America vs. the World

Robert Kagan

The Trump administration's National Security Strategy made it official: The American-dominated liberal world order is over. This is not because the United States proved materially incapable of sustaining it. Rather, the American order is over because the United States has decided that it no longer wishes to play its historically unprecedented role of providing global security. The American might that upheld the world order of the past 80 years will now be used instead to destroy it.

Americans are entering the most dangerous world they have known since World War II, one that will make the Cold War look like child's play and the post–Cold War world like paradise. In fact, this new world will look a lot like the world prior to 1945, with multiple great powers and metastasizing competition and conflict. The U.S. will have no reliable friends or allies and will have to depend entirely on its own strength to survive and prosper. This will require more military spending, not less, because the open access to overseas resources, markets, and strategic bases that Americans have enjoyed will no longer come as a benefit of the country's alliances. Instead, they will have to be contested and defended against other great powers.

Americans are neither materially nor psychologically ready for this future. For eight decades, they have inhabited a liberal international order shaped by America's predominant strength. They have grown accustomed to the world operating in a certain way: Largely agreeable and militarily passive European and Asian allies cooperate with the United States on economic and security issues. Challengers to the order, such as Russia and China, are constrained by the combined wealth and might of the U.S. and its allies. Global trade is generally free and unhampered by geopolitical rivalry, oceans are safe for travel, and nuclear weapons are limited by agreements on their production and use. Americans are so accustomed to this basically peaceful, prosperous, and open world that they tend to think it is the normal state of international affairs, likely to continue indefinitely. They can't imagine it unraveling, much less what that unraveling will mean for them.

And who can blame them? According to Francis Fukuyama, history "ended" in 1989 with the triumph of liberalism—even the primal human instinct toward violence was "fundamentally transformed." Who needed a powerful America to defend what was destined to prevail anyway? Since the end of the Cold War, influential critics have been telling us that American dominance is superfluous and costly at best, destructive and dangerous at worst.

Some pundits who welcome a post-American world and the return of multipolarity suggest that most of the benefits of the American order for the U.S. can be retained. America just needs to learn to restrain itself, give up utopian efforts to shape the world, and accommodate "the reality" that other countries "seek to establish their own international orders governed by their own rules," as Harvard's Graham Allison put it. Indeed, Allison and others argue, Americans' insistence on predominance had caused most conflicts with Russia and China. Americans should embrace multipolarity as more peaceful and less burdensome. Recently, Trump's boosters among the foreign-policy elite have even started pointing to the early-19th-century Concert of Europe as a model for the future, suggesting that skillful diplomacy among the great powers can preserve peace more effectively than the U.S.-led system did in the unipolar world.

As a purely historical matter, this is delusional. Even the most well-managed multipolar orders were significantly more brutal and prone to war than the world that Americans have known these past 80 years. To take one example, during what some call the "long peace" in Europe, from 1815 to 1914, the great powers (including Russia and the Ottoman empire) fought dozens of wars with one another and with smaller states to defend or acquire strategic advantage, resources, and spheres of interest. These were not skirmishes but full-scale conflicts, usually costing tens—sometimes hundreds—of thousands of lives.

Roughly half a million people died in the Crimean War (1853–56); the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71) resulted in about 180,000 military and up to 250,000 civilian deaths in less than a year of fighting. Almost every decade from 1815 to 1914 included at least one war involving two or more great powers.

Today's equivalent of 19th-century multipolarity would be a world in which China, Russia, the United States, Germany, Japan, and other large states fought a major war in some combination at least once a decade—redrawing national boundaries, displacing populations, disrupting international commerce, and risking global conflict on a devastating scale. That was the world as it existed for centuries prior to 1945. To believe that such a world can never return would seem to be the height of utopianism.

From the January 2025 issue: David Frum on America's lonely future

Precisely to escape this cycle of conflict, the generations of Americans who lived through two world wars laid the foundations of the American-led liberal world order. They were the true realists, because they had no illusions about multipolarity. They had lived their entire lives with its horrific consequences.

After 1945, instead of reestablishing a multipolar system, they transformed the United States into a global force, with responsibility for preserving not just its own security but the world's. Doing so meant checking the rise of regional hegemons, especially in Europe and East Asia. They did this not because they wanted to re-create the world in America's image, but because they had learned that the modern world was interconnected in ways that would ultimately draw the United States into the great-power conflicts of Eurasia anyway.

No country had ever before played the role that the traditionally aloof United States took on after 1945. That is partly because no other power had enjoyed America's unique circumstances—largely invulnerable to foreign invasion, because of its strength and its distance from the other great powers, and thus able to deploy force thousands of miles from home without leaving itself at risk. This combination of geography and reach allowed the United States after World War II to bring peace and security to Europe and East Asia. Nations scarred by war poured their energies into becoming economic powerhouses. That made global prosperity and international cooperation possible.

Perhaps more extraordinary than America's ability and willingness to play the dominant role was the readiness of most other great powers to embrace and legitimize its dominance—even at the expense of their own potency. In the decades after 1945, almost all of the countries that had fought in the world wars gave up their territorial ambitions, their spheres of interest, and even, to some extent, power itself. Britain, France, Germany, and Japan not only relinquished centuries of great-power thinking and conduct but placed their security and the well-being of their people in the hands of the distant American superpower.

This was truly aberrant behavior and defied all theories of international relations as well as historical precedent. The normal response to the rise of a newly predominant power was for others to balance against it. Coalitions had formed to check Louis XIV, Napoleon, both imperial and Nazi Germany, and imperial Japan. Yet far from regarding the United States as a danger to be contained, most of the world's powers saw it as a partner to be enlisted. America's allies made two remarkable wagers: that the United States could be trusted to defend them whenever needed, and that it would not exploit its disproportionate might to enrich or strengthen itself at their expense. To the contrary, it would promote and benefit from its allies' economic prosperity.

This was the grand bargain of the American order after 1945. And it was what allowed for the extraordinary peace and stability of the subsequent decades, even during the Cold War. The American

order established harmony among the great powers within it, and left those outside it, Russia and China, relatively isolated and insecure—unhappy with the global arrangement but limited in their ability to change it.

All of that is now ending. Trump has openly celebrated the end of the grand bargain. His administration has told Europeans to be ready to take over their own defense by 2027 and suggested that allies and strategic partners, including Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea, should pay the United States for protection. Trump has launched aggressive tariff wars against virtually all of America's allies. He has waged ideological and political warfare against European governments and explicitly threatened territorial aggression against two NATO allies, Canada and Denmark.

Meanwhile, the administration's National Security Strategy regards Russia and China not as adversaries or even competitors but as partners in carving up the world. With its significant emphasis on restoring "American pre-eminence" in the Western Hemisphere, Trump's strategy embraces a multipolar world in which Russia, China, and the United States exercise total dominance in their respective spheres of interest.

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rump and his supporters seem to believe that the rest of the world will simply accommodate this new American approach, and that allies, in particular, will continue to tag along, subservient to a United States that cuts them loose strategically, exacts steep economic tribute from them, and seeks to establish a "concert" with the powers that directly threaten them. But the radical shift in U.S. strategy must force equally radical shifts among erstwhile friends and allies.

What does Europe do, for instance, now that it faces hostile and aggressive great powers on both its eastern and western flanks? Not only Russia, but now the United States, too, threaten the security and territorial integrity of European states and work to undermine their liberal governments. A passive Europe could become a collection of fiefdoms—some under Russian influence, some under American influence, some perhaps under Chinese influence—its states' sovereignty curtailed and its economies plundered by one or more of the three empires. Will the once-great European nations surrender to this fate?

If history is any guide, they will choose rearmament instead. The task will be monumental. To mount a plausible defense against further Russian territorial aggression while also deterring American aggression will require not just marginal increases in defense spending but a full-scale strategic and economic reorientation toward self-reliance—a restructuring of European industries, economies, and societies. But if Germany, Britain, France, and Poland all armed themselves to the full extent of their capacity, including with nuclear weapons, and decided to forcefully defend their economic independence, they would collectively wield sufficient power to both deter Russia and cause an American president to think twice before bullying them. If the alternative is subjugation, Europeans could well rise to such a challenge.

From the January 2026 issue: Isaac Stanley-Becker on the new German war machine

Asian partners of the United States will face a similar choice. Japanese leaders have been questioning American reliability for some time, but Trump's posture forces the issue. He has imposed tariffs on America's Asian allies and repeatedly suggested that they should pay the United States for their protection ("no different than an insurance company"). Trump's National Security Strategy focuses intensely on the Western Hemisphere, at the expense of Asia, and the administration ardently desires a trade deal and strategic coordination with Beijing. Japan may need to choose between accepting subservience to China and building up the military capacity necessary for independent deterrence.

The recent election of a right-wing-nationalist prime minister, Sanae Takaichi, suggests which of these courses the Japanese intend to take. Trump and his advisers may imagine that they see fellow travelers seeking to "Make Japan Great Again," but the upsurge of Japanese nationalism is a direct response to legitimate fears that Japan can no longer rely on the United States for its defense. South Korea and Australia, too, are reconsidering their defense and economic policies as they wake up to challenges from both East and West.

The consequence of a newly unreliable and even hostile United States, therefore, will likely be significant military buildups by former allies. This will not mean sharing the burden of collective security, because these rearmed nations will no longer be American allies. They will be independent great powers pursuing their own strategic interests in a multipolar world. They will owe nothing to the United States; on the contrary, they will view it with the same antagonism and fear that they direct toward Russia and China. Indeed, having been strategically abandoned by the U.S. while suffering from American economic predation and possibly territorial aggression, they are likely to become hotbeds of anti-Americanism. At the very least, they will not be the same countries Americans know today.

Consider Germany. The democratic and peace-loving Germany of today grew up in the U.S.-dominated liberal international order. That order helped make possible West Germany's export-driven economic miracle of the 1950s, which in turn made the country an engine of global economic growth and an anchor of prosperity and democratic stability in Europe. Temptations to pursue a normal, independent great-power foreign policy were blunted both by economic interest and by the relatively benign environment in which Germans could live their lives, so different from what they had known in the past. How long Germany would be willing to remain an abnormal nation—denying itself geopolitical ambitions, selfish interests, and nationalist pride—was a question even before the present liberal world order began to unravel. Now, thanks to the American strategic shift, Germany has no choice but to become normal again, and quickly.

And just as American strategy forces the Germans to rearm, it is ensuring that they do so in an ever more nationalistic, divided Europe. The founders of the American order worked in the postwar years to dampen European nationalism, in part by supporting pan-European institutions. The Cold War–era American diplomat George Kennan believed that European unification was the "only conceivable solution" for the German problem. Yet today those institutions are under pressure, and if the Trump administration has its way, they will disappear altogether. At the same time, the administration is trying to inflame European nationalism, especially in Germany, where it may well succeed. The right-wing nationalist Alternative for Germany is the second-largest party in Germany's Parliament, just as the Nazi Party was in 1930.

Whether or not it succumbs to the far right, a rearmed Germany without an American security guarantee will necessarily take a more nationalist view of its interests. All of its neighbors will too. Poland, squeezed between a powerful Germany on one border and a powerful Russia on the other, has over the centuries been repeatedly partitioned, occupied, and at times eliminated as a sovereign entity. With no distant superpower to protect them, the Poles are likely to decide to build up their own military capability, including nuclear weapons. Meanwhile, France is but one election away from a nationalist victory that will hit Europe like an earthquake. French leaders have already told the country to prepare for war against Russia. But imagine a rearming, nationalist France facing a rearmed, nationalist Germany. The two nations might find common ground against mounting threats from the United States and Russia, but they also have a complex history, having fought three major wars against each other in the 70 years before the United States helped establish a durable peace between them.

Japanese rearmament will have similar ramifications. It will heighten the nervousness among Japan's neighbors, including South Korea, another ally now unsure of Washington's commitment to its defense. How long before the Koreans decide that they, too, need to rearm, including with nuclear weapons, as they face a hostile and nuclear-armed North Korea and a rearmed, possibly nuclear Japan, which has invaded and occupied Korea three times in the past?

Ben Hickey

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n a multipolar world, everything is up for grabs, and the flash points for potential conflict proliferate. The American order for eight decades provided not only security commitments to allies and partners but also common access to vital resources, military bases, waterways, and airspace—what theorists call "public goods." In the absence of the United States playing that role, all of these once again become targets of a multisided competition.

That competition won't be limited to Europe and East Asia. Until now, Germany and Japan have been content to rely on the United States to preserve naval access to Persian Gulf oil, for example. Now they and other rearming powers, including India, Britain, and France, will need to find new ways to take care of themselves. China has shown how this can be done. It had no navy to speak of two decades ago and no bases in the Persian Gulf. Today it has the largest navy in the world, a base in Djibouti, and cooperative arrangements with the United Arab Emirates and Oman to build facilities for China's use.

In a multipolar world, spheres of interest become important again. For centuries, the ability to maintain and protect a sphere of interest was part of what it meant to be a great power. It was also among the most common sources of war, as the spheres often overlapped. The seemingly endless three-way struggle among Russia, Austria, and the Ottoman empire for control of the Balkans was the source of numerous conflicts, including World War I. The desire to regain or create spheres of interest was a leading motive of the three "have not" powers that helped produce World War II: Germany, Japan, and Italy.

The conclusion of that war led to a global shedding of spheres of interest. Part of what made the liberal world order liberal was the principle of self-determination enshrined in the Atlantic Charter and United Nations Charter. This principle was sometimes violated, including by the United States. But in past multipolar orders, great powers never even had to consider the rights of small nations, and they didn't. By contrast, the liberalism of the American order pressured powerful countries to cede sovereignty and independence to smaller ones in their orbits.

The British gradually dismantled their empire, as did the French. Germany was compelled to give up its dreams of *Mitteleuropa*, just as Japan accepted the end of its sphere of interest on the Asian mainland, for which it had fought numerous wars from 1895 to 1945. Under the American-led order, these powers never attempted to regain those spheres. China after World War II was so bereft of a sphere of interest that it could not even lay claim to Taiwan, a nearby island filled with people who were once its citizens. The only remaining sphere, other than America's, was the one the Soviet Union won at Yalta in Eastern and Central Europe. But that, too, was under pressure from the beginning, and the effort required to retain it ultimately exceeded the Soviet Union's capacities, leading to its collapse.

The mere existence of the United States and the liberal order it supported offered small and medium powers an opportunity denied them by centuries of multipolarity. Moscow's satellite states in Eastern and Central Europe would not have been so bent on escape had there been nothing to escape to. The American order promised a higher standard of living, national sovereignty, and legal and institutional equality. This gave nations living under the shadow of the Soviet Union an option other than accommodation, and when given the chance to leave Moscow's control, they took it.

Various self-described realists in recent years have called on the U.S. to accept a return to spheres of interest as an alternative to unipolarity. But they have mostly acknowledged only Russian and Chinese spheres. These are problematic enough. Do we know how far China's perception of its rightful sphere extends? Does it include Vietnam? All of Southeast Asia? Korea? How about what China calls the First Island Chain, which includes Japan? Russia's traditional sphere of interest from the time of Peter the Great always included the Baltic states and at least part of Poland. Vladimir Putin is openly emulating Peter and is frank about his desire to restore the Soviet empire as it existed during the Cold War.

To recognize Russia's and China's spheres of interest would mean accepting their hegemony over a swath of nations that currently enjoy sovereign independence. And in this emerging new world, Russia and China will not be the only ones seeking to expand their spheres. If Germany and Japan need to become great powers again, they will have spheres of interest too, which will inevitably overlap with China's and Russia's, leading to numerous conflicts in the multipolar future just as in the multipolar past.

Which brings us to the much-trumpeted idea of a new accord among the United States, China, and Russia, equivalent to the 19th century's Concert of Europe. A successful arrangement would have to settle on boundaries for their relative spheres of interest. Is such an agreement possible?

The answer is no, because the new multipolar world will not have the same qualities as the one that prevailed two centuries ago. Metternich's Austria was a status quo power, interested only in protecting a conservative order against its liberal challengers. Bismarck regarded his newly unified Germany in the late 19th century as "satiated." They both sought an equilibrium to hold on to what they had, not to get more.

But China and Russia are not at all satiated, status quo powers. They are dissatisfied, have-not powers. Since the end of the Cold War, they have been chronically unhappy with American global supremacy and sought to restore what they regard as their natural and traditional regional dominance. Even today, China exercises only partial mastery over Southeast Asia, and it doesn't control Taiwan, much less enjoy what it would deem the proper subservience from Japan and South Korea. Russia, too, is only in the early stages of rebuilding its traditional sphere in Eastern and Central Europe. Ukraine is not the end but the beginning of Putin's envisioned order.

What kind of arrangement with the United States could satisfy these ambitions? Not one that simply codifies the status quo, as the Concert of Europe attempted to do. It would have to accommodate the radical geopolitical transformation of Europe and Asia that Russia and China each view as essential, and for which Russia, at least, has been willing to go to war. Such a transformation will not be a pleasant process for the small and medium powers forced to give up their independence and accept domination by Beijing, Moscow, or Washington—and perhaps eventually by Berlin, Tokyo, or who knows who else. If the first four decades of the 20th century taught us anything, it is that achieving a stable peace with have-not powers is hard. Every nation or territory conceded to them strengthens and emboldens them for the next demand.

In fact, Beijing and Moscow have neither the desire nor the need for any restraining accord with the United States. On the contrary, they have every reason to believe that this is the moment to press on. Xi Jinping has spoken of "great changes unseen in a century," which offer China a "period of strategic opportunity." For Putin, Trump's destruction of the transatlantic alliance is such a "great change." Why shouldn't he seize this opportunity? He can't know how long the Trump phase will last in the United States, and if the Europeans rearm, the Kremlin's window of opportunity may close. Until now, Putin has moved slowly, waiting six years between invading Georgia and annexing Crimea, and then another eight years before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which was severely hampered by America and its allies. The Americans have now shattered that solidarity, and Putin could well believe that this is the moment to speed up his plans for conquest.

This means that the first years of the new multipolar era will not be marked by adroit, mutually accommodating diplomacy, but by intense competition and confrontation. The world will look more like the brutal multipolar era of the early 20th century than like the more orderly, if still brutal, world of the 19th.

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his is the new world that America is entering, voluntarily shorn of its greatest assets. The influential Chinese strategic thinker Yan Xuetong once observed that the most important gap between the United States and China was not military or economic power, both of which China could amass. It was America's global system of alliances and partnerships.

When Russia or China went to war, it went alone. When the United States went to war, even in an unpopular conflict like Iraq, it had the support of dozens of allies. American military-power projection has depended on bases all around the world, provided by nations that trusted the United States as a partner and have been willing to overlook the inconveniences of hosting American soldiers. But they may reconsider if the U.S. no longer guarantees those nations' security and instead wages economic warfare against them and makes political and ideological demands that they find offensive. Trump officials seem to expect European and Asian countries to join the United States whenever Washington needs or wants them—to put pressure on China, for instance—even as the U.S. offers them nothing in return. But can you ditch your allies and have them too?

It would be one thing if the United States really was retreating within its hemisphere, reverting to its 19th-century isolation and indifference to global affairs. But among the most remarkable things about this administration's foreign policy is that, for all the talk of "America First," Trump evinces seemingly unlimited global ambition. He enjoys wielding American power even as he depletes it. In his first year back in office, he launched strikes against Iran and Syria; threatened to seize Canada and Greenland; decapitated Venezuela's government and promised to "run" the country; meddled ineffectually in wars in Southeast Asia, Central Africa, and the Middle East; and even proposed construction projects in the Gaza Strip that would have to be defended by American forces.

Is this what "restraint" looks like? Trump's intellectual cheerleaders extol him for abandoning the "nonsensical utopian goals" of "clueless elites," but in the next breath praise him for seeking nothing less than to "reshape" the entire world. Reshape it to what end? To line Trump's pockets and bring him glory?

Trump's megalomania is transforming the United States from international leader into international pariah, and the American people will suffer the consequences for years to come. Germany's chancellor in 1916, Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, worried that his nation's behavior risked making it "the mad dog among nations" and would provoke "the condemnation of the entire civilized world." He was right. German leaders were proud of their unflinching "realism," and believed that the frank and brutal pursuit of self-interest was simply what nations did. But as the historian Paul Kennedy noted, Germany's constant appeal "to the code of naked *Machtpolitik*" helped unite the world's great powers in bringing about Germany's defeat.

The Trump administration revels in the pursuit of self-interest and the exercise of strength for its own sake, with gleeful disregard for the interests of others. As Trump's first-term national security adviser H. R. McMaster put it in an essay co-written with the economist Gary Cohn, the world is not a "global community," but "an arena where nations, nongovernmental actors and businesses engage and compete for advantage," and in this world of *Machtpolitik*, the United States enjoys "unmatched" power. But for how long? McMaster's formulation, like Trump's exaltation of selfishness, rests on profound ignorance of the true sources of American strength. So much of America's influence in the world has derived from treating others as part of a community of democratic nations or of strategic partners.

Others see this, even if many Americans don't. Yan, the Chinese thinker, observed that one of the elements holding the American order together was America's reputation for morality and respect for international norms. Theodore Roosevelt, often regarded as the quintessential American realist and no slouch in the wielding of power, believed that great nations ultimately had to be guided by an "international social consciousness" that considered not just their own interests but also "the interests of others." A successful great power, he observed, could not act "without regard to the essentials of genuine morality."

For decades, much of the world supported a United States that acted on these principles and accepted America's power, despite its flaws and errors, precisely because it did not act solely out of narrow self-interest—much less in the narrow, selfish interest of a single ruler.

That era is over. Trump has managed in just one year to destroy the American order that was, and he has weakened America's ability to protect its interests in the world that will be. If Americans thought defending the liberal world order was too expensive, wait until they start paying for what comes next.

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