



The Liberal Order Is Dying. What Comes Next?

Stewart M. Patrick | Tuesday, Jan. 15, 2019

In January 2017, as Donald Trump prepared to enter the White House, predictions of what his foreign policy might look like ran the gamut from a retreat into neo-isolationism to a reassertion of bare-knuckled power politics. As the incoming administration scrambled to name the team that would be responsible for translating the president-elect's rhetoric into policy, I speculated

(<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/20868/an-open-world-is-in-the-balance-what-might-replace-the-liberal-order>) about what might replace the liberal world order he had inveighed against during the campaign. Two years later, in light of his actual policies, the time is ripe to consider whether these scenarios were prescient or unfounded.

Candidate Trump had made his instincts clear: Tired of seeing the United States played for a sucker, he promised to place "America first," abandoning global leadership and adopting a transactional foreign policy. He disdained international organizations, treaties and law as infringements on U.S. sovereignty and freedom of action; regarded the United Nations and other global bodies as worthless talk shops; and viewed longstanding alliances like NATO as protection rackets. Describing economic competition as a zero-sum game, he pledged to withdraw from "unfair" multilateral trade deals and use America's market leverage to win concessions through bilateral negotiations. He disdained human rights and democracy promotion and admired strongmen unconstrained by the niceties of electoral politics, or even democratic checks and balances. He valued military force above civilian power instruments like diplomacy and development aid. Finally, he demanded that America regain control over its porous borders, to preserve its identity, safety and prosperity.

In short, the president-elect rejected the principles and sought to dismantle the institutional foundations of an open world that 12 previous administrations had built and defended since 1945. It was less obvious what sort of world might succeed the one that America had made. I proposed five potential alternatives.

The first, which I called Concert Redux, envisioned a shallow world order based on a handful of norms of



U.S. President Donald Trump attends the G-7 Gender Equality Advisory Council breakfast, Charlevoix, Quebec, Canada, June 9, 2018 (Yomiuri Shimbun photo via AP Images).

great power coexistence, akin to the Concert of Europe of the early 19th century. The United States would abandon exceptionalism and behave like a “normal” nation committed to Westphalian sovereignty. It would rein in multilateral institutions and remain indifferent to tyranny abroad.

The second scenario extended this theme of great power prerogative. It imagined the United States, China, Russia and perhaps India each consolidating tacit spheres of influence, enjoying a regional free hand reminiscent of the Monroe Doctrine. Great powers would also pull neighboring countries into their commercial orbits, fragmenting the global trading system in the process.

The third plausible future, Fortress America, foresaw U.S. retrenchment. The United States would erect walls to restrict immigrants, impose tariffs to protect U.S. industries and workers, and subordinate foreign policy to the imperatives of homeland security. America would “come home” after decades of misadventures abroad that had dissipated its wealth and cost American lives.

The fourth scenario, what I called A League of Our Own, considered whether Trump might ultimately discover his inner John McCain, by endorsing a league of democracies united against authoritarian foes in Beijing, Moscow and elsewhere. The United States would rededicate itself to the concepts of the “Free World” and “the West,” expanding the Group of Seven and recommitting itself to European and Asian allies.

In pursuing his pledge to upend the international order, Trump’s record is perversely impressive.

Finally, an ad hoc or à la carte world might arise, as universal, treaty-based organizations ceded to nimble coalitions that coalesced on the basis of shared interests, common identities or relevant capabilities. Such flexible “mini-lateral” frameworks would become increasingly attractive as global turbulence increased, formal organizations were stymied, and great powers sought to collaborate in certain spheres while competing in others.

Which of the five scenarios has come closest to the mark? And are there others I overlooked? Before answering, let’s examine the policies Donald Trump has actually pursued.

The Trump Record

Say what you will about the president, but he has followed through on his pledges to upend the open international order. Since his inauguration, he has shaken the institutional pillars and weakened the

normative foundations of postwar American leadership.

Trump's record is perversely impressive: He has undermined Western solidarity with repeated assaults on NATO and the G-7 and repudiation of the international agreement limiting Iran's nuclear weapons program. He has threatened to leave the World Trade Organization and blocked judicial appointments to its appellate body. He has repudiated the Trans-Pacific Partnership, forced the renegotiation of NAFTA into a more closed deal, slapped aluminum and steel tariffs on U.S. allies on dubious national security grounds, and launched an all-out trade war with China.

The administration has repeatedly derided international organizations and agreements as infringements on American sovereignty (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/23022/bannon-may-be-out-but-trump-s-sovereignism-is-here-to-stay>), submitting budgets that, in the absence of congressional resistance, would have slashed U.S. funding for the United Nations. Trump removed the United States from the Paris climate agreement, the century's most important multilateral accord, while abandoning both the U.N. Human Rights Council and UNESCO and refusing to participate in the new U.N. Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration.

Finally, Trump has relinquished U.S. leadership when it comes to human rights, democracy and the international rule of law. His first secretary of state dismissed (<https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/tillerson-pushing-human-rights-abroad-creates-obstacles/story?id=47190743>) "values" as a distraction from "policy." His current national security adviser has declared war (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/09/14/john-bolton-attacked-the-icc-cooperating-with-it-might-be-a-better-way-to-protect-u-s-interests/>) on the International Criminal Court. Most disconcerting, the president himself has embraced a rogues' gallery (<https://thehill.com/opinion/international/350241-cozying-up-to-strongmen-is-un-american-harms-human-rights>) of authoritarian thugs, from Kim Jong Un to Xi Jinping, Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi, Vladimir Putin, Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Rodrigo Duterte.

Given this performance, how have the scenarios stood up?

We can begin by dismissing what was admittedly a long shot: Trump endorsing a league of democracies united against authoritarianism. Contrary to the foreign policy establishment's hopes, the burdens of office have not socialized Trump to reconsolidate the Western core of the liberal order. Although he belatedly endorsed NATO's Article 5 collective defense obligations and authorized modest troop deployments to Eastern Europe, he continues to undermine the alliance (<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/07/15/natos-global-peace-is-unraveling-and-we-cant-see-it/>), chastising allies for "free riding," while still resisting congressional pressure for a harder line against Russia. At the G-7 summit in June, he berated the host, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, and refused to sign the final communiqué (<https://www.cfr.org/blog/g7-summit-trump-takes-wrecking-ball-west>). His most blatant break with Western partners occurred in the spring of 2018, when he renounced the Iran deal over the entreaties of Britain, France and

Germany.



Chinese President Xi Jinping during the signing of agreements between Portugal and China, Quéluz, Portugal, Dec. 5, 2018 (AP photo by Armando Franca).

Despite this dismal record, establishment luminaries dream that either Trump himself or his successor will come to their senses and rally Western democracies behind open markets and open societies. Former National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley and former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, for instance, advocate a declaration of principles (<https://www.economist.com/international/2018/08/02/countries-team-up-to-save-the-liberal-order-from-donald-trump>) on “advancing a rules-based democratic order” that would unite the United States and Western partners behind human rights, non-discrimination and collective defense. Unfortunately, the White House has little interest in such a scheme, and it is unclear that the next administration—or the American public—will sign on either. Nor is it evident that other countries, after the cynical Trump years, would consider U.S. leadership of this agenda credible.

Two prominent analysts of U.S. abdication, Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2018-09-30/committee-save-world-order>), counsel the world’s other advanced market democracies to defend the liberal international order until Washington returns to the fold. This was certainly the ethos behind the Paris Peace Forum (<https://parispeaceforum.org/>) that French President

Emmanuel Macron hosted on the centenary of Armistice Day in November—an event he billed as an opportunity to reinvigorate multilateralism. But it remains unclear if other Western countries, including European Union member states, Canada, Australia, Japan and South Korea, possess either the will or the weight, even collectively, to exercise such leadership. One also needs to keep this proposal in perspective. Few transnational threats, like climate change and nuclear proliferation, can be resolved by a subset of wealthy democratic nations.

Nor has Trump evinced much interest in an “ad hoc world.” Both of his immediate predecessors experimented with flexible mini-lateral groupings, from the Proliferation Security Initiative in the George W. Bush years to the Major Economies Forum under Barack Obama. Trump finds even informal bodies like the G-7 overly constraining—and worries that they allow others to gang up on the United States. He prefers to engage bilaterally to bring U.S. leverage to bear.

This penchant has informed his nuclear talks with North Korea. But his trade negotiations with China are most instructive. Trump could have rallied OECD countries aggrieved by China’s violation of the letter and spirit of its WTO accession. Instead, he chose to fight alone. Meanwhile, the EU and China, at their first summit in two years this summer, rededicated themselves

(https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1577516.shtml) to a “rules-based, transparent, non-discriminatory, open, and inclusive trading system with the World Trade Organization at its core.”

Despite its transactional appeal, bilateralism offers a weak and unrealistic foundation for world order. Global politics is not like the real estate arena in which Trump cut his teeth, where new buyers and sellers invariably appear if a transaction falls through. Rather, it is a repeated game, in which the players remain the same, the stakes are high, and credibility is critical. Repeated defections and an unwillingness to compromise undermine diplomatic trust and encourage even longtime partners to hedge their bets.

More fundamentally, bilateralism is too unwieldy to achieve global goods like financial stability, control of fissile material, a secure internet, the eradication of disease, or a livable planet. None of these goals can be achieved through one-on-one deals.

What about Concert Redux? This scenario envisions a multipolar balance among major global power centers, tempered by modest norms to reduce points of friction and facilitate peaceful coexistence. The historical model is post-Napoleonic Europe. That order lacked deep institutional foundations. But its major players recognized not only a balance of power but a balance of rights and satisfactions

(https://www.jstor.org/stable/20097176?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents) among themselves, and they agreed to manage crises jointly. Equally significant, they tolerated differences in their domestic authority structures.

There are echoes of the Concert of Europe today. For the historical Holy Alliance of tsarist Russia, Austria-Hungary and Prussia, substitute the contemporary authoritarian powers China and Russia. For liberal

Britain and France, substitute the United States, the EU and Japan. Like Castlereagh and Talleyrand, Trump seeks workable relations with erstwhile ideological adversaries. He refrains from criticizing Russian and Chinese human rights violations while seeking their aid in ending the civil war in Syria and reversing North Korea's nuclear weapons program. Meanwhile, he treats the EU less as a partner than a rival, just one more actor in an emerging multipolar balance.

And yet the Concert analogy ultimately breaks down, because Trump often resists collective crisis management—as in his disavowal of the Iran deal—and takes actions, like his trade war with China, that undermine great power comity. More provocatively, the White House's own National Security Strategy (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>) identifies China and Russia as strategic adversaries, and the administration remains at loggerheads with Beijing over its claims in the South China Sea and with Moscow over its annexation of Crimea.

This resistance to Chinese and Russian regional hegemony suggests that the Trump administration is not prepared to accept great power spheres of influence—or even the “Four Policemen” concept that President Franklin Roosevelt contemplated during World War II that would have seen the United States, the Soviet Union, the British empire and China taking primary responsibility for maintaining order in their neighborhoods.

Trump may disdain U.N. universalism, but his administration is unwilling to cede to Beijing and Moscow dominance in East Asia or Eastern Europe. He may periodically wonder why America should keep troops and the peace in Asia and Europe, but he has authorized freedom of navigation exercises in the South and East China Seas and troops to deter Russian adventurism in Poland and the Baltics.

If spheres are emerging, they are in the economic realm. Trump has increased the prospects of global economic fragmentation into regional blocs by attacking the WTO, withdrawing from the TPP, suspending discussions on a trans-Atlantic trade pact, and negotiating a more protected North American trade arrangement in NAFTA 2.0, what is now known as the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement, or USMCA. The trend toward economic spheres is pronounced in Asia, where the United States has ceded the field to China's own megaregional trade scheme, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Program. Beijing is also drawing neighboring countries into its orbit with its Belt and Road Initiative, the largest infrastructure investment project in history. The rise of a pan-Asian trading order has been long in the making, but the administration's strategies have given it a boost.

Trump loves bilateralism, but it takes more than one-on-one deals to achieve global financial stability, control of fissile material, the eradication of disease, and a livable planet.

The most isolationist of my five scenarios envisaged a U.S. retreat into Fortress America, in keeping with candidate Trump's insular, protectionist and sovereignty-obsessed platform. Many of the president's most symbolic actions have reflected his nostalgic desire to return the United States to a simpler, pre-globalist era in which the nation was safe from foreign threats, protected from "unfair" economic competition, and possessed of a more ethnically homogeneous population.

A core component of this effort to put America first and make it great again has been the administration's antipathy toward multilateral arrangements, such as the ICC or the global migration compact, that allegedly threaten U.S. sovereignty. Another has been an elevation of homeland security in U.S. foreign policy, and Washington's zeal for securing America's frontiers from terrorists, criminals and illegal aliens—a zeal that culminated in the recent dispatch of troops to the southern border. A third has been a push for "managed" rather than "free" trade to protect domestic manufacturers and workers, as well as the raising of barriers for extra-hemispheric trading partners, not least in the automobile sector. A fourth has been a crackdown on illegal immigration, including through the ongoing fight to build a southern border wall and reduced admissions of legal migrants and refugees. These steps are part of a reactionary effort to slow rapid demographic changes, not least shifts in the country's ethnic and racial composition that portend a minority-majority nation in the coming decades.

Each policy commands a vocal political constituency. But they are all backward-looking and ultimately as futile as commanding the oceans to stop rising in response to global warming. Seventy-three years ago, Sen. Tom Connally, a Democrat from Texas, kicked off a debate on the U.N. Charter in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee by describing (<https://www.amazon.com/Best-Laid-Plans-American-Multilateralism/dp/0742562980>) the futility of isolationism in a globalizing world. Any effort to preserve America within a "cellophane wrapper" was both counterproductive and unsustainable. Connally's advice has never rung more true than it does today.

What I Missed

With the benefit of hindsight, the five possible scenarios I outlined two years ago overlooked at least three other potential futures that have become more plausible in the intervening months.

One missing scenario was the prospect that longstanding U.S. partners might respond to a suddenly capricious U.S. hegemony by hedging their bets against its unsettling and unpredictable actions (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2018-01-23/how-us-allies-are-adapting-america-first>). Although less familiar than “balancing” and “bandwagoning” behavior, “hedging” is especially attractive in uncertain times. Just as investors place side bets to reduce their exposure to market risk, so junior partners can try to reduce their dependence on dominant actors, typically through some combination of self-reliance, coalescing with other vulnerable states, or making overtures to other powerful states.

Since 1945, the United States has provided geopolitical reassurance to dozens of countries, functioning essentially as an insurance agency. The Trump administration has suddenly called such arrangements into question, just as an insurance company might suddenly raise premiums or deny coverage.

Examples of hedging against the United States are easy to find. In response to Trump’s relentless hectoring over burden-sharing and growing doubts about the credibility (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wqVg8byadj0>) of U.S. security guarantees, Europeans are exploring ways to enhance their “strategic autonomy.” (<http://www.gmfus.org/blog/2018/01/10/necessity-and-impossibility-strategic-autonomy>) One proposal, recently floated by Macron (<https://www.rferl.org/a/merkel-echoes-france-macron-call-european-army-angers-trump-nato-mattis-/29599466.html>), is to create an integrated European army—an echo of the continental defense community that the United States pressed in vain for Europeans to create in the early 1950s. Already, 25 of the bloc’s 28 members have endorsed an EU mechanism called Permanent Structured Cooperation on Security and Defense, or PESCO, as a way to pool defense efforts (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/nato-pushes-eu-to-work-with-allies-for-security-1518883797>).

Asian allies have also been uncertain about Washington’s willingness to sustain the regional balance of power in the age of America First. Take Australia. Its quandary, as one observer writes (<https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/foreign-policy-white-paper-does-reality-match-our-ambitions>), is the need to “hedg[e] against the dual risks of a reckless China and a feckless United States.” Elsewhere in the region, Japan is embracing greater self-help in the face of Chinese assertiveness, including by increasing defense spending to record levels. The government of South Korea, meanwhile, has declared its intent to assume wartime control over its military from the United States in the event of conflict with the North. As long as the United States remains a major source of global uncertainty, expect hedging to increase.

Another obvious, recent trend has been for other countries to respond to American abdication by simply getting on with things. What a change from two decades ago, when Albright, running the State Department, memorably labeled (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/11/06/the-myth-of-the-indispensable-nation/>) the United States the world’s “indispensable nation,” a country that “stands tall and sees further than other countries into the future.” Her phrase encapsulated what U.S. foreign policy elites then believed: The world could do

little without U.S. leadership.



Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Russian President Vladimir Putin during a Group of 20 summit in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Nov. 30, 2018 (Kyodo photo via AP Images).

But 2018 is not 1945, or even 1998. The United States is no longer a “hyper-power,” as Albright’s French counterpart, Hubert Vedrine, once called it. Global economic power has shifted faster in the past 20 years than during any comparable period in world history. And while the United States retains unmatched advantages, other countries are increasingly willing to proceed without it when, like a schoolboy on the playground, it threatens to take its ball and go home.

On the very day that Trump repudiated the Paris accord, for example, the EU and China declared their intention (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/01/world/europe/climate-paris-agreement-trump-china.html>) to forge ahead and honor the deal. Likewise, the 11 remaining members of the TPP have soldiered on in the rechristened Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership. The EU, similarly, is negotiating a massive bilateral trade agreement with Japan and exploring another with the South American bloc Mercosur. And of course, Britain, France, Germany, Russia and China remain committed to the Iran nuclear deal. In sum, countries are teaming up (<https://www.economist.com/international/2018/08/02/countries-team-up-to-save-the-liberal-order-from-donald-trump>) to preserve cooperative arrangements from the unpredictable actions of a superpower

gone rogue.

Perhaps the most obvious shortcoming of my earlier article was the failure to consider a global confrontation between the two powers whose relationship will help define world politics in this century. The United States and China are already locked in a multidimensional competition to define the global economy, dominate emerging technologies, and determine the military balance. It is premature to speak of a new “Cold War.” For one thing, unlike the U.S.-Soviet rivalry, Sino-American competition does not involve the clash of two mutually exclusive, universalist ideologies. It is a classic clash of incumbent and aspiring hegemony, reminiscent of the Anglo-German antagonism (<https://www.amazon.com/Rise-Anglo-German-Antagonism-1860-1914/dp/157392301X>) of the early 20th century, and thus susceptible to, though by no means doomed by, the so-called “Thucydides trap.” (<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/united-states-china-war-thucydides-trap/406756/>)

The geopolitical competition is heating up, though, and economic relations are awful and likely to get worse before they get any better. For decades, most American commentators argued that globalization would transform China, moderating its military ambitions, opening its markets and liberalizing its politics. Today, disillusionment has set in (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2018-02-13/china-reckoning>). China has indeed been transformed. But its regional ambitions are expanding as it seeks to become the dominant force in Asia. Its economy remains closed to global trade and investment, even as it ramps up its mercantilist Made in China 2025 initiative. Beijing is determined to win the global race for artificial intelligence, pouring untold billions into it, while pursuing a mercantilist “Digital Silk Road” (<https://www.cfr.org/blog/belt-and-router-china-aims-tighter-internet-controls-digital-silk-road>) as part of the Belt and Road Initiative. Finally, its totalitarian system is becoming more deeply entrenched as its citizens navigate an increasingly Orwellian system of pervasive surveillance and “social credit” scores (<https://www.npr.org/2018/10/31/662436265/china-tests-a-social-credit-score>), a vastly expanded—and far more intrusive—version of Americans’ credit ratings.

As America abdicates global leadership, allies are reeling, authoritarians are rejoicing, rivals are emboldened, and the world drifts without clear direction.

The world is thus bracing for a clash between two “revisionist” great powers (<https://www.cfr.org/blog/emperor-xi-meets-donald-trump-thought>). China is a rising, nationalist power that, like Imperial Germany, seeks its own “place in the sun.” It wants to dismantle the U.S. alliance system, achieve technological primacy and

enhance its weight in global councils. The United States is a weary titan no longer convinced that China will become a “responsible stakeholder” and increasingly drawn to containment, as evinced by Vice President Mike Pence’s hawkish speech (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/05/world/asia/pence-china-speech-cold-war.html>) at the Hudson Institute in October. To reassure and mobilize Asian partners, the United States is pushing its vision of a “free and open Indo-Pacific,” while punishing China with escalating tariffs and seeking to thwart its technological ambitions.

Neither Trump nor Xi is likely to shrink from this collision. Trump has staked his administration on a tough line on China, particularly on trade, while Xi cannot afford to lose face at home by caving to American demands. Nor is Sino-American confrontation likely to moderate if a Democratic candidate wins the White House in 2020 or 2024, given the party’s indictment of China’s predatory trade behavior and labor practices, and the likelihood that the next Democratic president will resurrect human rights promotion in U.S. foreign policy.

The bipolar confrontation is coming at the worst possible moment, given disagreements between Washington and Beijing over the fundamental rights and obligations of sovereign states, including the principles and rules that should govern state conduct in a daunting array of global domains, from cyberspace to outer space, global trade to humanitarian intervention, and climate change to the ocean commons. American and Chinese policymakers will face the ongoing task of managing and moderating inevitable tensions, so that the two nations can continue to collaborate on areas of overlapping interest critical to the planet’s survival.

Two years into his administration, Donald Trump’s war on the liberal international order is still gathering steam, and the costs are mounting. The United States is increasingly going it alone—when it is not going home. As America abdicates global leadership, traditional allies and partners are reeling, authoritarians are rejoicing, geopolitical rivals are emboldened, and the world drifts without clear direction.

To escape this moment of danger, President Trump would ideally do two things in the remainder of his term: reach a strategic and commercial rapprochement with Beijing that reduces tensions while allowing both sides to save face; and rededicate the United States to Western solidarity, to ensure a balance of power that favors freedom. Alas, little suggests that he is capable of such deft diplomacy, whether with adversaries or erstwhile allies. Indeed, he seems inclined to repeat the mistakes that America made a century ago, in 1919-20, when the United States, having rejected membership in the League of Nations, retreated into political isolation and economic nationalism—only to watch the world crumble around it.

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