major obstacle to achieving these ends. Russia continues to suffer from some severe long-term economic, strategic, and demographic vulnerabilities limiting its international role. Nevertheless it uses what capabilities it has, aggressively, to promote its own stature while challenging broad notions of liberal international order.¹⁹

The conventional wisdom regarding Sino-Russian cooperation used to be that their relationship was nothing more than an axis of convenience.²⁰ Unfortunately, this is no longer true. To be sure, Moscow and Beijing still have many foreign policy differences, and their coordination falls well short of any formal military alliance. But Russia and China now have a working strategic partnership that reaches across multiple issue areas, including weapons sales, oil and gas supplies, security coordination, and defense against liberal norms.²¹ The two authoritarian regimes see eye to eye in protesting supposed outside interference in their own affairs—and in creating or recreating regional spheres of influence as economic and security buffer zones. Both ultimately look to see a world free from unmatched American hegemony, and characterized instead by the internal

and external security of their own authoritarian regimes. Moreover, both powers often have businesslike and mutually beneficial relationships with other leading autocracies such as Iran and North Korea. Altogether, the result is a Eurasian landmass dominated by a *de facto* Sino-Russian partnership and its attendant supporters, whether dictatorial or simply weak. This is something close to Halford Mackinder's geopolitical nightmare: an Old World increasingly dominated by an authoritarian Heartland, against an outer crescent of maritime democracies.

After these great-power competitors, the next category of actor to challenge anything resembling liberal conceptions of regional order are the rogue states of North Korea and Iran. Both regimes have already lasted longer than many post-Cold War observers expected. North Korea has been ruled as a brutally totalitarian system by the Kim family since the end of World War II. Iran is dominated by a repressive Shiite theocracy with elements of military dictatorship. Both regimes look to upend regional balances and expel American influence, whether in the form of existing alliances or otherwise. Iran uses proxy forces, covert action, mendacious diplomacy, and support for terrorism to promote its influence in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, and beyond. North Korea uses aggressive brinkmanship—including the threat of its existing nuclear arsenal—to pressure the United States and its allies with the stated long-term purpose of reunifying the Korean peninsula under the control of Pyongyang.²² Both regimes are highly authoritarian, anti-American at a deep ideological level, and possessed of revisionist regional ambitions with longstanding WMD programs. Both regimes are also capable of considerable tactical flexibility, including negotiated arms control settlements, in pursuit of their long-term goals.

Finally, jihadist terrorists and radical Islamists pose a continuing security challenge. Transnational networks of salafi-jihadists such as ISIS, Al Qaeda, and affiliated and likeminded groups target regional US allies, American forces, and US civilians, including within the United States. Salafi-jihadist organizations operate in the form of many local groups and affiliates across large parts of Africa; South, Southeast, and Central Asia; and of course the Middle East. Sometimes these terrorist groups compete

with one another; sometimes they coordinate; sometimes they fight internal disputes. But they are all bitterly hostile toward the United States in a fundamental sense, and wage perpetual war upon it by their own choice. Their declared goal going back several decades is to topple regional governments within the Muslim world, expel Western influence, recover previously Muslim territories, establish strict sharia law, and eventually restore the unity of the Islamic world culminating in a restored caliphate. To that end they utilize terrorist attacks, work with local tribal leaders when they can, look to bog down US forces, attempt to win over Muslim support both inside and outside the Western world, and wage something like a decentralized global insurgency campaign. These methods and objectives do not carry the support of most Muslims worldwide, but they do carry the support of a significant minority in many countries, and it would be delusional to deny it. The appeal of salafi-jihadist ideology to that minority will continue to bring these terrorist groupings a certain number of recruits, even when the United States successfully undermines specific organizations. In particular, the dismantling of ISIS as a state-like entity, while most welcome, does not indicate the end of either ISIS or jihadist terrorists more generally. Salafi-jihadist terrorist groups do not possess the material capabilities of even a single major nation-state. But their demonstrated willingness and ability to inflict mass civilian casualties, including through suicide bombing attacks, combined with their overall resilience and adaptability, necessarily makes them a persistent security concern for the United States and its allies.²³

The challenge of politicized radical Islam is actually broader than that of these groups, even though neither is equivalent to the Muslim religion as a whole. Even political Islamists who do not support terrorist attacks on American civilians, and who work through parliamentary methods, often support attacks on US troops in the Muslim world, and take for granted the need to expel Western influence. Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood prior to the Arab Spring was one such group, which is what made its ascension to power in 2011–2012 such a disaster for US interests, not to mention for Egyptians.²⁴ Most Islamists, by definition, are not committed to liberal democracy, but instead use it as a means toward a very different end. They

also frequently harbor a vicious anti-Semitism culminating in calls for the physical destruction of Israel.²⁵ Such groups have a degree of local support within the Muslim world beyond that of terrorist organizations. Factional disputes among politicized radical Islamists—and with terrorist groups like Al Qaeda—will certainly continue. As with salafi-jihadists, political Islamists are a very diverse group. Fortunately radical political Islam as a specific ideology is not equivalent to the Muslim religion as a whole, and it is unhelpful to pretend that it is.²⁶

The US-led international order that has existed since the 1940s is a real achievement, not to be lightly dismissed. But it rests upon a political superstructure, and especially since the end of the Cold War too many liberal internationalists on both sides of the Atlantic have forgotten this. Even into the twenty-first century, the global political system remains in many ways an anarchy in which independent nation-states interact and compete for advantage. No multilateral organization—not even the United Nations—really has the power to enforce law and order at the international level. That leaves independent nation-states reliant on themselves to protect vital national interests. In this sense, some of the most enduring realities of international politics have never really changed that much from one century to the next. Although technologies have certainly advanced, numerous features of international power politics have not. Strategic competition between major powers is not historically abnormal—quite the contrary. Diplomacy must still be backed by material weight or force of some kind. Nations use carrots and sticks, or promises of reward and punishment, to secure their interests in relation to one another. And military instruments of power of national power are by no means outmoded in our time. These are the points made by foreign policy realists, past and present, and their caveats are worth taking seriously.²⁷

Under these circumstances, what sort of foreign policy should the United States pursue?

A number of academic foreign policy realists advocate an alternative American strategy of offshore balancing.²⁸ This would involve deep reductions in US land forces, the forswearing of counterinsurgency

operations, and the avoidance of international projects entailing the governance or occupation of other countries. Under a strategy of offshore balancing, Washington would move toward disbanding inherited alliance commitments in Eurasia, cut US defense spending, abandon the pursuit of American hegemony, focus on limited air and sea capabilities, and for the most part avoid warfare overseas. The United States would station its armed forces over the horizon, and rely upon local state actors to balance one another. If these actors proved genuinely unable to protect regional balances of power, then and only then would US forces come ashore against the revealed threat to restore the balance and return home. Offshore realists suggest that such a strategy would undercut support for anti-American terrorism or weapons of mass destruction on the part of other nations. They further argue that it would curb the powers of the US national security state, rely on America's insular geographic position for security, and permit a much-needed focus on domestic priorities. Similar and overlapping strategic proposals go by the name of deep retrenchment, restraint, or nonintervention.²⁹ Within the community of foreign policy commentary, these alternate strategies have particular support from libertarians at the CATO Institute, as well as from some venues on the right such as *The American Conservative*.³⁰

Realists are right to suggest that any plausible foreign policy must begin with a specification of national interests. US vital interests begin with the defense of American territory from attacks of any kind, the preservation of the country's sovereign integrity and independence, and the protection of America's distinctive system of limited government. Internationally, the responsibility of the US government is to behave in such a way as to safeguard these interests, protect the lives and property of American citizens, and enhance economic opportunities for the United States overseas. The preservation of regional balances of power within Europe and Asia is certainly in the American interest. So is the security of oil supplies flowing from the Persian Gulf. Past these basic interests, the United States has a vital stake in the maintenance of American primacy—defined as the retention of more broad-based material capabilities than any other major

power—since the promotion of every other American interest will be easier if that primacy is conserved.³¹

The problem with a strategy of offshore balancing, however, is that it is hardly obvious it would secure these vital interests any better than a continued US forward presence. There are genuine risks to retrenchment, precisely from a realist perspective.³² The costs of America's world role are visible and known. The potential risks and costs of dismantling that forward presence are less knowable, but potentially catastrophic. It is entirely possible that US strategic disengagement from Eurasia could invite greater nuclear proliferation, jihadist terror, authoritarian advances, and even major power warfare. Yet advocates of offshore balancing regularly operate on the unprovable assumption that no such destabilizing scenarios would materialize—or that they would be of no great interest to the United States. In all likelihood, as Americans were forced to rediscover during World War II, regional breakdowns coinciding with previous US disengagements would be of very great interest, requiring strategic re-entries far more costly than simply remaining forward committed.³³ Indeed this is why the United States has maintained a forward presence over the past seventy years in the first place. Conservatives, of all people, should beware the unintended consequences of dismantling strategic commitments that have served the United States tolerably well.

Instead of disengaging offshore, the United States should carefully safeguard its existing forward presence and pursue robust strategies of pressure against authoritarian competitors overseas, using a wide array of integrated policy tools. These mixed tools should include responsible foreign assistance, alliance relationships, economic sanctions, trade agreements, covert action, diplomatic capabilities, intelligence assets, forward bases, and a well-maintained armed force.³⁴ Such an approach also requires coercive and deterrent threats that are serious, clear, and credible. The overarching goal should be to gain leverage, intensify pressure, and impose costs against challengers in differentiated fashion case by case. In some cases, such as China, this will certainly include continued economic and diplomatic engagement alongside a more disciplined competitive approach. But the overall shift in American strategy should be away from

overly optimistic assumptions of the past, toward long-term strategies of pressure against US adversaries.

In relation to Putin's Russia, the United States should aim to deter, balance, and counter Russian assertions in credible fashion within the former Soviet Union and elsewhere. This can include tightened military coordination within NATO, with a fresh emphasis on eastward territorial defense; strengthened missile defense systems in that region; diplomatic, military, and technical assistance to the Ukrainian government; increased US oil and gas supplies to Europe; broadened economic sanctions against key Russian actors; new American ground and air forces deployed in Poland and the Baltic States; and enhanced US cyber defenses against election interference. The United States can still utilize businesslike diplomacy and work with Moscow on a range of dimensions, locations, and issue areas. But the United States should not assume that American accommodations in any of these issue areas will necessarily lead to broader cooperation from Moscow, because the record of the past twenty years suggests the opposite.³⁵

With regard to China, the United States possesses a number of counterbalancing foreign policy tools, and it should make good use of them. The United States can bolster its military capabilities in the region; encourage strategic, complementary and cooperation among US allies; develop ballistic missile defense systems against regional threats; consider entering a renegotiated TPP agreement; support regional security partners and allies consistently; increase controls on American technology exports useful to China militarily; explore additional US basing options within the Asia-Pacific region; support Japan's expansion of its own defenses; counter Chinese Communist Party influence operations; and help US allies better defend their own sea and air spaces. The United States will continue to engage with China both economically and diplomatically, as well it should. But Washington should simultaneously pursue focused, energetic, and credible policies of deterrence, pressure, and counterbalancing against Chinese regional assertions—as in the South and East China Seas—precisely in order to prevent any misunderstandings or mixed messages that might unintentionally lead to armed conflict.³⁶

In the abstract, one option in relation to the current Sino-Russian partnership would be for the United States to counterbalance Russia against China, by reaching out to Moscow diplomatically, in a kind of reversal of the Nixon-Kissinger outreach toward Mao during the early 1970s. Indeed this may be President Trump's preference.³⁷ The problem with this option, however, is that Putin has demonstrated little interest in acting as a cat's paw for Washington against China. Moreover, the uses of an anti-American strategic position, together with common interests in continued Sino-Russian coordination, run too deep for the Chinese and Russian regimes.³⁸ Indeed President Barack Obama tried an accommodating approach toward both Moscow and Beijing in 2009, only to discover its limitations. Certainly, the United States can avoid actions so foolish and precipitous that they unintentionally benefit Sino-Russian partnership. But under the circumstances, the United States really has no choice but to try to counteract aggressive and authoritarian pressures emanating outward from both Moscow and Beijing.

In relation to Iran, the United States can develop a comprehensive, integrated strategy to pressure and frustrate the current regime from multiple directions. This should include bolstered American deterrents in the region; US covert action; theater missile defenses in Europe; American foreign aid programs aimed at competing with Iran; strategic coordination with US allies; intensified and fully enforced sanctions against Tehran; a more regular presence of an American carrier task force in the Mediterranean and Persian Gulf regions; and drawing attention to the issue of human rights inside Iran. Regional allies and adversaries both need to understand that the United States is not simply abandoning the region. The overall American goal should be to push back against Iranian aggressions, and retake the initiative from a hostile regime, by pressuring and imposing costs upon it well beyond the issue of nuclear weapons.³⁹

With regard to North Korea, the United States must maintain a carefully focused pressure campaign to deter the North's aggression and set back its nuclear weapons capabilities while avoiding a second Korean war—a very delicate balancing act. This necessarily entails close security cooperation with Seoul and Tokyo; a strengthened US naval presence in nearby

waters; intensified international sanctions; theater and national missile defenses; close diplomatic efforts with Beijing; and very clear US alliance commitments. There is no need for the United States to make either regime change or preventive warfare the centerpiece of its approach toward Pyongyang. But there is also no need to shy away from pointing out North Korea's outrageous human rights abuses, since the regime's totalitarian nature is ultimately the source of its own foreign policy. Over the long term, the only real solution to the peninsula's internal security tension is the reunification of Korea under a democratic government. In the meantime, the United States should avoid diplomatic concessions to the North that do not actually dismantle the regime's nuclear weapons arsenal—a common mistake of past arms control agreements with Pyongyang.⁴⁰

Finally, in relation to jihadist terrorist groups such as ISIS, Al Qaeda, and their affiliates, the United States can pursue strategies of counterpressure involving training and advisory support to partner governments, special operations, drones, intelligence capabilities, detective work, technical assistance, counterterror cooperation with allies, financial sanctions, better homeland security, and direct military action when necessary. This includes cooperating with allied or partner governments in the Muslim world such as Egypt, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Saudi Arabia. It also includes supporting US intelligence agencies rather than undermining or castigating them. In the end, jihadist suicide bombers cannot be managed peacefully, but must be located, captured, turned, or killed before they are able to carry out deliberate attacks on innocent civilians. Of all the international competitors listed, jihadist terrorist groupings cannot really be contained, but must be forcibly preempted, rolled back, and destroyed.

The credible maintenance of US-backed pressure and deterrence against a number of authoritarian regimes overseas requires a certain level of American defense spending in order to keep the peace. US defense expenditures pegged at something like 4 percent of GDP would be necessary simply to meet existing commitments. There is certainly a strong case for reforming military payroll and benefits, along with weapons acquisitions practices, in order to economize on spending. But in terms of military research and development, procurement, modernization, major

weapons systems, and the number of troops within each armed service, there is no current need for cuts. Quite the contrary.⁴¹ The United States must maintain forces able to deter aggression in three separate theaters—Europe, the Middle East, and the Asia-Pacific—sufficient to win if deterrence fails. Without playing service favorites, this will especially require long-term commitment to an American naval buildup.⁴²

In terms of the prospective use of force, over the past ten to fifteen years many Americans, including successive US presidents, have drawn powerful lessons from the 2003 invasion of Iraq. One lesson has been to avoid new large-scale counterinsurgency, nation-building, or stability operations overseas. In itself, that lesson is understandable. But there is another lesson that should be drawn as well: namely that if and when the United States intervenes militarily overseas, it should do so in a way that is serious, decisive, and fully considered, with prior and careful preparation for a wide range of contingencies. As former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates once wrote, the United States has never been particularly good at predicting future wars.⁴³ We cannot assume that “boots on the ground” are a future impossibility simply because the idea is unpopular. America's adversaries may not oblige these expectations. From time to time internationally the unexpected occurs, and the United States needs to prepare for it by maintaining a range of balanced capabilities. This includes military forces useful for great-power competition. It also includes not throwing away America's hard-earned capacities in counterinsurgency campaigns since 2001.

Is a conservative US foreign policy strategy of this type politically possible, or compatible with the recent surge of a more populist American nationalism? If we refer back to the last chapter's findings on public opinion, there is considerable evidence that it is. In reality, GOP voters have not turned altogether against free trade, American alliances, defense spending, aggressive counterterrorism, or a leading US foreign policy role in the world. However, many of these voters—like many Americans generally—have demonstrated increased skepticism or ambivalence toward certain aspects of economic globalization, along with large-scale US military interventions overseas. This skepticism should be respected, since

it has some validity, and in any case carries political weight. But in truth, as we have seen throughout this book, most Republican voters will support the foreign policy decisions of a Republican president in most cases, so long as that president does not line up against issues of central concern to those voters. Presidents have considerable leeway on these matters, and future presidents will, as well.

To its credit, as we saw earlier, the Trump administration has adopted and pursued many of the policy directions recommended earlier, including a set of pressure campaigns against key US adversaries overseas. But there remain several areas of concern. They center especially on trade policy, alliance relationships, and presidential management style.

The first area of concern is US trade policy. One central premise of American foreign relations since the 1940s has been that freer trading arrangements help encourage an open international order more conducive to American interests. The pattern in the twenty-first century has been that multiple administrations from both parties pursue bilateral and regional trade deals with US partners and allies, independent of the WTO, since genuinely global trade talks have long since stalled. The politics of free trade are always difficult, since opposition to it from import-competing interest groups tends to be intense, vocal, and organized. The costs of free trade are sometimes dramatic and concentrated, while the long-term benefits are extensive but dispersed. Organized labor, environmentalists, and human rights groups on the progressive wing of the Democratic Party have long expressed deep skepticism toward both new and existing free-trade agreements.⁴⁴ Now they are joined by President Trump, along with some of his earliest supporters within the Republican Party, a shift that has upended the usual partisan divisions over trade.

For Americans as a whole, international trade promotes innovation, exports, and export-related jobs. It also produces strategic benefits in bolstering US allies against America's adversaries. For all of these reasons the Trump administration should seriously consider re-entering the TPP, revamped by US allies in 2018. American entry into this agreement would be one of the most effective ways to push back against Chinese economic influence within the Asia-Pacific. In general, trade with democratic allies

should be distinguished from trade with authoritarian competitors who simply do not play by the same rules. China in particular has engaged in a massive campaign of intellectual property theft, forced technology transfer, cyber larceny, and trade-distorting state subsidies over the past generation. This predatory behavior has carried real costs for the United States. Consequently there truly is a case for developing a focused, targeted campaign against Chinese foreign economic practices. American tariffs or the threat of tariffs do constitute one tool in this effort, however blunt. But the main focus should not be trade deficits per se. Instead it should be on pressing for changes in the aforementioned Chinese practices, for example by zeroing in on those specific companies most guilty of offense. The United States has multiple economic tools at its disposal to use against China, if it decides to employ their full range. It should do so in concert with American allies, rather than fighting trade wars with them.⁴⁵

The second area of concern is US alliance relationships. In any such relationship allies may fear being abandoned by their partner on the one hand, or entrapped in some unwanted conflict on the other.⁴⁶ During the Obama years, there was already a growing concern among numerous allies that the United States was edging away from a firm commitment toward some of its traditional alliances overseas.⁴⁷ Since President Trump made a withering critique of America's allies during his 2016 campaign, the question arises whether US long-term commitments will remain in force. Indeed the president has made it clear that he hopes to leverage that concern in new ways to press for allied concessions on both trade and military spending. But if taken too far, this will be neither healthy nor productive. If the United States were to give the impression of disengagement or intense ambivalence in relation to core alliance commitments, this could lead to dangerous misimpressions on the part of authoritarian aggressors. US allies afraid of abandonment might respond by accommodating American adversaries in ways contrary to US interests—or by lashing out in unwelcome ways.⁴⁸ The most reliable course is to demonstrate, concretely, that being an ally of the United States means something. If not, we can expect that these allies will ultimately explore other options less friendly to American interests.

The third area of concern is presidential management style. Within the American political system, presidents have considerable room to make foreign policy decisions. Trump's predecessor, President Obama, was sometimes criticized for a national security management style of excessive ambivalence, overconfidence, and ambiguity, combined with a strong aversion to being pinned down. One possibility is that the US political system increasingly produces politicians of this type. If so, it will be difficult to conduct cohesive foreign policy strategies of any kind. President Trump has no doubt shown a readiness to make bold foreign policy decisions. The question remains whether the execution of those decisions is typically characterized by clarity, steadiness, and adequate information as to the necessary specifics. There is definitely a case to be made that foreign policy strategy is inevitably emergent—that is to say, a successful adaptation to events, rather than a sort of preset rigid plan.⁴⁹ Flexibility and freedom from ideological blinders are indeed virtues in strategic affairs. But successful adaptation is in turn more likely with good information, attention to detail, serious preparation, and credibility at the presidential level. In the end, there is really no substitute for persistent and well-informed attention to foreign policy matters on the part of the commander-in-chief. When presidents do not impose a sensible overall order upon the US foreign policy process, certainly nobody else is empowered to do so.⁵⁰

The Trump administration's foreign policy emphases appear utterly unprecedented only if earlier historical experience is ignored. To be sure, Trump is no liberal internationalist. But neither were most previous Republican presidents. Nor is doubling down on Wilsonian foreign policy assumptions the great necessity of our time. The liberal internationalist or Wilsonian tradition suggests that long-term global progress toward greater economic interdependence, democracy promotion, and multilateral organization ultimately combine to leave ancient patterns of power politics obsolete. Each post-Cold War president prior to Trump operated on some key premise within this tradition.⁵¹ President Bill Clinton hoped that expanding the zone of market-oriented US allies through democratic

enlargement would promote American values and interests at minimal cost. President George W. Bush hoped that preventive military action and a freedom agenda within the Middle East, combined with regime change in Iraq, would undermine support for jihadist terrorists inside the Muslim world. President Barack Obama hoped that international accommodations led by the United States would help to promote multilateral coordination around liberal policy goals. All three sets of hopes were sincere. All three had certain specific foreign policy successes. Yet in the end, all three were overly optimistic in some very significant ways. To be specific: history never ended. Historically normal patterns of strategic competition, international conflict, and great-power politics never entirely disappeared. Authoritarian powers both large and small discovered new ways to adapt and survive. And contrary to post-Cold War expectations, the major powers of the world did not all converge upon a single liberal democratic model or ideal. If anything, the twenty-first century has seen a resurgence of great-power competition. The conclusion of the Cold War did not bring an end to geopolitical realities. It only reconfigured them in new form.⁵²

The realization that progress is not inevitable and history has not ended ought to lead to a certain shift in emphasis. Expanding international cooperation and human rights are both worthy goals, but neither one in itself can be the starting point for US foreign policy strategy. Greater weight must be placed on supporting America's allies, and pushing back against its rivals and adversaries, within an internationally competitive environment. The answer is not to disengage. Nor is to think that rivals can be lectured into accommodation—much less blasted away in a sudden burst of regime change. Rather, the answer is for the United States to prepare for steady, long-term, robust competition with a range of serious adversaries, so as to better protect existing democracies against a very real variety of threats. Diplomatic efforts should start with traditional alliances, rather than obvious competitors. There is little point being half-hearted while protecting American primacy. But there is also no need to prioritize strategies of preventive war or regime change as uppermost doctrinally, since unsuccessful interventions overseas only undermine broader US interests. The default preference should be regionally differentiated

strategies of attrition, assertive containment, and peace through strength. Transformational global projects or promises from all directions must now be met with considerable skepticism. Today's great challenge is not to promote or transform any progressive world order, but simply to defend existing democracies. The United States is still much stronger than some believe. If it pursues tough-minded foreign policy approaches, tapping into its profound capabilities, it has the ability to outlast its challengers and prevail.

NOTES

CHAPTER 1

1. For some leading contributions on these issues, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2016); Azar Gat, *Nations: The Long History and Deep Roots of Political Ethnicity and Nationalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); Yoram Hazony, *The Virtue of Nationalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2018); Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Hans Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism* (London: Routledge, 2005 edition); and Maurizio Viroli, *For Love of Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
2. Samuel Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), 37–62, 362–66.
3. Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1955), 4–11; Samuel Huntington, *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981), chapter 2; Russell Kirk, *The Roots of American Order* (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2003); Seymour Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York: Norton, 1997), 31–52; Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Correspondence, 1846–1895*, trans. Donna Torr (New York: International Publishers, 1942), 449, 467, 501.
4. Mlada Bukovansky, *Legitimacy and Power Politics: The American and French Revolutions in International Political Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), chapter 4; Felix Gilbert, *To the Farewell Address* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), 16–17, 130–36; Michael Hunt, *Ideology and US Foreign Policy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), 17–18; Walter McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 36–75; Jeremy Rabkin, “American Founding Principles and American Foreign Policy,” in *Modern America and the Legacy of the Founding*, ed. Ronald Pestritto and Thomas West (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006), 299–330; George Washington, “Farewell Address,” September 19, 1796, in *The American Republic: Primary Sources*,