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## America and the World—The Effects of the Trump Presidency

### *Trump's Realism*

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The era of *Pax Americana*—ushered in by President Harry Truman, put on steroids during the neoliberal wave initiated by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan in the 1980s, and seemingly cemented by the profound changes in Europe after the Cold War—led many to proclaim the arrival of a final stage of global democratic peace and liberal order.<sup>1</sup> This teleological view of history has, in recent years, proved an illusion. While progressives would like to believe otherwise, “in geopolitics, as in biology, mankind remains susceptible to new strains of old maladies.”<sup>2</sup> And so a world that had grown accustomed to thinking of progress as inevitable and irreversible is now being rocked by old toxic patterns previously thought crushed by the march of progress—the outbreak of a global pandemic, the rise of authoritarian alternatives to democracy, and the return of great-power competition.<sup>3</sup> The comeback of these old system disturbances conforms with the twenty-first century’s wider theme of “back to the future.”<sup>4</sup> Their reappearance also introduces risks and complications into the international system that threaten to overwhelm the institutions of domestic and global governance. Indeed, order of any kind is becoming increasingly scarce in today’s politics of mounting chaos and randomness, traits associated with rising entropy.<sup>5</sup> History is accelerating, not ending.<sup>6</sup>

Enter President Donald J. Trump, a nationalist with a foreign policy agenda guided by core realist principles.<sup>7</sup> Condemning the evils of neoliberal cosmopolitanism, he and his followers despised the “power-hungry” globalist class, whose transnational elites—with their

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<sup>1</sup> For the seminal expression of liberal triumphalism, see Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?” *The National Interest*, No. 16 (Summer 1989), 3-18; Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992). Neoliberalism is defined by privatization, deregulation, globalization, free trade, austerity, and reductions in government spending.

<sup>2</sup> Vance Serchuk, “Plagues are Back. Will Wars Follow?” *The Wall Street Journal*, September 1, 2020, A15.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. Also see Ganesh Sitaraman, “A Grand Strategy of Resilience: American Power in the Age of Fragility,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 99, No. 5 (September/October 2020), 165-174.

<sup>4</sup> A term first used to describe international politics by John J. Mearsheimer, “Back to the Future: Instability in Europe After the Cold War,” *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Summer 1990), 5-56.

<sup>5</sup> See Randall L. Schweller, *Maxwell's Demon and the Golden Apple: Global Discord in the New Millennium* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> The resurfacing of old afflictions may be a symptom of a more profound cause of global upheaval—namely, the Information Revolution’s ongoing transformations of politics, society, distance, and economics. The trauma produced by the Information Revolution rivals the disruptions triggered by the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century.

<sup>7</sup> See Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, ed. Bernard Crick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988); Hans Morgenthau, *Scientific Man versus Power Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946); Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, 4th ed. (New York: Knopf, 1967); Robert Gilpin, “The Richness of the Tradition of Political Realism,” *International Organization*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (Spring, 1984), 287-304; Edward Hallett Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939* (London: Macmillan,

postmodern views of borders, patriotic nationalism, and other traditional loyalties as expendable social constructs—they viewed as putting the well-being of the world above their own countries.<sup>8</sup> Speaking before the United Nations General Assembly in 2017, Trump declared his “policy of principled realism,” which mainly asserted the primacy of nationalism over globalism: “In foreign affairs, we are renewing this founding principle of sovereignty. Our government’s first duty is to its people, to our citizens, to serve their needs, to ensure their safety, to preserve their rights and to defend their values. I will always put America first, just like you, as the leaders of your countries, will always and should always put your countries first.”<sup>9</sup> Trump’s economic nationalism sanctioned the right of states to intervene in markets to defend their citizens and to control the capricious effects of globalization. Consistent with the political economy of realism, the goals were to bring jobs back home, support domestic manufacturing, limit immigration, raise tariffs, and ensure national self-sufficiency in the production of strategic goods—from steel and 5G networks to antibiotics and surgical masks. True to his campaign promises, the Trump presidency was committed to a policy of setting up trade barriers to protect American jobs and industry. More generally, Trump’s foreign policy views sought a return to America’s pre-1941 approach to the world. Prior to the Cold War, American exceptionalism meant shielding the U.S. from foreign threats, steering clear of permanent alliances, spreading democracy through example rather than military force (mission not manifest destiny), embracing protectionism and fair (not free) trade, and preferring independent to multilateral action.<sup>10</sup> Simply put, it was about putting “America first.”

Embracing America’s past, Trump rejected the core tenets of the liberal international order (LIO)—the sprawling and multifaceted system that the United States and its allies built and have supported for seven decades. Questioning the very fabric of international cooperation, he assaulted the world trading system, reduced funding for the United Nations, denounced NATO, threatened to end multilateral trade agreements, called for Russia’s readmission to the G-7, and scoffed at attempts to address global challenges such as climate change. Trump’s transactional approach to foreign relations marked a United States that was less interested in managing its long-term relationships than in making gains on short-term deals. Trump sent the message that the United States would now look after its own interests, narrowly defined, not the interests of the so-called global community, even at the expense of long-standing allies.

This worldview is fundamentally realist in nature—and it resonated with a large portion of American voters, who view international politics as a highly competitive realm populated by self-interested states concerned with their own security and economic welfare.<sup>11</sup> On the campaign trail and in office, Trump argued that the United States needs its allies to share responsibility for their own defense. He also called for better trade deals to level a playing field tilted against American businesses and workers and to protect domestic manufacturing industries from currency manipulation. Defending his realist beliefs about the political economy, Trump asserted that political factors should determine economic relations, that globalization does not foster harmony among states, that economic interdependence increases national vulnerability, and that the state should intervene when the interests of domestic actors diverge from its own. Like all realists, Trump views economic interdependence in asymmetric terms—with the less dependent nations exercising power over the more dependent ones. For the U.S., this means that economic interdependence is a source of power—a potential weapon—vis-à-vis everyone else. Yet, Trump also saw globalization with suspicion as a source of vulnerability, competition, and control.<sup>12</sup>

This article explores four pillars of Trump’s realism: (1) his neo-mercantilist policy of rebalancing U.S. trade accounts with the world; (2) his relative-gains orientation; (3) his penchant for bilateral over multilateral deals; (4) and his belief that NATO is an outmoded

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1951); Jacob Viner, “Power versus Plenty as Objectives of Foreign Policy in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” *World Politics*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (October 1948), 1-29; and Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1954).

<sup>8</sup> President Donald J. Trump, as quoted in Brett Samuels, “Trump: ‘You Know What I am? I’m a Nationalist,’” *The Hill*, October 22, 2018: <https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/412649-trump-you-know-what-i-am-im-a-nationalist>

<sup>9</sup> Remarks by President Trump to the 72nd Session of the United Nations General Assembly, September 19, 2017: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-72nd-session-united-nations-general-assembly/>.

<sup>10</sup> Charles A. Kupchan, “The Clash of Exceptionalisms: A New Fight over an Old Idea,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 97, No. 2 (March/April 2018), 139-148 at 139; Kupchan, *Isolationism: A History of America’s Efforts to Shield Itself from the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> See Daniel W. Drezner, “The Realist Tradition in American Public Opinion,” *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (March 2008), 51-70.

<sup>12</sup> See Henry Farrell and Abraham L. Newman, “Chained to Globalization: Why It’s Too Late to Decouple,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 99, No. 1 (January/February 2020), 70-80.

organization, doling out American largesse to rich and secure European countries. I conclude with a discussion about why American foreign policy cannot return to its pre-Trumpian state and will not oscillate between liberalism and realism. There is no going back.

### *No More Uncle Sugar*

Drawing sharp distinctions between cosmopolitan and national interests, President Trump, unlike his predecessors, was not an unwavering free trader. A key part of his agenda was to rebalance the United States' trade accounts with the rest of the world. The goal was to correct systematic and excessive trade imbalances with wealthy East Asia and Europe, while protecting industries that are vital to U.S. national security.<sup>13</sup> Here, Trump was a mercantile realist, willing to "weaponize" the American market if necessary. Trump made it plain to the world: other countries would no longer be allowed to play the United States for a sucker—no more Uncle Sugar. "We're like the piggy bank that everybody is robbing," Trump said of America's trade partners. "And that ends." He further noted, "if they retaliate, they're making a big mistake" given the size of the U.S. economy. "We win that war a thousand times out of a thousand."<sup>14</sup> This statement reveals Trump's inherent realist understanding of economic interdependence as a power resource, not a weakness, for the United States. While America is somewhat dependent on the external world, all other countries depend on the external world much more so. As Kenneth Waltz put it: "As compared to other nations, the United States is more independent than dependent."<sup>15</sup>

To illustrate the point, American exports to China are about 1% of U.S. gross domestic product (0.6% of America's \$21 trillion economy); while imports from China totaled \$506 billion (2.4% of the U.S. economy).<sup>16</sup> By comparison, Chinese exports to the United States totaled \$451.7 billion in 2019 (roughly 20% of all Chinese exports). The numbers reveal how much more the Chinese need access to American markets than the U.S. needed access to China's. A full-scale trade war with China would not derail America's economy, but it would do serious damage to China's economy. This is America's great advantage—what Trump referred to as "the war" we win "a thousand times out of a thousand."

To explain variation in state behaviors, realist theory places enormous causal weight on national power and international structure. And, indeed, dramatic changes in these structural-systemic factors predicted the shift in America's foreign economic policy from neoliberalism to Trump's transactional brand of politics. As Friedrich List argued in the middle of the nineteenth century, free trade serves world interests by maximizing exchange value, but whether free trade serves a nation's interest depends on its situation. It is now clear that America's situation has changed. Since the start of the new millennium, the global distribution of resources and power—economic wealth, political influence, and military power—has evolved in a more plural direction. The United States remains the most powerful state in the world. But it is no longer an Atlas capable of carrying the world on its shoulders.

The old hegemonic relationships and institutional arrangements, built during a different structural-systemic setting, have outlived their usefulness and intended purpose. It no longer makes sense for the U.S. to accept the costs of managing a liberal international order. Washington's attempts to perpetuate America's post-1945 role as hegemonic leader have progressively damaged the international system and the United States itself. In a suddenly competitive international system, America will exercise its power to advance goals defined by a narrower conception of the national interest—one less identified with the welfare of its allies, the stability of the global system, or the health of the liberal international order (LIO). America's international position changed, and so would its economic policies. Trump merely followed the dictates of international structure.

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<sup>13</sup>The balance of trade is the difference between the value of a country's exports and the value of its imports. When a country imports more than it exports, it is running a trade deficit, which means that it must rely on foreign direct investment or borrow money to make up the difference. In the long run, persistent trade deficits lower the total demand for goods and services in a country, reducing growth and employment.

<sup>14</sup>President Trump quoted in Damian Paletta and Anne Gearan, "Trump Pulls US from G7 Joint Statement after Bitter Feud with Trudeau," *The Washington Post*, June 10, 2018, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/g-7-meeting-fails-to-calm-tensions-as-donald-trump-justin-trudeau-exchange-trade-threats-1865100>. Trump then raised tariffs on steel and aluminum imports from Brazil and Argentina and proposed tariffs of up to 100% against \$2.4 billion of French imports in response to a new digital-service tax that France imposed on U.S. technology companies. Josh Zumbrun, Paulo Trevisani, and Amrith Rumkumar, "Trump to Levy Tariffs on Brazil, Argentina," *The Wall Street Journal*, December 3, 2019, A1, A2.

<sup>15</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 157.

<sup>16</sup> See Alan S. Blinder, "The Obama-Trump Economic Boom," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 26, 2019, A17.

### *The Primacy of Relative-Gains Concerns*

As Waltz correctly predicted back in 1993: “Economic competition is often as keen as military competition, and since nuclear weapons limit the use of force among great powers at the strategic level, we may expect economic and technological competition among them to become more intense.”<sup>17</sup> Sino-American tensions rose dramatically during the Trump Presidency. It was not a Cold War fueled by ideological and geostrategic competition. Rather, it was a hot war over economic and technological supremacy. The Sino-American struggle for global dominance in 5G networks, quantum computing, and artificial intelligence (AI) is the new superpower arms race. The winner stands to gain an economic, military, and intelligence edge for much of the century.<sup>18</sup> Unlike prior Presidents, who stressed global partnerships and economic interdependence, Trump did not sugarcoat the ruthlessness of global competition under anarchy. He also appreciated the national-security externalities associated with trade policy. As Peter Navarro, assistant to the president for trade and manufacturing policy, pointed out, U.S. tariffs on Chinese imports were used “as leverage to defend America’s technological crown jewels from being forcibly transferred to Chinese companies—from artificial intelligence, robotics and autonomous vehicles to quantum computing and blockchain. These industries comprise the core of the next generation of weapons systems needed to repel threats from rivals like China, Russia, and Iran.”<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, China has become a full-spectrum peer competitor—not near peer-competitor—of the United States in commercial and national security applications of AI—from facial recognition to fintech to drones and 5G.<sup>20</sup> Unlike the U.S.-Soviet competition in developing and deploying nuclear weapons, the AI race between the United States and China will dictate battlefield superiority. “Advances in AI have the potential to change the character of warfare for generations to come. Whichever nation harnesses AI first will have a decisive advantage on the battlefield for many, many years,” predicted Secretary of Defense Mark Esper.<sup>21</sup> More generally, the outcome of the AI contest will decisively impact the power trajectories of both countries.

Realists understand the importance of leading-sector technologies on a nation’s relative power position within the international system. Once again, as Waltz observed: “Technical and economic advances accumulate. One technological breakthrough may lead to others. Economic growth rates compound.”<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, realist theory finds that states are positional in character: they are most concerned about making relative gains and avoiding relative losses—concerns that often constrain their willingness to cooperate with each other.<sup>23</sup> Realism’s preoccupation with relative gains and losses is rooted in its insights that states under anarchy not only fear for their survival as independent actors but also seek to maximize their power and influence over others. Reflecting his relative-gains orientation, President Trump made it clear at a White House event unveiling the administration’s 5G strategy in April 2019, that “we cannot allow any other country to outcompete the United States in this powerful industry of the future.” He went on to say that the race to develop these faster, more powerful networks is a competition “America must win.”<sup>24</sup>

What were the results of Trump’s economic realism? On January 15, 2020, the United States and China signed the Phase One trade deal, requiring structural reforms and other changes to China’s economic and trade regime in the areas of intellectual property, technology

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<sup>17</sup> Kenneth Waltz, “The Emerging Structure of International Politics,” *International Security*, Vol. 18, No. 2. (Autumn, 1993), 44-79, at 59.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, David Sanger, Julian E. Barnes, Raymond Zhong, and Marc Santora, “U.S. Scrambles to Outrun China in New Arms Race,” *The New York Times*, January 27, 2019, 1, 11.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Navarro, “Give Trump’s Tariffs a Fair Test,” *The Wall Street Journal*, January 14, 2020, A15.

<sup>20</sup> Graham T. Allison and ‘Y,’ “The Clash of AI Superpowers,” *The National Interest*, No. 165 (January/February 2020), 11.

<sup>21</sup> As quoted in Allison and ‘Y,’ “The Clash of AI Superpowers,” 20.

<sup>22</sup> Waltz, “The Emerging Structure of International Politics,” 60.

<sup>23</sup> Joseph M. Grieco, “Realist Theory and the Problem of International Cooperation: Analysis with an Amended Prisoner’s Dilemma Model,” *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 50, No. 3 (August 1988), 600-624.

<sup>24</sup> President Trump as quoted in Darlene Superville and Tali Arbel, “FCC to Hold Big 5G Auction, Spend \$20B for Rural Internet,” *Associated Press*, April 12, 2019: <https://apnews.com/402d7c2651914d31a4f216f81eadda53>.

transfer, agriculture, financial services, and currency and foreign exchange. In return, the U.S. pledged not to increase tariffs on Chinese exports.<sup>25</sup> As of this writing, Chinese purchases of U.S. exports have fallen far behind Beijing's "trade deal" pledge. Yet, the trade war did produce one victory for the United States and the Trump administration. Global companies, fearing greater uncertainty and seeking diversity to lessen their dependence on China, have reduced their exposure to Chinese factories by shifting their supply chains to other countries, mostly the United States, Mexico, Vietnam, Cambodia, and India. The move, known as decoupling, has significantly diminished China's role as the world's factory—an outcome that many Trump administration officials wanted at the onset of the trade war.<sup>26</sup> Among those shifting their manufacturing elsewhere are Hewlett-Packard, Dell, Microsoft, and Nike, all of whom have altered their risk assessment on Beijing. "Once a business incurs the one-time cost of shifting its supply chain out of China, it is unlikely to return," avers Andy Puzder and Bill Hagerty. Some of the largest direct investors in China "made clear that further investment in China is off the table."<sup>27</sup>

According to realist theory, relative gains concerns extend beyond a state's enemies. Realists stress the fact that others' intentions are essentially unknowable and can change.<sup>28</sup> "Direct knowledge is elusive because intentions are private information. Only states know their own intentions," asserts Sebastian Rosato. "Even if observers could determine a state's current designs with confidence, there is no proven way for them to know what they will be later because there are many situations in which intentions can change."<sup>29</sup> Because today's friend may be tomorrow's enemy, states fear that joint gains from cooperation that advantage a friend in the present might produce a more dangerous potential foe in the future.

Guided by this realist logic, Trump did not exempt America's closest allies from his economic nationalism. In May 2018, for instance, the Trump administration made good on a key campaign promise when it said it was moving ahead with a 25 per cent tariff on steel imports and a 10 per cent tariff on aluminum imports from Canada, Mexico, and the European Union. The justification for imposing such tariffs stemmed from a Commerce Department investigation, which concluded that imported metal threatened U.S. national security by degrading the American industrial base.<sup>30</sup> The logic was rooted in core principles of realist political economy. Specifically, realists believe that states must anticipate the possibility of war, which sometimes requires them to deviate from policies prescribed by economic liberalism. With war always lurking in the background, "states will strive for national self-sufficiency, in order to assure the ability to produce the means to fight, as well as to reduce vulnerabilities that would result from the disruption of peacetime patterns of international economic flows. This is an important reason why realists tend to be skeptical of arguments touting the benefits of interdependence."<sup>31</sup> Endemic uncertainty about the intentions of others means that self-help is persistent, relative gains loom large, competition is the norm, and cooperation, even with traditional allies, is rare and fleeting.

### *No more Multilateralism: the U.S. Will not be Bound*

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<sup>25</sup> The complete text of the agreement is available at: [https://ustr.gov/sites/default/files/files/agreements/phase%20one%20agreement/Economic\\_And\\_Trade\\_Agreement\\_Between\\_The\\_United\\_States\\_And\\_China\\_Text.pdf](https://ustr.gov/sites/default/files/files/agreements/phase%20one%20agreement/Economic_And_Trade_Agreement_Between_The_United_States_And_China_Text.pdf).

<sup>26</sup> Keith Bradsher, "Rethinking China's Role as the World's Factory," *The New York Times*, April 6, 2019, A1 and A6.

<sup>27</sup> Andy Puzder and Bill Hagerty, "China Surrenders to Reality in the Trade Dispute," *The Wall Street Journal*, January 16, 2020, A15.

<sup>28</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 31. As Waltz observes, "[T]he condition of insecurity—at the least, the uncertainty of each about the other's future intentions and actions—works against their cooperation." Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 105.

<sup>29</sup> Sebastian Rosato, "The Inscrutable Intentions of Great Powers," *International Security*, Vol. 39, No. 3, (Winter 2014/2015), 86-87.

<sup>30</sup> For the results of the investigation, see U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Industry and Security, Office of Technology, *The Effect of Imports of Aluminum on the National Security: An Investigation Conducted Under Section 232 of the Trade Expansion Act of 1962, as Amended* (January 17, 2018): [https://www.commerce.gov/sites/default/files/the\\_effect\\_of\\_imports\\_of\\_aluminum\\_on\\_the\\_national\\_security\\_-\\_with\\_redactions\\_-\\_20180117.pdf](https://www.commerce.gov/sites/default/files/the_effect_of_imports_of_aluminum_on_the_national_security_-_with_redactions_-_20180117.pdf).

<sup>31</sup> Jonathan Kirshner, "The Political Economy of Realism," in Ethan B. Kapstein and Michael Mastanduno, eds., *Unipolar Politics: Realism and State Strategies after the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 75.

Another realist plank of Trump's foreign policy platform was that the United States should work with its international partners on a bilateral basis whenever possible, rather than through multilateral arrangements and commitments. Accordingly, the administration withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and the Paris agreement on climate change. Likewise, the Trump administration chose a bilateral approach to confront China on its trade and business practices—one that kept the European allies at arm's length. Trump reportedly told France's President Emmanuel Macron that he didn't want to see the European Union reaping the benefits of a U.S. trade pact, calling the draft trade agreement "my deal."<sup>32</sup>

Multilateralism, in Trump's view, is intended to tie down American power and to inhibit Washington's ability to manage and control its own affairs. In a much-anticipated speech on foreign policy in April 2016, candidate Trump said: "We will no longer surrender this country, or its people, to the false song of globalism. The nation-state remains the true foundation for happiness and harmony. I am skeptical of international unions that tie us up and bring America down, and will never enter America into any agreement that reduces our ability to control our own affairs."<sup>33</sup> Thus Trump "oppose[d] democracy promotion, multilateralism, security guarantees, and, implicitly, keeping the global commons open for use by all nations."<sup>34</sup>

The Trump administration was not alone in its assault on multilateralism. Countries around the world shifted to a "go it alone" strategy. As Peter Goodman of *The New York Times* observes: "The notion that global economic integration amounts to human progress had a good run, dominating the thinking of the powers that be for more than seven decades. But a new era is underway in which national interests take primacy over collective concerns, with trading arrangements negotiated among individual countries."<sup>35</sup> The globalist panacea that envisioned everyone getting rich in an increasingly flat and borderless world has been in steady retreat for over a decade now, as a growing number of people seem willing to trade efficiency, growth, and openness for the sake of state autonomy and the preservation of national identity and cultural distinctiveness.

Back in the 1930s, Christian realist Reinhold Niebuhr warned that the "development of international commerce, the increased economic interdependence among the nations, and the whole apparatus of a technological civilisation, increase the problems and issues between nations much more rapidly than the intelligence to solve them can be created."<sup>36</sup> The coronavirus pandemic massively reinforced the current deglobalization trend. What COVID-19 has most glaringly shown is that, as Stephen Walt argues, tight interconnections among states "create as many problems as they solve, sometimes more quickly than we can devise solutions for them. For this reason, states—the critical building blocks of international politics—try to reduce risks and vulnerabilities by placing limits on their dealings with one another."<sup>37</sup>

### *No more Free-Riding and why NATO Should Not Endure*

The final piece of Trump's foreign policy is his insistence that U.S. allies pay their fair share of the costs of their defense. This is a deeply held belief that long pre-dates his ascension to the Presidency. On January 17, 2019, President Trump put wealthy countries that host U.S. military forces "under notice" that they need to "pay the cost of this protection":

Very unfair when Germany pays 1 percent and we're paying 4.3 percent of a much larger GDP. We cannot be the fools for others. We cannot be. We don't want to be called that. And I will tell you, for many years, behind your backs, that's what they were saying. So there's a big difference. We're going to be with NATO 100 percent. But as I told the countries, you have

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<sup>32</sup> Vivian Salama and William Mauldin, "Trump Kept Allies at Bay in China Talks," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 11, 2019, A6.

<sup>33</sup> As quoted in Thomas Wright, "Five Things We 'Learned' From Trump's Foreign Policy Speech," *Brookings*, April 27, 2016: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2016/04/27/five-things-we-learned-from-trumps-foreign-policy-speech/>.

<sup>34</sup> Wright, "Five Things We 'Learned' From Trump's Foreign Policy Speech."

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Peter S. Goodman, "Shift in Trade Around Globe: To Go It Alone," *The New York Times*, December 15, 2019, 1, 14 at 1.

<sup>36</sup> Quoted in Stephen M. Walt, "The Realist's Guide to the Coronavirus Outbreak," *Foreign Policy*, 9 March 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/09/coronavirus-economy-globalization-virus-icu-realism/>.

<sup>37</sup> Stephen M. Walt, "The Realist's Guide to the Coronavirus Outbreak."

to step up. You have to pay minimum numbers, actually. The numbers should be much higher. They set a 2 percent goal. Very few pay that. But they should be much higher than that. If you look at what we pay, it's massively higher than that. So we have very good relationships, but countries are now stepping up, and they can well afford to.<sup>38</sup>

In private discussions with his aides, President Donald Trump devised a formula called “Cost Plus 50,” which demanded that U.S. allies pay the full cost of hosting U.S. troops in their countries, plus a 50% premium for the privilege of American protection.<sup>39</sup> To some, this monetary view of alliances wrongly suggested “that American support is about money, not shared security”—that the U.S. military is a mercenary corp, and that Washington will resort to extortion if necessary to get its way.<sup>40</sup> Perhaps. But a \$22 trillion national debt, (more than 105% of U.S. GDP), crumbling domestic infrastructure, and public indifference towards a global liberal empire make America's estimated 800 overseas bases in 80 countries appear as a bizarre misallocation of federal funds and taxpayers' money.

The United States accounts for 73 percent of NATO defense spending—a rather large amount for an organization with twenty-nine members that is focused on European security. Meanwhile, discussion of the current German defense budget foresaw military spending that would max out at 1.37% of GDP by 2020, and then fall to under 1.3% of economic output by 2022. This is well below Berlin's “political goal” of 1.5%, never mind the 2% target to which Germany has repeatedly committed.<sup>41</sup> Starved of funds by the German government, the Bundeswehr consists of only 181,500 soldiers (ranked 27<sup>th</sup> globally and down from 500,000 in 1990), whose military training sometimes features “laughable improvisations,” e.g., battle exercises in which soldiers use broomsticks to stand in for gun barrels and passenger vans for armored personnel carriers.<sup>42</sup>

One might have expected that a country would beef up its own defenses when its superpower patron, which has long guaranteed its security, calls into doubt its willingness to continue to protect its longtime allies—especially when the leader of that superpower has linked its willingness to continue defending the country to its willingness to spend significantly more of its budget on its own defense.<sup>43</sup> Yet Germany (with a GDP nearly 2.5 times Russia's) did nothing of the sort. Trump's frustration with Germany thus grew. At NATO's 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration, Vice President Mike Pence warned that Germany, given its embrace of the \$11 billion Nord Stream 2 Russia-to-Germany natural gas pipeline, risked becoming a “captive of Russia,” while Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared, “Now is not the time to repeat tired excuses that our citizens don't support increased defense spending or security spending.”<sup>44</sup>

Most American allies have refused to shoulder the human and economic costs required for their own defenses and credible military deterrents; they are more accurately regarded as American dependencies or protectorates than actual military partners.<sup>45</sup> And the few U.S. “allies” that do spend a healthy amount on their defenses—Turkey, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia—do not share American interests or

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<sup>38</sup> Remarks by President Trump and Vice President Pence Announcing the Missile Defense Review, January 17, 2019, (The Pentagon, Arlington, Virginia): <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-vice-president-pence-announcing-missile-defense-review/>.

<sup>39</sup> See Stacie L. Pettyjohn, “Cost Plus 50' Explained,” *The Washington Post*, March 15, 2019: <https://www.rand.org/blog/2019/03/cost-plus-50-explained.html>.

<sup>40</sup> Op-Ed, “The Wrong Way to Make Allies Pay More,” *The Wall Street Journal*, March 14, 2019, A18.

<sup>41</sup> Op-Ed, “Germany's NATO Backslide,” *The Wall Street Journal*, March 21, 2019, A18.

<sup>42</sup> Stefan Theil, “Berlin's Balancing Act,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 96, No. 5 (September/October 2017), 9.

<sup>43</sup> See Yascha Mounk, “Germany First,” *The National Interest*, No. 151 (September/October 2017), 34.

<sup>44</sup> Both quoted in David E. Sanger, “As NATO Envoys Celebrate, Signs of Fracturing from Within,” *The New York Times*, April 5, 2019, A9.

<sup>45</sup> Yoram Hazony and Ofir Haivry, “Why America Needs New Alliances,” *The Wall Street Journal*, April 6-7, 2019, A11.

values; they cooperate with Washington only when it serves their purposes. Yet these same “allies,” despite their collective disinterest in U.S. goals, are happy to benefit from U.S. arms, protection, and cash.<sup>46</sup>

As realism leads us to suspect, the deepening divisions within NATO and America’s alliances in the Middle East are less about the temperaments of current leaders or malicious turns in their domestic politics than about the changed international structure. In a world of increasingly decentralized power, alliances become less fixed: today’s friend may be tomorrow’s enemy (or, at a minimum, competitor), and vice versa. Trump accepted this. He operated according to the realpolitik principle that former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, echoing Lord Palmerston, once summarized: “America has no permanent friends or enemies, only interests.”<sup>47</sup> A focus on international structure also reveals an enormous transfer of wealth and military capabilities from West to East over the past two decades. Why should the trans-Atlantic alliance to remain a vital force when the world’s political center of gravity has shifted to the Indo-Pacific?

Indeed, the Europeans themselves do not see the relevance of the alliance. In a Pew poll released in February 2020, when asked if their country should go to war with Russia if it attacked a NATO ally, 50% of respondents in the EU said no, and only 38% support honoring their commitment to NATO allies. The breakdown is quite astonishing. Only 34% of Germans, 25% of Greeks and Italians, 36% of Czechs, 33% of Hungarians, and 41% of French believed that their country should fulfill its NATO treaty obligation if another European country was attacked. In contrast, the U.S., Canada, the U.K., Lithuania, and the Netherlands had a majority in favor of honoring their NATO commitment to mutual defense. These results partly reflect the sense of disorientation that many Europeans are experiencing in the age of “America First”—a theme now called “Westlessness.”<sup>48</sup>

Like virtually every prominent realist over the past decade, Trump called into question the continued existence of NATO, thereby shocking the foreign-policy establishment. As a realist, Trump is sensitive to the fact that NATO no longer exists to advance a realist purpose, viz., balancing against a dangerous superpower. Indeed, virtually all realists have been and remain sensitive to this fact. Thus, Kenneth Waltz very wrongly but quite logically predicted in 1993, “NATO’s days are not numbered, but its years are.”<sup>49</sup>

In the post-Cold War era, NATO abandoned its realist roots and become something akin to a regional collective security system, embracing the strategy of defending liberal democratic values: freedom, democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights.<sup>50</sup> The Clinton administration articulated NATO’s mission as “enlarging the community of market democracies while deterring and limiting a range of threats to our nation, our allies, and our interests. The more that democracy and political and economic liberalization take hold in the world, particularly in countries of strategic importance to us, the safer our nation is likely to be and the more our people are likely to prosper.”<sup>51</sup> NATO’s area of operations expanded as well. The (1998-99 war in Kosovo was the first time that “a defensive alliance launched a military campaign to avoid a humanitarian tragedy outside its own borders.”<sup>52</sup> After the war, President Bill Clinton declared:

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<sup>46</sup> Hazony and Haivry, “Why America Needs New Alliances.”

<sup>47</sup> [https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Henry\\_Kissinger](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Henry_Kissinger).

<sup>48</sup> Walter Russell Mead, “Europeans Try to Have It Both Ways,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 18, 2020, A15. In June 2020, the Trump administration announced that troop reductions are coming. In a move that dramatically reshapes the U.S. military posture in—and commitment to—Europe, President Trump directed the Pentagon to remove thousands of American troops from Germany by September, reducing the U.S. troop presence by 9,500 and capping at 25,000 the number of American troops in Germany at any given time. The decision reflected Trump’s frustration with Germany’s level of military spending (it promised to meet the NATO goal of 2% of GDP by 2031) and Berlin’s insistence on completing the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which would pour billions into Kremlin coffers.

<sup>49</sup> Waltz, “The Emerging Structure of International Politics,” 76.

<sup>50</sup> Visar Xhambazi, “From Collective Defense to Collective Security: NATO Intervention in Kosovo,” *Journal of Political Science and Public Affairs*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (May 2017), 1-5.

<sup>51</sup> The White House, “A National Security Strategy of Enlargement and Engagement,” February 1996: <https://fas.org/spp/military/docops/national/1996stra.htm>; see Sean Kay, *America’s Search for Security: The Triumph of Idealism and the Return of Realism* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), ch. 5.

<sup>52</sup> Javier Solana, “NATO’s Success in Kosovo,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 78, No. 6 (November/December 1999), 114.



“Whether you live in Africa or Central Europe, or any other place, if somebody comes after innocent civilians and tries to kill them en masse because of their race, their ethnic background or their religion, and it’s within our power to stop it, we will stop it.”<sup>53</sup>

Realists expected NATO to disappear as had every other grand military coalition in history once the foe had been defeated. Yet, it not only persisted but expanded as well. Realists attributed this “disconfirming” case to a pathological disorder associated with the historically unprecedented structural condition of unipolarity. Unchecked power, as realism warns, is dangerous not only to everyone who confronts it but to its possessor, who succumbs to the vice of overextension.<sup>54</sup> For the United States, this vice has manifested itself not only in an outmoded generosity towards its rich NATO allies but in costly and pointless wars that have undermined its influence around the world.<sup>55</sup>

### *No ‘Glorious Restoration’ after Trump*

For Democrats and “never Trump” Republicans, Joe Biden’s victory promises a ‘glorious restoration’ of the LIO and the strategic progress made during the post-Cold War decades—a return to the pre-Trump foreign policy for which they were responsible. And what a record it was: the ascent of al Qaeda and 9/11; the disastrous Iraq war; the quagmire in Afghanistan; the rise of Iran to near-hegemony in the region; civil wars in Syria and Libya; the territorial expansion of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS); a resurgent Russia gobbling up territory in Ukraine, aligning with Beijing, and expanding its influence in the Middle East and Africa; and the unchallenged rise of a revisionist China to “peer competitor” status with the United States. A restoration indeed.<sup>56</sup> These same establishment elites loudly condemned Trump’s rejection of the Iranian nuclear deal, decision to withdraw 2000 U.S. troops from Syria, movement of the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem, and assassination of Iran’s most powerful military commander—moves that culminated in historic normalization agreements between Israel and the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain.<sup>57</sup> Trump continued the Obama administration’s anti-ISIS campaign, culminating in a U.S. raid that killed the ISIS commander Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in October 2019. The Obama-Trump operation destroyed ISIS’s conventional military forces and ended its bid for a territorial state.

It is possible that the report of the LIO’s death has been grossly exaggerated. After all, this is hardly the first time that the foreign policy community has been convinced that the sky is falling. Panic over the viability of the American global order has been a persistent theme among foreign policy analysts since the LIO began—from Sputnik in the 1950s, to Vietnam and the export of inflation in the 1960s, to the end of the Bretton Woods system and the oil shocks of the 1970s, to the soaring U.S. budget and trade deficits in the 1980s, to 9/11, and, most recently, the 2008 financial crisis. This time, however, it is different.<sup>58</sup> The “after Trump” narrative of a restoration will never happen—and not because it was more catastrophe than glorious. But rather because Trump’s victory is of more consequence than cause of the LIO’s demise. Changes were afoot years before the rise of Trump.

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<sup>53</sup> Stephen S. Rosenfeld, “Exultant Crusader: For Overseas Rescue Missions, Americans Still Prefer Caution and Care,” *The Washington Post*, 2 July 1999, A27; Kay, “21<sup>st</sup> Century Realism and the Transatlantic Security Relationship,” 22.

<sup>54</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, “Structural Realism After the Cold War,” *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 1. (Summer 200), 13. See also John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, “The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior U.S. Grand Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs*, (July/August 2016), 76; and Barry R. Posen, “Pull Back: The Case for a Less Activist Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 92, No. 1 (January/February 2013), 121, 125.

<sup>55</sup> See Stephen M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America’s Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2018).

<sup>56</sup> Gerard Baker, “Elites Yearn for a Restoration Abroad Under Biden,” *The Wall Street Journal*, August 25, 2020, A17.

<sup>57</sup> For example, in February 2019, the Senate led by establishment elites voted overwhelmingly (68-23) in favor of legislation drafted by the majority leader Mitch McConnell (and backed by virtually every Senate Republican) to express strong opposition to President Trump’s withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Syria and Afghanistan. McConnell argued that “it is incumbent upon the United States to lead, to continue to maintain a global coalition against terror and to stand by our local partners.” Quoted in Catie Edmondson, “President Draws Bipartisan Swipe from the Senate,” *The New York Times*, February 1, 2019, A1-A6.

<sup>58</sup> See Daniel W. Drezner, “This Time Is Different: Why U.S. Foreign Policy Will Never Recover,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 98, No. 3 (May/June 2019), 10-17. While I agree with Drezner’s conclusion, I am not entirely persuaded by the logic he uses to reach it. I very much disagree with his boldly put political views regarding the Trump administration.

Deep structural forces in the international system inexorably work against any one country that accumulates so much power that it can establish and rule an international order. Unipolarity is over. The United States must come to grips with the new reality of bipolar strategic competition with China, multipolarity in other areas (the global economy and nuclear weapons), and limits on its action. As A. Wess Mitchell, who worked in the Trump administration and is now a Republican foreign-policy expert, explains:

The country is at a moment of self-correction. America's external and internal environments have dramatically changed. We got used to three decades with no peer competitor and unlimited resources. These conditions are now gone. You can't have a \$24 trillion debt and competition on all fronts and expect to continue business as usual. Far-reaching departures from our traditional foreign policy are now required. Otherwise, changes will be forced upon us later, with more pain than if we are proactive.<sup>59</sup>

Neoconservative internationalism has given way to neo-isolationism among grassroots factions within the Republican Party. As Thomas Wright observes, they are "sick and tired of U.S. involvement in the Middle East and have little interest in America's alliances with Europe. They are mainly worried about the economic challenge from China. They'd pull up the drawbridge, build the wall, and live in the fortress."<sup>60</sup> It would be a mistake to treat these attitudes as a mere minority view, confined to the xenophobic-driven faction of Republican voters. Back in early 2014, a Pew survey found a majority of Americans, for the first time, said that the U.S. should be less engaged in world affairs and believed that their country had a declining influence on what was happening around the globe.<sup>61</sup> Americans began to reject hard power and high politics. They no longer believe that American primacy is worth the candle. As David Brooks puts it, "Today people are more likely to believe that history is driven by people gathering in the squares and not from the top down."<sup>62</sup>

Unable or unwilling to acknowledge how the return of great power politics demands a realist reorientation of American grand strategy, the foreign policy community continues to maintain that America's global purpose is to protect and manage its liberal world order. This rather abstract goal does not strike most Americans as justification for the huge sacrifices that their government has been asking, and continues to ask, them to make. As Robert Kaplan exclaims, "Americans' tolerance for the inevitable failures of foreign policy and war is largely a function of the dangers they perceive in the world."<sup>63</sup> And there is widespread conviction these days that American liberal hegemony no longer serves U.S. interests. Thus, after four American soldiers were killed in special operations against Islamic terrorists in Africa in October 2017, a *New York Times* editorial argued that it is "time to take stock of how broadly American forces are already committed to far-flung regions and to begin thinking hard about how much of that investment is necessary."<sup>64</sup>

The general point is that dramatic shifts of international structure explain why the United States has abandoned its leadership role and is turning inwards. That said, Trump contributed to the irreversible nature of the LIO's demise in two ways. First, he not only challenged Republican orthodoxy, but he also blew up its establishment, making Trumpism virtually impossible to dislodge.<sup>65</sup> The other issue regards trust and the role it has played and must continue to play if American leadership were to be restored. Let me explain.

### *The Problem of Trust*

After a phone call with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, President Trump ordered U.S. troops to retreat from northern Syria, thereby acquiescing to a Turkish incursion into the region. American allies were shaken that Kurdish forces, who had backed the U.S.

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<sup>59</sup> As quoted in Thomas Wright, "Will Trumpism Change Republican Foreign Policy Permanently?" *The Atlantic* (August 2020): <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/08/will-trumpism-change-republican-foreign-policy-permanently/615745/>.

<sup>60</sup> Wright, "Will Trumpism Change Republican Foreign Policy Permanently?"

<sup>61</sup> See David Brooks, "The Leaderless Doctrine," *The New York Times*, March 10, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/11/opinion/brooks-the-leaderless-doctrine.html>.

<sup>62</sup> David Brooks, "The Leaderless Doctrine."

<sup>63</sup> Robert Kagan, *The Jungle Grows Back: America and Our Imperiled World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2018), 100-101.

<sup>64</sup> "America's Forever Wars," *New York Times*, October 23, 2017, A20.

<sup>65</sup> Wright, "Will Trumpism Change Republican Foreign Policy Permanently?"

since 2003 and had fought ISIS since 2011, were abandoned to a fierce Turkish military assault. Secretary of Defense James N. Mattis resigned in protest with a public resignation letter that praised the “international order” and asserted that “we cannot protect our interests...without maintaining strong alliances and showing respect to those allies”—sentiments that he knew Trump loathed.<sup>66</sup> It is hard to imagine how the U.S. can remain in the business of proxy warfare—what proxy would trust Washington to remain loyal or supportive during crunch time?<sup>67</sup> Defending his decision, Trump made it clear that he didn’t mind if America’s geopolitical adversaries filled the void: “Anyone who wants to assist Syria in protecting the Kurds is good with me, whether it is Russia, China, or Napoleon Bonaparte. I hope they all do great, we are 7,000 miles away.”<sup>68</sup> But even more than the betrayal of a loyal partner, what most alarmed American allies was Trump’s sheer unpredictability—the fact that he made such a momentous decision on the spur of the moment.<sup>69</sup> With one brief phone call, the bonds of trust that have held America and its formal and informal allies together—bonds that have kept the common project moving forward—seemed to many observers to be irretrievably broken.

What defines the emergence of a trusting relationship is the decision by both parties to make themselves vulnerable.<sup>70</sup> As James Notter argues, “if you risk and you are not exploited, this builds your confidence in the trustworthiness of the other.”<sup>71</sup> A trusting relationship is

“one into which actors enter in order to realize benefits which would otherwise not be available to them. They do so in the knowledge that this increases their vulnerability to other actors whose behavior they do not control, with potentially negative consequences for themselves. In doing so, they make a judgment about how to relate to the other party in which there is a strong expectation that they will not face the negative consequences of the decision to trust.”<sup>72</sup>

Taking a rationalist approach, the political philosopher Russell Hardin writes: “I trust you because I think it is in your interest to take my interests in the relevant matter seriously.”<sup>73</sup> Here, trust rests on interest-based calculations and, therefore, is vulnerable to changes in the payoff structure. If the distribution of benefits and losses from cooperation changes (for instance, as a result of the changed circumstances of one of the players), there will be an incentive to abandon cooperation. Under such circumstances, a prudent leader will be extremely cautious about investing in the trusting relationship and will probably look for alternatives. There are no guarantees that trust will be preserved, much less grow; and there is no escape from uncertainty and the possibility of betrayal. Trust between actors can be heightened or lost. But once trust is broken, it is difficult if not impossible to reclaim; the relationship cannot be as it was in its prior pristine form.

Without high levels of trust in U.S. global commitments and engagement, the American order will unravel. There is little chance, after Trump leaves office, of future oscillations between a liberal engagement and restraint. Once American moves away from Liberal

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<sup>66</sup> Quoted in Fred Kaplan, “The Defeat of General Mattis,” *The New York Review of Books*, Vol. 66, No. 18 (November 21, 2019), 4.

<sup>67</sup> For the rise and importance of proxy wars, see Daniel Byman, “Approximating War,” *The National Interest*, No. 157 (September/October 2018), 10-19.

<sup>68</sup> Quoted in Raja Abdulrahim, “Kurdish-Syrian Pact Scrambles Alliances,” *The Wall Street Journal*, October 15, 2019, A10.

<sup>69</sup> See David D. Kirkpatrick, Ben Hubbard, and David M. Halbfinger, “Snap Swerves By Trump Put Allies in a Fog,” *The New York Times*, October 13, 2019, p 1 and 10; “The Turk and the President,” *The Wall Street Journal*, October 12-13, 2019, A14; and Peggy Noonan, “Trump’s Reckless Rush to Withdraw,” *The Wall Street Journal*, October 12-13, 2019, A15.

<sup>70</sup> See Robert C. Solomon and Fernando Flores, *Building Trust: in Business, Politics, Relationships, and Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). Also see, Russell Hardin, *Trust and Trustworthiness* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2002); Deborah Welch Larson, *Anatomy of Mistrust: US-Soviet Relations During the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); Andrew H. Kydd, *Trust and Mistrust in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); and Aaron M. Hoffman, *Building Trust: Overcoming Suspicion in International Conflict* (New York: SUNY Press, 2005).

<sup>71</sup> James Notter, “Trust and Conflict Transformation,” The Institute for Multi-Track Diplomacy, Occasional Paper Number 5 (April 1995). Available at <http://www.imtd.org/pdfs/OP5.pdf>.

<sup>72</sup> Jan Ruzicka and Nicholas J. Wheeler, “The Puzzle of Trusting Relationships in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty,” *International Affairs*, Vol. 86, No. 1 (January 2010), 69-85 at 72.

<sup>73</sup> Hardin, *Trust and Trustworthiness*, 1.

Hegemony there is no turning back. If the Trump administration withdraws from the Middle East, for instance, policymakers in Europe and Asia will interpret it as a potential (or actual) sign of a broader American disengagement, as a prelude to a global isolationist pullback. In response, they will take actions (e.g. potentially pursuing a rapprochement vis-à-vis China or even Russia) that will complicate Washington's efforts to keep the option of maintaining global alliances open. Indeed, we already see hedging behavior by U.S. allies in Asia, and this could become more acute if these allies were to perceive further signs of global disengagement.

At home, there is little evidence that the American people would accept a return to the "liberal engagement" foreign policies of the 1990s and 2000s. The most likely scenario for American politics will be continued polarization, oscillations in party power, frequent periods of dysfunctional divided government, and ugly contestation over the basic rules of politics. There will be little room for maneuver, however, in terms of America's role in the world. Neither a return to primacy nor pre-WWI isolation are in the cards. The United States will remain a world power, it cannot be otherwise. But it will be a more selfish, normal great power.

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