



BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE INTERNATIONAL ORDER

A RAND Project to Explore U.S. Strategy in a Changing World

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American Grand Strategy and the Liberal Order

Continuity, Change, and
Options for the Future

Perspective

EXPERT INSIGHTS ON A TIMELY POLICY ISSUE



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Support for the liberal international order has been the single most consistent theme of U.S. grand strategy since World War II, and over seven decades, U.S. grand strategy has contributed markedly to the success and advancement of that order. Yet the precise form and manifestations of U.S. support have varied from year to year, and from presidential administration to administration, and America's relationship with the liberal order may again be reaching an inflection point today. Accordingly, in this paper, I seek to address two principal questions: How have elements of continuity and change in American engagement with the liberal order been manifested over time? And what are the various grand strategic options available to the United States in engaging the liberal order today?

I attempt to answer these questions as follows. First, I briefly review the defining characteristics of the postwar liberal order and the overarching contours of American engagement with that order since World War II. Second, I illustrate elements of change within continuity by discussing how different postwar administrations—from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush—addressed the order amid the particular international challenges and

opportunities they confronted. Third, I briefly survey the political and geopolitical developments that have rendered the prospects of the liberal order—and the nature of America's engagement with that order—more problematic in recent years. Fourth, I outline and analyze four notional approaches that American officials might take in relating U.S. power to that order in the years to come. Fifth, I conclude by briefly discussing basic criteria for selecting from among these options.

Two brief disclaimers may be useful at the outset. First, this paper is not a work of original research; it is a synthetic think-piece that draws on existing research about U.S. engagement with the international order over time, as well as ongoing debates about the future of American grand strategy. Second, this paper necessarily engages a variety of big, contested issues—debates about what would happen if the United States rolled back its forward force presence overseas, for instance—that would require far more extensive analysis to resolve conclusively. Accordingly, in this essay, I have simply sought to sketch the outlines of debate on some of these issues, and to offer my own analytical judgment about which side of the argument is most persuasive.

The Liberal Order and Postwar American Grand Strategy

The *international order* is the body of rules, norms, and institutions that govern relations among the key players in the international environment. Since World War II, the dominant international order has been the liberal order anchored by the United States. That order has been broadly characterized by an emphasis on liberal norms and values—including economic liberalism in the form of relatively free trade and open markets; political liberalism in the form of representative government and human rights; and other liberal concepts, such as non-aggression, self-determination, and the peaceful settlement of disputes. These norms and values have been manifested through such international institutions as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, World Trade Organization, United Nations, and European Union (EU). Both liberal norms and liberal institutions, moreover, have been bolstered by geopolitical arrangements that have fostered the international climate in which a liberal order can flourish. Alliances that have deterred aggression and promoted stability, arms control agreements that have reduced the danger of great-power war, and efforts to contain or roll back the influence of illiberal powers—these and similar initiatives have provided the foundation upon which the liberal order rests. As Robert Kagan, Michael Mandelbaum, and other scholars have noted, international norms and rules are not divorced from underlying geopolitical realities and power dynamics; they are often directly a function thereof.¹

In particular, the liberal order has benefited from the consistent support of the world's most powerful country—the

United States. From an American perspective, World War II demonstrated the interdependence—in both economic and security terms—of the global environment, as well as the corresponding need to build an overarching international system that would be congenial to the nation's security and values. Moreover, that conflict demonstrated that desired international norms—from nonaggression to human rights—could be preserved and advanced only through decisive action by powerful actors.

Accordingly, since World War II, Washington has made the creation and advancement of a liberal international order the core, overriding objective of its statecraft. Over the course of seven decades, American policies have promoted the expansion of global trade, finance, and investment, and they have broadly supported the spread of democratic values and human rights. The United States has led many of the institutions most associated with the international order, it has shouldered predominant responsibility for upholding such key norms as nonaggression, and it has been the primary provider of the international stability and reassurance that a successful liberal order demands. “In the decades after World War II,” G. John Ikenberry writes, “the United States engaged in the most ambitious and far-reaching liberal order building the world had yet seen.”²

During the Cold War, these measures were often oriented toward containing the Soviet Union, which supported a rival conception of world order and represented the most pressing threat to America's vision of how the international system should work. Yet as U.S. officials made clear, promoting a liberal world order would have been an overarching priority even absent Cold War competition. As noted in NSC-68, a key statement of U.S. early Cold War

strategy, efforts “to foster a world environment in which the American system can survive and flourish” constituted “a policy which we would probably pursue even if there were no Soviet threat.”³ And indeed, when the Cold War ended, Washington did not dramatically retrench from the commitments and initiatives it had employed to promote the liberal order. Rather, the United States reaffirmed and, in some cases, advanced those initiatives and commitments even further in order to exploit the opportunities that had become available in the unipolar era. The promotion of democracy and globalization, the use of American force deployments and security guarantees to stabilize the international order, and efforts to contain or undermine autocratic “rogue states”—these efforts have remained among the foremost components of America’s post–Cold War grand strategy.⁴ Advancing a liberal system has thus been an overriding grand strategic imperative for the United States across historical eras. It has been the most prominent, enduring theme of post–World War II American statecraft.⁵

That approach, moreover, is now generally recognized as having been broadly effective in delivering a range of important benefits for the United States. Disputes about the overall efficacy of postwar U.S. foreign policy notwithstanding, it is widely accepted that American engagement has helped deliver a prosperous and generally open international economy, and that this international economy has produced broad prosperity gains for the United States (even if those gains have been unevenly distributed).⁶ Detailed historical work also indicates that U.S. policies to promote democracy have helped significantly expand the number of democracies in the world over time, and there is a substantial body of historical and social science

scholarship to suggest that this effect also has made the international environment more peaceful, and the United States more secure and influential, than either might otherwise have been.⁷ Additionally, there is a strong body of work indicating that the U.S. security commitments, alliances, and forward deployments used to anchor the international order have helped foster an international system that has been—by historical standards—relatively stable and peaceful since World War II, with a remarkably low incidence of great-power war.⁸ Finally, the creation, leadership, and support of liberal institutions—from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to the EU—helped create positive relationships between many of the major Western powers during the Cold War, and somewhat more broadly since then.⁹ The liberal order–building project has not only been fairly consistent over time but also has produced real gains for the United States.

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Yet grand strategy inevitably involves both change and continuity, and this has been true of American support for the liberal order. Over the course of the postwar era, different administrations have confronted different challenges and different opportunities in addressing the liberal order; different administrations also have experienced varying degrees of success or failure in deepening and advancing that order. Examining how individual administrations have approached these tasks can thus be useful in illustrating how even enduring grand strategies shift and adapt amid changing circumstances; it can also help us trace the arc of American engagement with that order as it has evolved over time.

The following section therefore briefly recounts the policies of several key presidential administrations of the post–World War II era. This sampling is meant to be illustrative rather than exhaustive; one could profitably examine the policies of administrations not covered here as well. But each of these administrations—those of Harry Truman, Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan,

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and George W. Bush—governed at a key inflection point in the trajectory of the postwar order. These episodes thus show how different administrations have used American power in relation to the liberal order—and how successful or unsuccessful they have been in doing so—at different times.¹⁰ That discussion, in turn, helps frame the subject covered in the latter half of this paper—how American grand strategy, and America’s relationship with the liberal order, might evolve in years to come.

Examining Individual Administrations

The Truman Administration—Building the Western Order

Many of the key ideas and institutions that characterized the postwar order actually emerged during, and even prior to, World War II. The importance of free trade, human rights, and nonaggression, and the creation of the United Nations and the Bretton Woods institutions—these concepts and initiatives were products of the Franklin D. Roosevelt years. Yet Roosevelt also consistently underestimated the political and economic chaos that would follow global war, and his vision for the postwar world had been premised on a mistaken belief that the liberal order would rest on a foundation of great-power concert. The failure of that concert to materialize, and the danger that the Soviet Union might capitalize on postwar tumult to erect an antipathetic global system, created the context in which the Truman administration confronted issues of international order following World War II.¹¹

In these circumstances, the Truman administration made two crucial choices that would structure American

engagement with the liberal order for much of the Cold War. First, the administration accepted that Cold War bipolarity and Soviet hostility made the truly *global* application of liberal principles implausible for the time being. Second, the administration resolved to harness America's unmatched power to allow a liberal *Western* order to flourish even amid postwar devastation and great-power competition. "There are, in short, two worlds instead of one," State Department Counselor Charles Bohlen wrote in 1947, and "all American policies should be related to this central fact."¹² The major geopolitical and geo-economic initiatives of the Truman era reflected this guiding imperative.

On the economic front, the Marshall Plan—a commitment of aid equivalent to roughly 5 percent of American gross national product—best embodied this approach. The Marshall Plan helped ensure that postwar economic chaos in Europe did not lead to the collapse of democratic governance, or to a revival of the trade blocs and protectionism that had impoverished the world economy prior to World War II. Equally important, it helped to check the advance of communist—and, by extension, Soviet—influence in a vital strategic region and to turn Western Europe into a hub of market-based prosperity that the Soviet world would never come close to emulating.¹³ In Japan, the "reverse course" initiative—the decision to use U.S. aid and trade preferences to promote economic rehabilitation rather than punishment—had similar motives and results. In essence, the Truman administration mobilized America's peerless economic power to fortify the democratic, capitalist core from which the liberal order would subsequently radiate, and to give that core a decisive long-term advantage over its Soviet-led rival.¹⁴

On the security front, the Truman administration's role was equally formative. The Roosevelt administration had initially imagined that Washington could erect a vibrant liberal order *without* making long-term security commitments to such key regions as Western Europe. The Truman administration, by contrast, gradually recognized that those commitments were essential to building the liberal order amid geopolitical insecurity, residual historical antagonisms, and budding bipolar conflict. U.S. alliance guarantees and forward deployments tamped down historical rivalries within the Western world, fostered the supranational cooperation that allowed such defining liberal projects as European integration to take hold, and provided the shield behind which Western countries could emphasize liberal political and economic development. In the same vein, the U.S. military buildup associated with NSC-68 helped substantiate these commitments and ensure that the supporters of the liberal order would maintain a preponderance of geopolitical and military power. Moreover, the consensual, genuinely participatory approach that U.S. officials generally took to forming such Western security arrangements helped give those arrangements an organic solidarity that distinguished them from their rival institutions in the Soviet bloc, and a durability that would permit their persistence and flourishing over time.

All told, the Truman administration may not have originated America's postwar liberal order. But on security and economic matters alike, it made the long-term investments of American power and built the positions of enduring strength that would redound to the benefit of that order for decades to come.¹⁵

The Nixon and Ford Administrations— Coping with Relative Decline

If the Truman administration helped build the postwar order, the Nixon and Ford administrations governed as that order seemed to be coming undone. In international economic relations, the Bretton Woods system of monetary relations had underpinned rapid postwar growth, but by the 1970s, that system was on the verge of collapse. The rules of Bretton Woods essentially required the United States to bear the dual burden of simultaneously stabilizing the international monetary system, by pegging the dollar to gold at \$35 per ounce, while also lubricating that system by providing a steady outflow of dollars to the world. The gradual decline of America's relative economic power following World War II had made this burden steadily harder to bear over the course of the 1950s and 1960s. By the beginning of the 1970s, the U.S. balance of payments was deteriorating ominously, while only costly and frequent emergency interventions were holding the Bretton Woods system together. The geopolitical panorama was also increasingly stormy as the Cold War seemed to turn against the United States. The Soviet Union was emerging as a truly global military and geopolitical competitor, just as the Vietnam War was exposing the limits of American power and draining U.S. resources and self-confidence. American alliances were also under strain. Throughout the 1970s, there was thus a pervasive sense that U.S. influence was receding and that the liberal order itself was in growing danger.

Under these circumstances, the Nixon and Ford administrations' strategy emphasized a mix of creative maneuvers and selective retrenchment, meant to preserve the liberal

order at a time of relative U.S. decline. In international economic affairs, Nixon effectively took the United States off the gold standard in 1971—thereby abandoning the core of the Bretton Woods system—in an effort to reestablish international monetary relations on more-favorable and less-onerous terms.

Meanwhile, in international security affairs, Nixon and Ford sought to limit the most dangerous challenge to the liberal order—the prospect of Soviet geopolitical primacy—via more-selective, less-profligate means. First, the Nixon administration withdrew from Vietnam in order to liquidate an unsustainable commitment along the global periphery, and thereby enable the reconsolidation of containment at the core of the international system. Second, Nixon and Henry Kissinger conducted a geopolitical opening to China in hopes of defending the Western order by balancing its most powerful enemies against one another. China was not a liberal democracy by any means, of course, but the calculation here was that the *sine qua non* of a liberal international order—an international balance of power favorable to the United States and its liberal allies—could best be preserved by splitting the enemies of that order and thereby counterbalancing the growth of Soviet power.

Third, both Nixon and Ford sought to update containment not by abandoning it, but by continuing efforts to check Soviet advances while also working to integrate Moscow into the international system to a greater degree than before. In particular, they used arms control agreements, the promise of diplomatic legitimacy, and the lure of economic incentives in an effort to moderate Soviet behavior by giving the Kremlin a greater stake in preserving that system. As the Soviets became more deeply involved in

an international system that provided it with prestige and tangible benefits, the thinking went, they would also have less interest in attacking or seriously disrupting that system. And fourth, as the Nixon and Ford administrations carried out these various maneuvers, they generally downplayed such issues as human rights and democracy in their dealings with allies and adversaries alike. They did not do so out of any hostility for human rights and democracy per se, but in the belief that Washington must be more selective in what it sought to achieve in the world, and that preserving the favorable balance of power on which a liberal order rested justified making such compromises at a time of geopolitical duress.¹⁶

Admittedly, these efforts would prove problematic in many respects. The end of Bretton Woods in 1971 unleashed a period of relative anarchy in international monetary relations, and the effort to establish a new regime of fixed rates at more-sustainable levels ultimately had to be abandoned.¹⁷ Likewise, the Nixon and Ford administrations never really succeeded in integrating the Soviet Union into the international order, and as Soviet military power grew during the 1970s, Moscow actually became more assertive in contesting U.S. interests at both the core and the periphery of that order. Additionally, support for authoritarian regimes abroad, and a relative de-emphasis on addressing both allies' and adversaries' human rights violations, ultimately inspired a backlash within the United States from critics who believed that American policymakers had become too willing to compromise on the near-term promotion of liberal values overseas. These and other difficulties notwithstanding, however, policies from the Nixon and Ford era did make two essential contributions to America's post-1945 liberal project.

First, although the détente strategy and its associated maneuvers did not constrain Soviet behavior to the extent desired, they did have important strategic effects. Such maneuvers as the opening to China and the reliance on friendly authoritarians helped shore up a slipping U.S. global position, for instance, while arms control agreements helped limit Soviet gains in the strategic arms competition and injected a degree of stability into the bilateral relationship. Likewise, the shift to a less confrontational posture helped preserve a fraying U.S. relationship with NATO allies. These maneuvers thus helped sustain containment—and with it, the liberal Western order—at a time of great international and domestic trauma and gave that strategy the time it needed to work.

Second, the policies of the Nixon and Ford administrations also set the stage—sometimes in ways that their creators did not fully envision—for the dramatic advancement of

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the liberal order in later years. The opening to China not only helped counterbalance Soviet power but also permitted Beijing's subsequent integration into the global economy. Similarly, in a way that most U.S. policymakers did not anticipate, the Helsinki Accords—the culmination of U.S.-Soviet détente—fostered liberalizing political currents that would ultimately transform the communist world from within.¹⁸ Finally, on the economic front, the abandonment of the Bretton Woods system and the eventual shift to a “nonsystem” of floating exchange rates may have been disruptive and disorderly, but it also made possible the gradual abolition of national currency and capital controls—thereby liberating international finance and helping usher in the modern era of globalization.¹⁹ The Nixon-Ford years were a challenging period, no doubt, but they nonetheless demonstrated how selective retrenchment could help stabilize the liberal order amid difficult conditions, and they presaged some of the major breakthroughs that the order would enjoy in the 1980s and after.

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The Reagan Administration— Pressing Forward on All Fronts

Those major breakthroughs began in earnest during the Reagan years. By the time Reagan took office in 1981, the geopolitical adversities of the 1970s were fading and the international environment was evolving in ways that were far more favorable to advancing the liberal order. The onset of third-wave democratization was commencing a global sea-change that would raise the number of electoral democracies from 39 in the early 1970s to 120 at century's end.²⁰ The onrush of modern-day globalization was simultaneously integrating the global economy and encouraging the proliferation of neoliberal, market-oriented concepts. Not least, the onset and progression of terminal Soviet decline was gradually laying the groundwork for the transformation of the Cold War, and for the rise of a unipolar system in which liberal norms and institutions were no longer hemmed in by geopolitical divisions.

These trends enabled what Reagan called “a forward strategy for freedom”—an aggressive, multipronged push to expand the liberal order more aggressively than at any time in decades.²¹ After some pronounced initial ambivalence, the administration made democracy promotion a centerpiece of its statecraft, combining medium- and long-term efforts to strengthen the building blocks of democracy with shorter-term initiatives to pressure authoritarian regimes and encourage political openings. These measures, which ranged from covert action and economic coercion to diplomatic engagement and the programs sponsored by the National Endowment for Democracy, would help foster democratic transitions in countries from the Philippines to Chile and El Salvador during the Reagan

years.²² The administration simultaneously played a crucial role in deepening the liberal economic order. In confronting the Third-World debt crisis, for instance, the Reagan administration used U.S. influence in the IMF, World Bank, and other international institutions to make lending to cash-strapped governments contingent on neoliberal reforms, thereby helping to gradually push globalization into the Global South.²³

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the Reagan administration contributed to advancing the liberal order through its policies toward great-power relations and the Cold War.²⁴ During the early 1980s, the administration undertook a major geopolitical offensive—employing military, political, economic, diplomatic, and ideological tools—that exploited Soviet weaknesses and increased U.S. strategic leverage. From the mid-1980s onward, the administration then used that leverage to negotiate a reduction of tensions that entailed major breakthroughs in arms control and a significant easing of Moscow’s longstanding challenge to the international order. The administration simultaneously promoted liberal concepts within the Soviet Union itself. George Shultz, Reagan’s Secretary of State, held seminars with the Soviet leadership on the need for liberal economic reform; the administration also used its influence to incentivize, affirm, and strengthen Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev’s move toward political liberalization. By the end of the 1980s, the administration’s policies were therefore contributing to the ongoing liberalization of Soviet politics and society and to winding down the bipolar conflict that had long limited the liberal order’s geographic reach. Across an array of key issues, then, the Reagan administration exploited propitious conditions to strengthen and advance that order and to set the stage for an era of liberal dominance.

The George W. Bush Administration— Overreach and the Ebbing of the Liberal Tide?

The era of liberal dominance had been under way for roughly a decade when George W. Bush took office. During the 1990s, U.S. policymakers had used America’s unipolar position to foster the continued advance of democracy, markets, and human rights while also maintaining American military primacy as the backbone of the liberal order. Notwithstanding Bush’s prepresidential aversion to nation-building and “arrogant” liberal proselytism, he would soon seek to kick the U.S.-backed liberal offensive into even higher gear.²⁵

The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, were the primary catalyst for this endeavor. These attacks demonstrated that even a unipolar environment held great dangers and that strong measures were needed to protect liberal societies from such menaces as catastrophic terrorism. They also showed, from Bush’s perspective, that the persistence of illiberal governance could turn areas like the Middle East into wellsprings of homicidal radicalism. The upshot was an immensely forward-leaning effort to lock in the liberal order and to advance that order further than ever before. Bush announced that America would indefinitely maintain a “balance of power that favors freedom”—in other words, a unipolar environment dominated by the United States and its liberal allies. “America has, and intends to keep, military strengths beyond challenge,” he declared in 2002, “thereby making the destabilizing arms races of other eras pointless, and limiting rivalries to trade and other pursuits of peace.”²⁶ The administration simultaneously resolved to employ that military power,

preemptively and without the sanction of international institutions if necessary, in order to confront the most pressing threats to the liberal order and to thrust liberal concepts into the region where they were most sorely lacking—the Middle East. The U.S. effort to implant democracy in Afghanistan from late 2001 onward, and the subsequent invasion, occupation, and attempted democratization of Iraq, were the primary manifestations of this ambitious liberal endeavor.

Yet after a promising start, the results of these policies—particularly in Iraq—proved to be deeply counterproductive. The invasion of Iraq invited a bloody insurgency and caused profound instability across much of the Middle East; it also empowered decidedly illiberal forces—from Iran to al-Qaeda—to fill the vacuum of authority the war had caused.²⁷ More broadly, the war invited blowback against the democracy-promotion and nation-building agenda that had come to prominence in the post-Cold War era, and it caused a backlash against perceived

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American recklessness and unilateralism—including among many of America's key liberal allies. “What do we do,” asked German foreign minister Joschka Fischer, “when . . . our most important partner is making decisions that we consider extremely dangerous?”²⁸ During and after the Iraq War, in fact, some of those allies occasionally seemed to view the unconstrained use of *American* power as a threat to the liberal order. For its part, the Bush administration had argued that it was seeking to protect and expand that order by confronting an aggressive authoritarian regime, upholding the raft of United Nations Security Council resolutions passed regarding Iraq since the early 1990s, and enabling the spread of liberal concepts into the Middle East. Yet to many international observers, the Bush administration's behavior seemed to flout and perhaps fundamentally endanger key aspects of that order—namely, respect for international law, international institutions, and multilateralism.²⁹

The Bush administration's experience thus revealed some sobering truths about America's relationship with the liberal order. It demonstrated the limits of America's ability to advance that order, and it showed that Washington had, to a substantial degree, already picked the low-hanging fruit regarding the promotion of human rights and democracy. It demonstrated that although U.S. leadership remained essential to the liberal order, acting too assertively—while also bypassing key liberal institutions, such as the United Nations—could actually jeopardize that leadership by alienating other key liberal powers and creating doubt about U.S. motives and behavior. Not least of all, the Iraq War indicated that liberal overreach could leave the nation exhausted and distracted from other

rising challenges. This last issue had become particularly prominent by Bush's second term, as several dangers—from a nuclear North Korea, to the resurgence of Russian authoritarianism and aggression in the post-Soviet space, to the emergence of China as a potential, and highly illiberal, peer competitor—were rendering American dominance and the liberal order increasingly contested.

Bush had sought to push the liberal tide to new heights. Yet when his presidency ended, it was becoming common to wonder whether that tide was now receding—and how the United States would relate to the liberal order in a more difficult future.

American Strategy and the Future of the Liberal Order

These questions have become only more pressing in recent years. Since Bush left office in January 2009, several key international developments have raised further doubts about the future of the liberal order, and about the future of U.S. grand strategy. Most experts now agree that the advance of electoral democracy has stalled in the face of the inherent difficulties of democratization, the exhaustion of “easy cases,” and the increasing resilience of smarter, more-subtle authoritarian regimes; the major debate centers on whether a “democratic recession” is now under way.³⁰ Similarly, the 2007–2008 global economic crisis and its aftereffects have taken some of the sheen off of globalization and the liberal economic model, while also placing enormous stress on institutions—such as the EU—that have long been seen as exemplars of the liberal model. The 2016 British vote to exit the EU (“Brexit”)

has placed the future of European integration under even greater doubt. Meanwhile, dreams of thrusting the Middle East into the liberal order are now only a distant memory. The promise of the period immediately following the liberation of Iraq, and then of the Arab Spring in 2011, has now largely given way to a continuing nightmare of sectarian violence, Islamic radicalism, and reinvigorated authoritarianism.

Amid these setbacks—and likely contributing to them—the geopolitical foundations of the liberal order also have come under greater stress. A militarily (if not economically) resurgent Russia is contesting liberal norms (such as nonaggression) along its frontiers while seeking to divide and weaken such institutions as NATO and the EU. At the same time, the rise of China has shifted global power dynamics in the direction of a politically illiberal actor that prefers authoritarianism to democracy, that pursues a quasimercantalist approach to key international resource flows, and that is contesting the security order in East Asia, as well as established international norms, such as freedom of navigation—all as it reaps the benefits of globalization and a liberal international trade and investment regime. Conversely, the share of global economic and military power wielded by the United States and its liberal allies has receded—not precipitously but meaningfully—since around 2004, raising additional concerns about whether the supporters of the liberal order still possess the vigor needed to sustain and advance that order.³¹ To be clear, as of 2016, the liberal order remains quite robust by most historical standards, and Washington and its core liberal allies still possess a clear preponderance of global power. But the forward momentum of the liberal order has clearly

dissipated to some degree, and that order seems more contested than at any time since the end of the Cold War.

The future of U.S. grand strategy seems more contested than at any time since the end of the Cold War, too. The years prior to 2016 had already seen growing calls for retrenchment within the strategic studies community and from some mainstream observers. Against this backdrop, the 2016 election cycle has made clear that the domestic political foundations of the liberal order are showing signs of strain. Candidates in both major parties have captured widespread support, in part, through harsh critiques of the very institutions and practices that advancing the liberal order requires—for example, promoting free trade and globalization, maintaining American alliances, and committing to supporting a positive-sum international

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system.³² And for the first time since 1972 (if not earlier), one major party has as its nominee a candidate who rejects key premises of the assertive liberal engagement that has long underpinned the international order. How much this phenomenon reflects broader domestic disillusion with the liberal order is difficult to say, because opinion polls sometimes indicate that domestic support for such engagement remains more robust than the presidential horse-race might indicate.³³ But the prominence of strident opposition to free trade and other liberal endeavors in the presidential campaign does presumably indicate that American views of the liberal order are in greater flux than they have been at previous points in the post–Cold War era.

All this raises the question of how future presidential administrations will seek to relate American power to the trajectory of the liberal international order. Will they continue to support the long-term advancement of that order? Or might they undertake more-significant departures from the post–World War II pattern? The remainder of this paper considers four notional approaches that subsequent administrations might take, two fitting squarely within the former category and two fitting within the latter. All of these approaches are adapted from the existing literature on grand strategic options for the United States.³⁴ Moreover, all of these approaches are essentially ideal types, meant to outline the range of choices available to U.S. policymakers and how those choices might affect the liberal order.³⁵ Each section that follows articulates the basic logic and intellectual premises of a given approach, outlines its prospective policy characteristics, and briefly discusses the strategic advantages and challenges it might entail. The conclusion of this paper then presents criteria that might be used to choose from these various options.

Grand Strategy and the Liberal Order in the Years Ahead

In this section, I discuss the following possible approaches to U.S. grand strategy and the international order moving forward:

- Retaking the Offensive
- Selective Engagement, Selective Retrenchment
- Offshore Balancing
- Zero-Sum.

Retaking the Offensive

The most ambitious approach might be termed *retaking the offensive*.³⁶ Its fundamental intellectual premise is that the advancement of the liberal order—the spread of democracy and market economics, the prominence of liberal ideas as the guiding norms of international affairs, and the preservation of relative global stability and a balance of power favoring the liberal democracies—has served U.S. and global interests quite well over several decades. The optimal course for the United States would therefore be one that solidifies that order—and deepens it even further.

Beyond this core premise, this approach is also based on the following subpremises. First, the best defense is a good offense, in the sense that the best way to preserve the liberal order is to keep that order moving forward. Second, proponents of the liberal model still possess a clear preponderance of power in the international system, so they can and should seek to maintain the global initiative. Third, the basic global appeal of liberal principles remains inherently robust, despite the setbacks of recent years. Fourth, those recent difficulties—the rise of a more assertive, illiberal China; the resurgence of an aggressive Russia;

the onset of a “democratic recession”; and a dimming of the allure of free-market approaches—do not represent a fundamental historical turn away from the liberal ascendancy, but rather a set of difficulties that can be overcome via a sufficient investment of effort and resources by the United States and its liberal partners. And fifth, even in a more contested and competitive geopolitical environment, it becomes all the more important to wage a concerted global campaign on behalf of the principles and arrangements that Washington prefers.³⁷ If one accepts these basic premises, then a strategy of *retaking the offensive* represents the best approach.

In practice, this approach would feature determined, across-the-board efforts to sustain the liberal order and reinvigorate its forward momentum. Policies that the United States might pursue in service of this broad approach would include the following:

- Continue to provide public goods, such as security and stability, in key regions and guarantee the free flow of critical resources, such as Persian Gulf oil.
- Make the investments necessary to revitalize U.S. alliances, provide these public goods, and maintain the multidimensional military primacy that has long undergirded the liberal order.
- Strengthen America’s broader diplomatic and economic relationships with other key liberal democracies (from Germany, France, and the United Kingdom in Europe, to Japan, India, and Australia in the Asia Pacific) as a way of fortifying the liberal democratic core of the international order.
- Reinvest in international institutions—from the United Nations to the EU—that have played a

key role in advancing the liberal order, and seek to avert developments—such as further defections from the EU in the wake of Brexit—that would weaken or fragment those institutions.

- Continue seeking to integrate rising powers, such as China, into the international economy and international institutions, while also hedging—through alliances and military primacy—against nonintegration and strongly opposing those or other countries’ efforts to contest key liberal principles, such as nonaggression or freedom of navigation.
- Work diligently to conclude important regional free-trade agreements, such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, while also seeking to reenergize the broader global free-trade agenda via renewed progress in the Doha Round of the World Trade Organization.
- Re-emphasize whole-of-government efforts—from diplomacy, to economic assistance, to programs run by the National Endowment for Democracy—to promote liberal governance and human rights overseas, and perhaps even use military force for these ends in exceptional circumstances.
- Aggressively combat terrorism, nuclear proliferation, and other key dangers to the international order, using the full range of national power to do so.

In essence, then, *retaking the offensive* would strongly affirm America’s role as chief supporter of the liberal order, and it would seek to advance the geographical reach of that order while also solidifying its institutional and geopolitical foundations.³⁸ Table 1 summarizes this approach.

So what are the strengths and weaknesses of this strategy? The potential advantages are fairly straightforward. First and foremost, this approach accurately recognizes the longstanding benefits of the liberal order, and it builds on the substantial investments that Washington has already made in that order over several decades. Additionally, it recognizes that significant liberal advances have generally come at least partially as a result of determined U.S. and allied efforts, and that a broadly assertive strategy may thus be well suited to sustaining liberal progress to date and seizing what opportunities emerge in the coming years. Finally, it reflects the judgment that the erosion of the liberal order in recent years has sometimes been exaggerated, and that, in general, the future prospects of that order are not as bleak as sometimes assumed. To give but one example of this final point, the proportion of global economic and military power controlled by the United States and its liberal allies has indeed declined since the early post-Cold War era, but the “liberal coalition” still commands a clear majority of that power in economic and military terms alike, and at a share far greater than that of any conceivable illiberal counter-coalition.³⁹ Therefore, a reinvigorated liberal offensive appears a plausible and potentially rewarding course.

That said, however, this approach also invites key risks, uncertainties, and potential counter-arguments. First, in light of the long-term budgetary challenges that the United States confronts, it is not clear that the U.S. population and political system will be willing to make the expensive investments necessary to maintain American geopolitical and military primacy in the face of China’s rapid rise.⁴⁰ Second, it is similarly unclear whether

TABLE 1
Retaking the Offensive

MAIN THRUST	CORE PREMISES	KEY POLICY IMPLICATIONS
<p>Pursue comprehensive efforts to sustain, deepen, and reinvigorate the momentum of liberal order.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The liberal order has served U.S. and global interests well. • The best way to preserve order is to sustain forward momentum. • Proponents of the liberal order are still geopolitically dominant. • The appeal of liberal ideals is still robust. • Recent difficulties and setbacks can be overcome with sufficient effort. • A more contested and competitive international environment demands a more assertive approach. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue providing global security and public goods in key regions. • Make the investments needed to revitalize alliances and maintain military primacy. • Integrate illiberal powers into the liberal order while hedging against or opposing adverse behavior. • Aggressively pursue regional and global free trade. • Use whole-of-government efforts to promote human rights and democracy, including using military force in exceptional cases. • Deepen relationships with liberal powers. • Reinvest in liberal institutions. • Aggressively combat terrorism, proliferation, and other threats using all elements of national power.

America’s liberal allies—particularly in Europe—still have the geopolitical vitality, global-mindedness, and political will necessary to be useful partners in perpetuating and advancing the liberal order. Third, it will be difficult at best to revitalize the global free-trade agenda, and the combination of international and domestic resistance that has so far stymied the Doha Round may make this project altogether infeasible.⁴¹ Fourth, being too assertive in confronting threats and seeking to expand the liberal order can backfire—as the Iraq War demonstrated—by inviting strategic exhaustion or international pushback. Fifth, and drawing together many of these issues, if global conditions have indeed become less favorable to the liberal order’s near-term advance, then perhaps the more economical

and sustainable strategy might be to trim one’s sails—as during the Nixon era—and wait for a more propitious time to resume the offensive. A strategy of *retaking the offensive* might nonetheless be the best choice, but these issues do indicate that such a strategy would face significant hurdles in the years to come.

Selective Engagement, Selective Retrenchment

A second potential approach would acknowledge the difficulties inherent in relaunching a comprehensive liberal offensive, and seek to address them through a more measured approach to supporting the liberal order. This approach might be termed *selective engagement*, *selective*

The “selective engagement, selective retrenchment” approach would take its inspiration from the policies of the Nixon-Ford years—and, to some extent, those of the Obama years.

*retrenchment.*⁴² Like *retaking the offensive*, it would be based on the overarching premise that the advancement of the liberal order has been good for America and good for the world, and that the United States should therefore affirm the long-term goal of supporting, defending, and ultimately advancing that order.

Yet in recognition of many of the challenges discussed above, this approach would feature a different set of key subpremises. First, American power is great but finite, and preserving that power—which is essential to preserving the liberal order—over the long term requires being more selective, discerning, and prudent in the short term. Second, liberal overreach—as seen during the Bush years—is likely to generate damaging blowback that will weaken the liberal order abroad and undermine its political support at home. And third, global trends today are simply not favorable to the broad and rapid advance of the

liberal order, so rationing U.S. exertions now is essential to retaking the initiative at a later and more propitious date. This approach, in other words, is based on the idea that advancing the liberal order is the work of generations; amid difficult conditions, the United States must therefore be willing to pick its battles and play “the long game.”⁴³

This approach would take its inspiration from the policies of the Nixon-Ford years—and, to some extent, those of the Obama years. In practice, it would share some broad similarities with the *retaking the offensive* approach, but it would also differ in several important respects. Possible differences might include some or all of the following policies for the United States:

- Maintain international stability and sustain America’s alliances, but rule out any further expansion of those alliances or other U.S. security commitments.
- Redouble efforts to limit military liability in the Middle East, an area that has been the graveyard of liberal aspirations in recent years, in favor of greater investment in those areas (e.g., East Asia) that are arguably more central to the fate of the liberal order over time.
- Seek to maintain American military primacy, but accept continued, moderate retrenchment as a way of addressing fiscal challenges within the United States.
- Emphasize integrating rising or resurgent illiberal powers into the international order, and preventing them from disrupting that order. Yet nonetheless consider a moderately greater willingness to cede more influence to these powers along their own borders—on the belief that doing so would reduce great-power frictions and thereby make

these illiberal powers less likely to challenge the liberal order writ large—or perhaps even a greater willingness to cut deals or pursue rapprochement with Russia in order to focus U.S. energies on the greater long-term threat represented by China.

- With respect to international economics, emphasize concluding key regional trade pacts already in gestation, but place limited emphasis on reviving the presently moribund global free-trade agenda, at least in the near term.
- Scale back the most ambitious and expensive forms of democracy and human rights promotion (e.g., humanitarian intervention, armed state-building), particularly in inhospitable locations, such as the greater Middle East.
- While still investing in nonmilitary forms of democracy and human rights promotion, place a more limited emphasis on these endeavors in dealing with illiberal countries that represent existing or potential geopolitical partners (e.g., Vietnam, Thailand, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates). The United States would undertake this step—along with some of the others discussed here—on the calculation that it cannot seek to advance all aspects of the liberal order at once, and so it is most important to focus on preserving the favorable balance of power, and the cooperation in dealing with key security threats, that make the other aspects of the liberal order possible.
- Continue to confront threats to the international order, such as terrorism and nuclear proliferation, but emphasize nonmilitary or light-footprint means of doing so, and scrupulously avoid the manpower-intensive operations of the post-9/11 decade.

In essence, the *selective engagement*, *selective retrenchment* approach would preserve broad, long-term American support for the liberal order, but it would accept greater near-term selectivity and a degree of retrenchment at the margins. Table 2 summarizes this approach.

As noted previously, this approach bears more than a passing resemblance to the grand strategy pursued by the Obama administration over the past several years.⁴⁴ And in many ways, it seems like a prudent approach for a superpower—and a liberal order—that are still fairly robust but have lately come under increased strain. This approach recognizes, for instance, that there are limits to what the United States can achieve in a more challenging climate, and that changing geopolitical dynamics confront supporters of the liberal order with difficult choices about where and how to engage. It honors the hard-earned lessons of past interventions in Iraq and Libya—where liberal inclinations produced decidedly illiberal and counterproductive results—and is calculated to mitigate the dangers of overextension and exhaustion. It reflects the need to devise a sustainable approach to addressing the international system rather than one that alternates between excessive activism and then excessive retrenchment.⁴⁵ Finally, this approach recognizes the overarching importance of preserving as much of the international order as possible—in contrast to the two approaches discussed next—and of consolidating America’s position in order to enable a longer-term advance.

At the same time, however, this selective approach is hardly a panacea, and the experience of the past several years hints at just a few of the potential difficulties involved. Even moderate military retrenchment could

TABLE 2
Selective Engagement, Selective Retrenchment

MAIN THRUST	CORE PREMISES	KEY POLICY IMPLICATIONS
<p>Preserve broad, long-term support for the liberal order, but accept greater selectivity and retrenchment at the margins.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The liberal order has served U.S. and global interests well, but . . . • Preserving U.S. power and the liberal order over the long term requires greater prudence and selectivity in the short term. • Liberal overreach damages order and domestic support for that order. • Global trends are not conducive to broad, rapid advance, so prudence now is essential to retaking the offensive later. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain global stability and U.S. alliances, but do not further expand alliances or security commitments. • Limit exposure in the Middle East, and pivot to East Asia. • Maintain military primacy, but accept moderate cuts. • Integrate or hedge against illiberal powers, but be more selective in opposing adverse actions. • Focus on regional rather than global trade agendas. • Deemphasize the most expensive and ambitious forms of democracy and human rights promotion. • Downplay promoting liberal ideals with illiberal partners. • Oppose terrorism and nuclear proliferation, but emphasize nonmilitary or light-footprint approaches.

soon bring the United States to the ragged edge of its military primacy, for instance, in view of the rapid rise of Chinese military power and the simultaneous intensification of other challenges—from Europe to the Middle East to the Korean Peninsula. The United States simply cannot continue to pare down its defense posture and, at the same time, promise to meet existing—and, in fact, increasingly threatened—commitments. Even without further cuts, notes one extensive assessment, the country is likely to see a steadily “receding frontier” of its military supremacy in the Asia-Pacific, owing to China’s rise.⁴⁶ Moreover, a decreased emphasis on democracy promotion could compound the effects of the democratic recession that is widely believed to be under way, as reflected by the fact that the number of democratic breakdowns has increased

over the past ten years, as the number of electoral democracies in the world seems to have plateaued. Illiberal forces might be further empowered.⁴⁷ In the same vein, a sense that the United States was engaged in selective retrenchment might make it more difficult to spur other friends of the liberal order to do more in support of that order while also leading to increased instability in regions—such as the Middle East and Europe—in which that retrenchment primarily occurs. Most broadly, and hardly least important, retrenchment is inherently difficult to calibrate, so there is always a danger that selective retrenchment will prove rather less precise than one initially intends. All strategies have their liabilities; the selective approach is no exception.

Offshore Balancing

The first two approaches discussed here fit within the multidecade U.S. tradition of supporting the liberal order. A third prospective approach—*offshore balancing*—would represent a greater departure from that tradition. *Offshore balancing* is generally associated with the “realist” paradigm of international relations scholarship, and it is frequently touted by its proponents as a corrective to the excesses of American liberal internationalism. To be clear, offshore balancers do not believe that the liberal order per se is a bad thing. What they do believe—and this is the core premise on which the strategy rests—is that many aspects of America’s traditional, assertive *pursuit* of that order have become profoundly self-defeating in the post–Cold War era, and there are far leaner and less-taxing approaches to securing an acceptable global environment.⁴⁸

The key subpremises of *offshore balancing* all reflect this basic mindset. Offshore balancers believe, for instance, that America’s provision of crucial global public goods—such as security and stability in key regions—incentivizes “free riding” by the rich industrial democracies that consume those goods, and that pulling back is the only way to force those countries to lean forward in preserving a congenial international climate. Supporters of this approach also believe that human rights and democracy are good things, but that active efforts to *promote* human rights and democracy overseas are, at best, a distraction from the core realist preoccupation of preserving a favorable international balance of power, and that, at worst, those efforts represent quixotic social engineering projects

that drain America’s geopolitical vitality and invite a host of unwelcome consequences. Finally, and most broadly, offshore balancers argue that America’s activist global posture—however well-intentioned it may be—creates more hostility than it allays or conquers. Meddling in the neighborhoods of such regional powers as Russia and China merely fuels the insecurity and antagonism of these countries; stationing U.S. troops in the Middle East incites jihadist terrorism; seeking to contain and undermine illiberal “rogue states” merely drives those states to pursue nuclear weapons. By working so assiduously to uphold the liberal order, in other words, U.S. grand strategy invites the very challenges that menace that order—and that menace U.S. security in more-direct ways as well. The cumulative grand strategic prescription that flows from these premises is that less can actually be more—that reducing U.S. engagement and activism overseas can actually strengthen U.S. security, husband U.S. power, and lead to a more organic and sustainable international system.

Against this intellectual backdrop, the key characteristics of *offshore balancing*—or more precisely, its key departures from the post–World War II and now post–Cold War tradition of American grand strategy—can be quickly summarized. Per this approach, U.S. policies would include the following:

- Roll back or perhaps even eliminate U.S. alliance commitments and force deployments overseas.⁴⁹
- Rely primarily on local powers to preserve stability, provide public goods, and maintain acceptable balances of power in key regions (such as East Asia, Europe, and the Persian Gulf), and

intervene—go back “on shore”—only when a crucial region is in danger of being overrun or otherwise dominated by a hostile power.

- In line with these first two prescriptions, cut U.S. military force structure significantly, with the largest cuts falling on the ground forces that have traditionally represented the bulk of U.S. forward presence in key regions. Barry Posen, for instance, argues that U.S. ground forces could be cut by roughly half under this grand strategy, that air and naval forces could be cut by between one-fourth and one-third, and that military spending could thereby be held to 2.5 percent of gross domestic product.⁵⁰
- Continue to resist efforts by illiberal powers to dominate key regions, but place less emphasis on preventing those powers from dominating countries—Taiwan in East Asia, Ukraine or the Baltic states in Eastern Europe—in their “near-abroads.”
- Sharply downgrade the promotion of democracy and human rights—by whatever means—in U.S. foreign policy, and firmly forswear the use of force to attain these or other “ideological” ends.⁵¹
- Take a much more restrained approach to combating such threats as international terrorism and nuclear proliferation. With respect to terrorism, respond militarily only to those terrorist threats that pose a large-scale, imminent danger to the American homeland or U.S. citizens, and rely on light-footprint approaches, such as drones and covert action, when force is absolutely necessary. With respect to nuclear proliferation, be content to contain rogue regimes that pursue or develop nuclear weapons; perhaps even encourage selective nuclear proliferation to

allies as a way of reducing U.S. burdens and promoting a more organic international equilibrium.

- Continue to participate in and support the liberal international economic order. This aspect of *offshore balancing* is what most distinguishes it from the *zero-sum* approach described below.⁵²

On the whole, offshore balancers believe that America should embrace a far more austere and restrained foreign policy—one that would significantly alter its relationship with the liberal order. Table 3 summarizes this approach.

As has been noted elsewhere, offshore balancers are often adept at pointing out the flaws and costs of America’s legacy grand strategy, and particularly at criticizing the excesses—for example, the invasion of Iraq—of the post-9/11 era. What is more problematic is their proposed solution to the problems they identify. On the plus side, *offshore balancing* might provide some near-term financial savings in the form of reduced defense outlays, and it might alleviate some—but not nearly all—of the radicalism underlying anti-American terrorism.⁵³ It might also lead to a near-term reduction of tensions with Russia over Ukraine or with China over Taiwan, and it would—if followed faithfully—minimize the possibility of prolonged regime-change and nation-building exercises, such as those undertaken in Iraq and Afghanistan over the past 15 years.

Yet *offshore balancing* would also have a range of less-desirable consequences. It could compromise international counterterrorism cooperation with the United States by weakening the partnerships and alliances that have helped elicit that cooperation. It might actually encourage nuclear proliferation by withdrawing the

TABLE 3
Offshore Balancing

MAIN THRUST	CORE PREMISES	KEY POLICY IMPLICATIONS
<p>Pursue broad-based retrenchment from the liberal order, and promote a less U.S.-centric system.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The liberal order per se is not a bad thing, but the assertive pursuit of that order causes self-defeating behavior. • Providing public goods promotes “free-riding”; pulling back is the only way to more equitably distribute global burdens. • Promoting human rights and democracy is a distraction from geopolitical realism and can be catastrophically counterproductive. • An activist U.S. posture creates more threats and hostility than it allays or conquers. • Less can be more—reducing U.S. engagement can foster a more organic international system at lower cost. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roll back or eliminate overseas alliances and deployments. • Rely primarily on local powers to provide stability and public goods in key regions. • Slash U.S. military force structure. • Prevent illiberal dominance of key regions, but put less emphasis on principled opposition to dominating individual countries. • Downgrade promotion of human rights and democracy, and forswear the use of force for liberal ideals. • Take a more restrained approach to counterproliferation and counterterrorism, and potentially support selective proliferation. • Continue to support the liberal economic order.

forward security presence that Washington has long used to dissuade key allies from seeking the bomb. In the past, for instance, the United States has used the leverage provided by its alliances and overseas deployments to prevent countries (e.g., South Korea, Japan, and West Germany) from developing nuclear weapons. If that leverage disappeared, so might the restraining effect.⁵⁴ (As noted earlier, some offshore balancers actually favor selective nuclear proliferation by American allies; the danger here is that in the absence of traditional U.S. constraints, the resulting nuclear proliferation would ultimately prove less controllable and selective than these offshore balancers predict.) More broadly, and of greatest interest here, *offshore balancing* would also have potentially severe implications for the liberal order.⁵⁵

Consider the issue of democracy promotion. It is true that U.S. efforts to promote democracy by force have sometimes been costly and disappointing failures. But the most persuasive scholarly work indicates that, on the whole, active U.S. efforts—economic, diplomatic, and other—to encourage the spread of democracy and human rights have frequently played an essential role in advancing liberal values, so withdrawing this support would presumably lead to a world less politically liberal than it might otherwise be.⁵⁶ Moreover, although offshore balancers argue that retrenchment would foster organic international stability by forcing others to do more to uphold the international order, it is just as plausible that such retrenchment would actually foster far greater instability. In particular, U.S. withdrawal would risk unleashing

the historical antagonisms and latent security competitions that American force deployments and alliance commitments have long suppressed, a factor that even some offshore balancers, such as John Mearsheimer, have acknowledged.⁵⁷

Additionally, *offshore balancing* could create new opportunities for illiberal, revisionist powers to more assertively press their interests in such regions as Eastern Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East, taking advantage of the vacuums created by U.S. withdrawal. If China, for instance, were confronted with weakened or terminated U.S. alliance commitments to the Philippines and Japan, it might well be emboldened to pursue greater coercion of those nations. Increased turmoil and geopolitical competition, in turn, might well undermine still other aspects of the liberal order by disrupting the global trade and investment flows that have flourished amid a climate of relative international peace and stability.⁵⁸

For all its flaws, assertive U.S. engagement has long been the linchpin of an international system that has been historically atypical in both its stability and its liberalism.

All of these likely drawbacks get at the fundamental problem of *offshore balancing*. The basic premise of that strategy is that a robust international order is still possible with significantly less assertive U.S. global engagement. What offshore balancers miss, however, is that for all its flaws, that assertive U.S. engagement has long been the linchpin of an international system that has been historically atypical in both its stability and its liberalism.⁵⁹ *Offshore balancing* might lessen some of the burdens of that engagement in the near term, but the likely longer-term result would be a world that is significantly less liberal, and less orderly, than the one Americans have come to know.

Zero-Sum

Offshore balancing is based not necessarily on an outright rejection of the liberal order, but rather on a belief that the pursuit thereof has led the United States to commit myriad lamentable excesses. A fourth and final approach—*zero-sum*—would entail an even more dramatic and deliberate break with the liberal order, for its foundational premise is that key aspects of that order are actually deeply pernicious to America's own national interests.⁶⁰

The major intellectual tenets of the *zero-sum* approach can be expressed as follows. First, the promotion of a liberal economic order centered on free trade and globalization actually cuts against U.S. economic well-being, because it exposes the United States to predatory practices by other countries that reap the benefits of this system while refusing to play by its rules. Second, the provision of global public goods—such as freedom of the seas, the free flow of Persian Gulf oil, and stability in key regions—is also fundamentally misguided because it allows others

to ride on American coattails rather than carrying their fair share of the burden. Third, and similar to this second point, the provision of security for smaller countries along the Eurasian periphery is a fool's errand, because it gives those countries enormous benefits—at very little cost—while exposing the United States to other people's troubles.

Fourth, the liberal trend toward open borders imperils the security of the United States and other countries by undercutting their sovereignty, decreasing their control of their own territory, and rendering them more vulnerable to migrant and refugee flows and other unwanted cross-border traffic. Fifth, while such constraints as international law, international agreements, and international institutions limit the freedom of action of all participants, they are uniquely injurious to the United States because they prevent America from fully utilizing its tremendous and unmatched power. Sixth, the promotion of democracy and human rights abroad not only is unlikely to succeed because of the inherent difficulty of that task, but it directly and inherently worsens America's relative position by squandering resources that might better be spent at home. The *zero-sum* worldview is thus defined by the overarching belief that promoting a liberal, positive-sum vision of international order has undermined America's own bottom line, and so it is imperative to adopt a *zero-sum*, more narrowly nationalistic approach to foreign policy.

In practice, then, *zero-sum* would incorporate some features of *offshore balancing* while also going considerably further than that approach in its departure from long-standing U.S. support for the liberal order. Some likely

policy implications of this approach would include the following:

- Withdraw from key alliances and cease providing global public goods—or at the very least, coercively extract higher rents from U.S. allies and partners in exchange for continuing to provide protection, stability, and other services.
- Abandon human rights and democracy promotion, by either military or nonmilitary means.
- As part of this geopolitical withdrawal and deprioritization of liberal values, place a far greater emphasis on establishing mutually respected spheres of influence with illiberal powers, such as Russia and China, and show significantly greater tolerance for Russian and Chinese efforts to exert greater influence or control over their own neighborhoods.
- Dramatically reduce U.S. efforts to restrain nuclear proliferation, and possibly encourage such proliferation as a way of easing U.S. withdrawal from current security commitments.
- Impose significantly stricter controls on U.S. borders, and support efforts to roll back liberal projects—such as the EU's Schengen Area—that are premised on promoting freer cross-border flows.
- Significantly decrease U.S. support for, and perhaps participation in, international institutions and legal regimes that seem to decrease U.S. freedom of action in addressing national security threats, such as terrorism.
- Perhaps most important, roll back key aspects of U.S. support for an open global economy. High tariffs on Chinese manufactured goods, withdrawal from established and prospective free trade agreements,

and other protectionist measures would loom large in a *zero-sum* approach to grand strategy.⁶¹

In brief, promoters of a *zero-sum* strategy believe that the liberal order hinders rather than bolsters U.S. interests, and that the United States should therefore adopt a more narrowly self-interested approach to international affairs. Table 4 summarizes this approach.

So, what about the consequences of this approach? In the broadest sense, there is little doubt that *zero-sum*, if extended over time, would lead to a severe erosion of the international order that exists today—indeed, that would be the very point of this strategy. The postwar security order would be fundamentally disrupted by either the withdrawal of U.S. alliance commitments or the adoption

of a more coercive approach thereto; the withdrawal of U.S. support for open free trade would probably lead to retaliatory protectionism and make a liberal economic system far harder to sustain (although the precise degree of damage to that system is impossible to predict in advance). More broadly, the guiding rules and norms of the international order are often set by the world’s leading power; to the extent that the United States returned to a more parochial, pre-World War II outlook on global affairs, it seems likely that other countries—including those that are heavily invested in the liberal order today—would eventually do the same. It is not just U.S. foreign policy that would look fundamentally different under this approach; international relations might well change fundamentally, too.

TABLE 4
Zero-Sum

MAIN THRUST	CORE PREMISES	KEY POLICY IMPLICATIONS
<p>Actively roll back the liberal order, and adopt a zero-sum grand strategy based on a narrow view of national interest.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The liberal order is pernicious to U.S. interests. • Providing public goods and security and promoting an open economic order benefit others at America’s expense. • Open borders undercut sovereignty and security. • International law and institutions unfairly constrain U.S. power. • Promoting human rights and democracy squanders resources better spent at home. • International relations are zero-sum, so a positive-sum strategy is self-defeating. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Withdraw from alliances, or at least extract higher rents. • Abandon human rights and democracy promotion. • Establish mutually respected spheres of influence with illiberal powers. • Encourage selective nuclear proliferation by U.S. allies. • Tighten border controls, and roll back the Schengen Agreement. • Withdraw support for institutions and legal regimes that inhibit U.S. freedom of action. • Take a protectionist, relative-gains approach to trade, and roll back support for an open global economy.

What would this mean for America's own interests over time? Advocates of *zero-sum* argue that the United States would emerge from this transition with fewer unneeded burdens and greater control over its national destiny. And to the extent that there is virtue in the *zero-sum* approach, it lies primarily in highlighting the fact that there are indeed costs and compromises inherent in America's pursuit of a liberal world order. Providing public goods, such as international security and stability, is not a cost-free endeavor; freer trade with China has, in fact, led to a loss of American manufacturing jobs. According to one study, for instance, granting permanent normal trade status to China in 2000 led to the loss of more than 2 million U.S. jobs over the next decade.⁶² Likewise, international institutions do sometimes constrain U.S. power in frustrating ways (even though more often they serve as conduits for the exercise of that power). In the short term, breaking with these arrangements might therefore bring some additional gains in such areas as manufacturing employment, bring some narrow financial benefits via reduced defense and foreign-affairs outlays, and provide Washington with additional freedom of action in addressing terrorism and other direct threats.

The trouble, however, is that *zero-sum* often severely overstates the costs of America's legacy approach to international order—by exaggerating the degree to which overseas military deployments are a drain on the U.S. budget, for instance—and simply dismisses the enormous national gains that come from supporting the liberal system.⁶³ The overall prosperity benefits that result from expanded global trade and financial flows; the way that American alliances help prevent vicious security competitions that

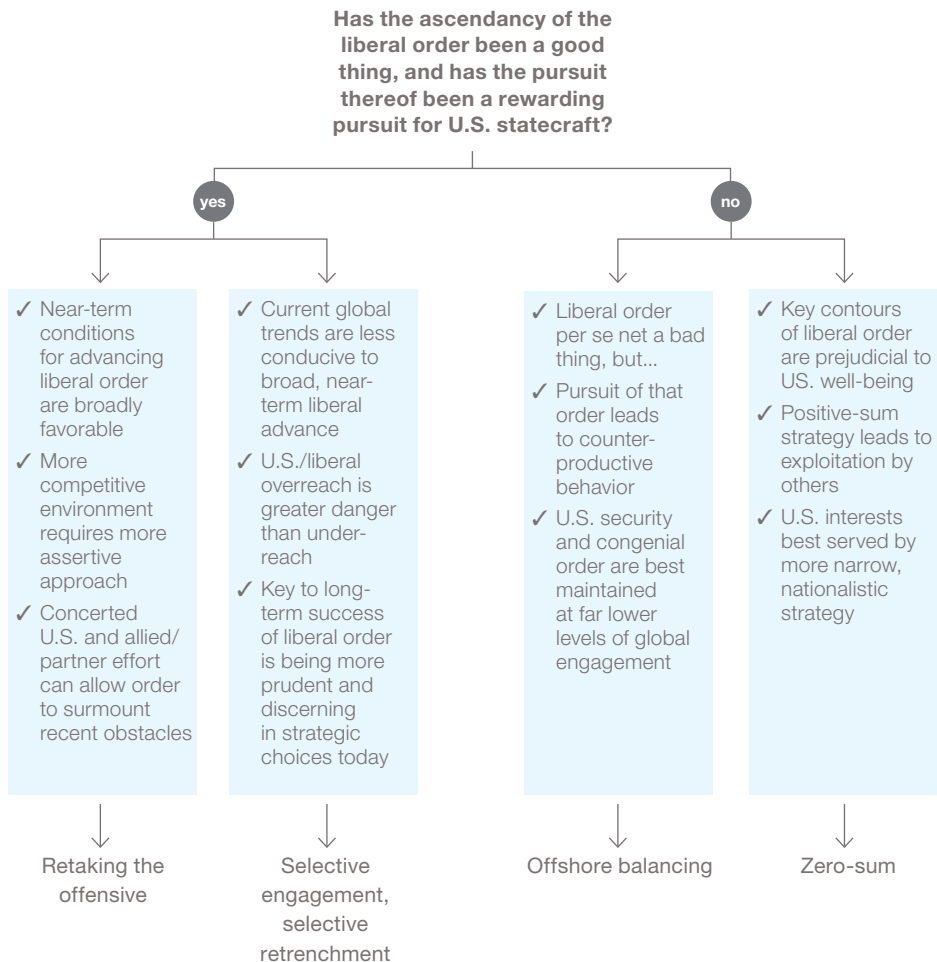
would ultimately embroil the United States; the extent to which the spread of democracy and human rights has actually made the country more secure and influential; and the fact that international institutions—from the United Nations to the IMF—can and frequently do magnify American power: In these and other respects, promoting the liberal order actually represents enlightened self-interest.⁶⁴ This is, certainly, the reason that American policymakers have so long promoted that order, and it is hard to imagine how that grand strategy could have persisted for so many decades had it been anywhere near as disastrous as its critics claim. To the extent that the *zero-sum* approach to U.S. strategy jeopardized the liberal order—and there is little doubt that it would—the United States would ultimately be a loser as well.

Conclusion

These four notional grand strategies give a basic sense of the variety of options available to U.S. policymakers as they address the liberal order in the coming years. Taken cumulatively, these strategies represent a wide range of intellectual premises and policy prescriptions, and they promise an equally wide range of likely outcomes for the liberal order and America's role therein.

So, what are the most important criteria for choosing among these approaches (see Figure 1)? There are multiple ways to address this issue, but perhaps the simplest and best way is to start with the basic question of whether one believes that the ascendancy of the liberal order has been a good thing for the United States and the world, and that the generally robust and assertive support of that order

FIGURE 1
Criteria for Selection



has been a rewarding pursuit for American statecraft. If one believes that this is indeed the case, then the most appealing options are likely to be the first two discussed here—*retaking the offensive*, and *selective engagement*, *selective retrenchment*—and the choice between the two hinges on which set of subpremises one finds most plausible. If one thinks that the near-term conditions for advancing the liberal order are broadly favorable, that a more competitive geopolitical environment requires a more assertive approach, and that a concerted effort by the United States and its liberal partners can allow the liberal order to surmount the obstacles that have arisen in recent years, then *retaking the offensive* is the optimal choice. If, however, one thinks that current global trends are less conducive to the broad, near-term advance of the liberal order; that American and liberal overreach is a greater danger than underreach; and that the key to sustaining the liberal order over time is thus to be more prudent and discerning in U.S. strategic choices today, then a mix of selective engagement and selective retrenchment is the best course.

Alternatively, for those who answer “no” to the first-order question—that is, those who believe that the ascendancy of the liberal order has *not* been a good thing or that the generally robust and assertive support of that order has been a counterproductive pursuit for American statecraft—either the third or fourth strategic options discussed in this paper would make most sense. If one believes that the liberal order per se is not necessarily a bad thing, but that the pursuit of that order inevitably leads to counterproductive and self-defeating behavior, and that American security and a congenial international

climate are best maintained via a significantly reduced level of U.S. global engagement, then *offshore balancing* represents the most appealing strategy. If, however, one believes that the very contours of the liberal order actively damage American well-being and that promoting such a system merely allows others—from illegal immigrants to selfish industrial democracies—to profit at America’s expense, then the *zero-sum* approach represents the right way forward.

As noted at the outset of this paper, comprehensively addressing the disputes between these various approaches would require a much longer analysis, and reasonable analysts can presumably disagree about which set of premises and policies is most persuasive. But a preliminary take on the first-order criterion for choice indicates that the first two options discussed here—*retaking the offensive*, and *selective engagement*, *selective retrenchment*—appear superior to those that call for more-marked retrenchment. For if the key question is whether the liberal order and the robust pursuit thereof are good for the United States and the world, then the balance of evidence would seem to support an affirmative answer. After all, by most standards, the era of postwar liberal ascendancy has been a veritable golden age of international politics—a period of relative international stability, a period when systemic or great-power wars have been conspicuous by their relative absence, a period of enormous international prosperity, and a period in which individual rights and democratic values have achieved unprecedented gains. Moreover, the most detailed and compelling historical work indicates that American power and activism have been necessary—if not sufficient—conditions for the erection

Insofar as the United States benefits from a world that is more peaceful, more stable, more economically open and prosperous, and more respectful of individual rights and democratic values, it would seem that the liberal order has been a good thing for America.

and preservation of that order.⁶⁵ And finally, insofar as the United States benefits from a world that is more peaceful, more stable, more economically open and prosperous, and more respectful of individual rights and democratic values, it would seem that the liberal order has been a good thing for America as well.

The basic premises of the third and fourth strategic options, conversely, appear more dubious. *Offshore balancing* rests on the idea that one can have an acceptable international order absent the robust American international engagement and leadership that have historically sustained that order, yet recent work has illustrated several ways in which this assumption is uncertain at best and dubious at worst.⁶⁶ For its part, the *zero-sum* approach rests on an exceedingly narrow definition of national self-interest and fails to grasp the larger benefits that the liberal order offers the United States. To be sure, one could debate the relative merits of these four approaches at much greater length, but this first-cut analysis would appear to support those who would have the United States maintain a strong commitment to the liberal order.⁶⁷

Of course, this analysis does not necessarily help one discriminate between *retaking the offensive* and *selective engagement*, *selective retrenchment*. Doing so requires more-extensive analysis to determine the accuracy of the various subpremises on which these strategies rest, and that analysis requires a degree of granularity that is beyond the scope of this paper. Yet if one accepts the first-order judgment that an affirmative effort to sustain and ultimately advance the liberal order is in America's interest, then the debate essentially narrows to the more tactical matter of how best to attain that end. And that debate represents familiar ground for U.S. officials. As we have seen, America's postwar grand strategy has consistently centered on supporting and promoting the liberal order even as the precise nature and degree of that support has evolved over time. This approach of change, debate, and adaptation within continuity has been an effective framework for choice in U.S. grand strategy so far; it represents a useful framework for choice moving forward as well.

Notes

¹ Robert Kagan, *The World America Made*, New York: Vintage, 2012a; Michael Mandelbaum, *The Case for Goliath: How America Acts as the World's Government in the Twenty-First Century*, New York: PublicAffairs, 2006.

² G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011, p. 2. To be clear, the point here is not that American officials have promoted liberal norms and arrangements entirely to the exclusion of other interests, nor that they have always been fully consistent in their promotion of a liberal order. The point, rather, is that *on the whole*, they have believed that American interests are best served by the creation of a liberal international environment that reflects American ideals, and in which the country can remain secure and prosperous. That goal, in turn, has influenced the most important policies that American officials have pursued during the post–World War II era.

³ Executive Secretary, *A Report to the National Security Council on United States Objectives and Programs for National Security*, National Security Council Report 68 (NSC-68), Washington, D.C., April 14, 1950.

⁴ Hal Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Rise of the Post-Cold War Order*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2016a, especially pp. 274–362. See also Peter Feaver, “American Grand Strategy at the Crossroads: Leading from the Front, Leading from Behind, or Not Leading at All,” in Richard Fontaine and Kristin Lord, eds., *America's Path: Grand Strategy for the Next Administration*, Washington, D.C.: Center for a New American Security, 2012.

⁵ This is not to say, of course, that the United States has promoted the liberal order in all areas equally or at once. As discussed subsequently, the United States had only limited ability to promote the liberal order in areas dominated by the Soviet Union and its satellites during the Cold War. Moreover, Washington has often placed greater emphasis on developing liberal institutions and arrangements in key geopolitical regions, such as Europe, than it has in more marginal and difficult areas, such as Africa. But as a broad characterization of how the United States has interacted with the international environment, this assertion still holds.

⁶ A good discussion of postwar trade policy and U.S. engagement with the international economic order can be found in Alfred Eckes and Thomas Zeiler, *Globalization and the American Century*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

⁷ See, for instance, Tony Smith, *America's Mission: The United States and the Worldwide Struggle for Democracy in the Twentieth Century*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994; Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, Norman, Okla.: Oklahoma University Press, 1991; and Bruce Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post-Cold War World*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994.

⁸ See, for example, Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William Wohlforth, “Don't Come Home, America: The Case Against Retrenchment,” *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 3, Winter 2012/2013.

⁹ The role of NATO in solidifying positive relations among the Western powers is discussed at length in Melvyn Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War*, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1992.

¹⁰ The four cases discussed here are those covered in Hal Brands, *What Good Is Grand Strategy? Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2016b. The subsequent sections draw on that book, as well as the other sources cited. This approach was suggested by Michael Mazarr, the leader of the Building a Sustainable International Order project (of which this paper is a part).

¹¹ Wilson Miscamble, “Roosevelt, Truman and the Development of Postwar Grand Strategy,” *Orbis*, Vol. 53, No. 4, September 2009.

¹² Gideon Rose, *How Wars End: Why We Always Fight the Last Battle*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011, p. 319.

¹³ Here, as in other instances throughout the postwar era, the United States occasionally promoted liberal ends via somewhat illiberal means—for instance, the use of covert action to influence the outcomes of crucial elections in Italy in 1948.

¹⁴ It is interesting to consider whether the United States would have consistently given such robust support to a liberal international order absent the Cold War–era Soviet threat. U.S. officials were certainly planning to erect a liberal economic order well before the Cold War emerged, and many of the liberal institutions that characterized the postwar period (e.g., the IMF and United Nations) were also planned or originated prior to the onset of superpower tensions. But it does seem unlikely that the United States would have made such enduring security commitments without the threat posed by the Soviet Union. The relevance of this point is that the liberal order has

not developed purely from U.S. liberal inclinations, but also in response to threats posed by illiberal powers that had their own visions of what the international system should be. I thank Charles Glaser for raising this issue.

¹⁵ On these economic and security initiatives, see Leffler, 1992; G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order After Major Wars*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001; and John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, especially Chapter 2.

¹⁶ This strategy is described in Brands, 2016b, Chapter 2; and Jeremi Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007, Chapters 4 and 5.

¹⁷ Harold James, *International Monetary Cooperation Since Bretton Woods*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996, pp. 217–251.

¹⁸ See Sarah Snyder, *Human Rights Activism and the End of the Cold War: A Transnational History of the Helsinki Network*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

¹⁹ Daniel Sargent, *A Superpower Transformed: The Remaking of American Foreign Relations in the 1970s*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

²⁰ On the rising number of democracies, see Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999, p. 25; Arch Puddington, *Freedom in the World 2013: Democratic Breakthroughs in the Balance*, Washington, D.C.: Freedom House, 2013, p. 20. This section also draws on Brands, 2016a, Chapters 2–4.

²¹ Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at the Conservative Political Action Conference Dinner,” February 18, 1983.

²² It is commonly argued that the Reagan administration had only a rhetorical commitment to democratization in non-Soviet bloc countries, and that its statecraft had the effect of entrenching friendly authoritarians in power. One historian has argued that Reagan’s policy was a “disaster for human rights” and political reform in the noncommunist world; see Brad Simpson, “Bringing the Non-State Back In: Human Rights and Terrorism Since 1945,” in Frank Costigliola and Michael Hogan, eds., *America in the World: The Historiography of American Foreign Relations Since 1941*, 2nd ed., New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014, p. 270. As recent research shows, however, this interpretation is mistaken. The Reagan administration, like every American administration of the postwar era, supported authoritarian

allies—China, Saudi Arabia, Egypt—for geopolitical reasons. Yet the administration also helped unseat friendly authoritarians in such countries as the Philippines, Chile, and South Korea, and it helped protect even relatively difficult democratic regimes in such countries as Peru. Furthermore, in such countries as El Salvador, it worked with authoritarian institutions to prevent communist takeovers, while also encouraging—successfully—reforms that helped bring about a transition to a more pluralistic system. In sum, despite some initial hesitation, the Reagan administration ultimately played a key role in seeking political liberalization in both Soviet-bloc and “free-world” countries alike. This argument is developed at length in Brands, 2016a, Chapter 10.

²³ It is worth noting, however, that the debt crisis was not conclusively resolved until after Reagan left office.

²⁴ There is a healthy debate on why the Cold War ended and what role Reagan’s policies played in that development. But recent literature, written on the basis of new archival evidence, supports the account provided here. See Brands, 2016a, Chapter 2; Brands, 2016b, Chapter 3; John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, Chapter 11; Steven Hayward, *The Age of Reagan: The Conservative Counterrevolution*, New York: Crown Forum, 2009; and John Arquilla, *The Reagan Imprint: Ideas in American Foreign Policy from the Collapse of Communism to the War on Terror*, Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006. Other notable interpretations include James Graham Wilson, *The Triumph of Improvisation: Gorbachev’s Adaptability, Reagan’s Engagement, and the End of the Cold War*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2014; and Raymond Garthoff, *The Great Transition: American-Soviet Relations and the End of the Cold War*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1994.

²⁵ See Commission on Presidential Debates, “The Second Gore-Bush Presidential Debate,” transcript, October 11, 2000.

²⁶ George W. Bush, “Commencement Address at the United States Military Academy in West Point, New York,” June 1, 2002. See also White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, Washington, D.C., September 2002.

²⁷ See, for instance, F. Gregory Gause, *International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 168, 171–174; Frederic Wehrey, Dalia Dassa Kaye, Jessica Watkins, Jeffrey Martini, and Robert A. Guffey, *The Iraq Effect: The Middle East After the Iraq War*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-892-AF, 2010; and Dana Priest, “Iraq New Terror Breeding Ground,” *Washington Post*, January 14, 2005.

²⁸ Robert Kagan, “America’s Crisis of Legitimacy,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 83, No. 2, March–April 2004, p. 69.

²⁹ This issue flags a broader point worth mentioning. Whether a given policy supports the liberal order or not is often a matter of perspective and subjective interpretation. There were disagreements on this point not simply during the Iraq War, for instance, but going back to Cold War episodes, such as the opening to China. The Nixon administration contended that its approach strengthened the liberal order by firming up the balance of power undergirding that order; other observers saw the opening as a betrayal of the liberal order because it required stabilizing relations with a murderous communist regime.

³⁰ On this debate, see Marc Plattner, “Is Democracy in Decline?” *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 26, No. 1, January 2015, pp. 5–10; and Joshua Kurlantzick, *Democracy in Retreat: The Revolt of the Middle Class and the Worldwide Decline of Representative Government*, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2013.

³¹ This point is elaborated at greater length in Hal Brands, “Allies in Decline: Alliance Management and U.S. Strategy in an Era of Global Power Shifts,” U.S. Department of Defense, Office of Net Assessment, February 2016c. See also Michael Boyle, “The Coming Illiberal Order,” *Survival*, Vol. 58, No. 2, April 2016.

³² See, for instance, Philip Rucker and Robert Costa, “Trump Questions Need for NATO, Outlines Noninterventionist Foreign Policy,” *Washington Post*, March 21, 2016; and Bernie Sanders, “So-Called ‘Free Trade’ Policies Hurt U.S. Workers Every Time We Pass Them,” *The Guardian*, April 29, 2015.

³³ On this point, see Bruce Jentleson, “The Prudent, Not Isolationist, Public,” *The Hill*, June 3, 2014.

³⁴ I say “adapted” because I have emphasized the aspects of these grand strategies that are most relevant to the liberal order. Moreover, there are some differences between the grand strategic options discussed here and those that are fixtures of the grand strategy debate. *Zero-sum* proponents and neo-isolationists, for instance, might take different approaches to the international economy and to dealing with such threats as the Islamic State.

³⁵ The fact that these options are each essentially ideal types is worth emphasizing. The point of laying out these four approaches is not to suggest that policymakers must select one approach exclusively, with all of the specific policy implications that come with it. (It is possible to imagine, for instance,

that policymakers might choose to pursue a grand strategy consisting of a blend of two approaches.) The point is simply to sketch the broad contours of the debate and the grand strategic options available.

³⁶ This approach is adapted from the “primacy” or “liberal hegemony” approaches that have long been fixtures of the U.S. grand strategy debate.

³⁷ For an analysis that supports these bets, see Robert Kagan “Not Fade Away: The Myth of American Decline,” *New Republic*, January 11, 2012b. See also Stephen G. Brooks and William Wohlforth, “The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers in the Twenty-First Century: China’s Rise and the Fate of America’s Global Position,” *International Security*, Vol. 40, No. 3, Winter 2015/2016.

³⁸ The basic approach outlined here bears some resemblance to the strategy favored by Kagan, 2012a. A somewhat more moderate version of this approach is represented by Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth, 2012/2013.

³⁹ As of 2014, for instance, the United States and its core treaty allies in Europe and Asia still accounted for roughly three-fifths of both global gross domestic product and global military spending. See Brands, 2016c.

⁴⁰ For long-term budget constraints, see Congressional Budget Office, *The 2016 Long-Term Budget Outlook*, Washington, D.C., July 2016.

⁴¹ In fact, political resistance to the Trans-Pacific Partnership indicates that even a more selective approach to trade regionalization may encounter significant obstacles.

⁴² As its name indicates, this approach is adapted from the “selective engagement” approach advocated by, among others, Robert Art, *A Grand Strategy for America*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003.

⁴³ Some similarities to this approach are evident in White House, *National Security Strategy*, Washington, D.C., May 2010; White House, *National Security Strategy*, Washington, D.C., February 2015; and U.S. Department of Defense, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*, Washington, D.C., 2012. See also Michael J. Mazarr, “The Pros and Cons of Obama’s Restraint,” *U.S. News & World Report*, February 6, 2015; and Derek Chollet, *The Long Game: How Obama Defied Washington and Redefined America’s Role in the World*, New York: PublicAffairs, 2016.

⁴⁴ For an assessment that both praises and critiques this approach, see Hal Brands, “Breaking Down Obama’s Grand Strategy,” *The National Interest*, June 23, 2014.

⁴⁵ This tendency is described in Stephen Sestanovich, *Maximalist: America in the World from Truman to Obama*, New York: Knopf, 2014.

⁴⁶ On the shifting balance in East Asia, see Eric Heginbotham, Michael Nixon, Forrest E. Morgan, Jacob Heim, Jeff Hagen, Sheng Li, Jeffrey Engstrom, Martin C. Libicki, Paul DeLuca, David A. Shlapak, David R. Frelinger, Burgess Laird, Kyle Brady, and Lyle J. Morris, *The U.S.-China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996–2017*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-392-AF, 2015, p. xxxi; and David A. Shlapak and Michael Johnson, *Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank: Wargaming the Defense of the Baltics*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1253-A, 2016.

⁴⁷ See Larry Diamond, “Facing Up to the Democratic Recession,” *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 25, No. 1, January 2015; and William J. Dobson, *The Dictator's Learning Curve: Inside the Global Battle for Democracy*, New York: Doubleday, 2012.

⁴⁸ Statements of offshore balancing include Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: U.S. Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006, pp. 159–192; Barry Posen, “Pull Back: The Case for a Less Activist Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2013, pp. 116–129; Stephen Walt, “The End of the American Era,” *National Interest*, November/December 2011; Peter Beinart, “Obama's Foreign Policy Doctrine Finally Emerges with ‘Offshore Balancing,’” *The Daily Beast*, November 28, 2011; John Mearsheimer, “Imperial by Design,” *National Interest*, January/February 2011; Eugene Gholz and Daryl Press, “Footprints in the Sand,” *American Interest*, March/April 2010; and Robert Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005, especially pp. 237–250.

⁴⁹ With respect to U.S. alliances and forward presence, different offshore balancers advocate somewhat different things. Some argue that the United States should preserve NATO as a political institution but get rid of its military command and structures; others advocate withdrawing from the alliance altogether. Some argue for simply reforming the U.S. alliance with Japan; others advocate terminating it. These distinctions matter, of course, but the basic point is that offshore balancing would see significantly less U.S. overseas military presence and alliance commitments.

⁵⁰ Barry Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2014, pp. 135–163, estimate on p. 135.

⁵¹ The critique of democracy promotion is evident in Stephen Walt, “Democracy, Freedom, and Apple Pie Aren't a Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Policy*, July 1, 2014.

⁵² One offshore balancer—John Mearsheimer—previously broached the idea that the United States might seek to exclude China from the liberal international order in an effort to retard its economic growth. But this was never a consensus position among offshore balancers, and Mearsheimer seems to have changed his mind about this issue since first raising it roughly 15 years ago.

⁵³ It is worth noting that jihadist grievances are not stoked solely by the presence of U.S. troops in such areas as the Persian Gulf; they are also stoked, for example, by U.S. support for authoritarian Arab regimes—which would presumably increase under an offshore balancing strategy.

⁵⁴ On this point, see Francis Gavin, “Strategies of Inhibition: U.S. Grand Strategy and the Nuclear Revolution,” *International Security*, Vol. 40, No. 1, Summer 2015.

⁵⁵ On the weaknesses of offshore balancing, see Hal Brands, “Fools Rush Out? The Flawed Logic of Offshore Balancing,” *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 2, Summer 2015b; Peter Feaver, “Not Even One Cheer for Offshore Balancing?” *Foreign Policy*, April 30, 2013; and Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth, 2012/2013.

⁵⁶ Smith, 1994.

⁵⁷ John Mearsheimer, “Why is Europe Peaceful Today?” *European Political Science*, Vol. 9, No. 2, September 2010.

⁵⁸ It is sometimes argued that the United States could remove its troops from Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East but preserve its security guarantees and simply move its troops back into theater rapidly when the need developed. Yet this recommendation ignores the way that *peacetime* presence has had a reassuring effect on allies and a deterrent effect on adversaries. It also makes heroic assumptions that the United States would be able to anticipate and respond quickly enough to adverse power shifts when, in fact, the historical record indicates that such agility is quite difficult for democratic powers to manage.

⁵⁹ On the issue of stability, consider the fact that there has not been a systemic, great-power war since 1945, in comparison to the two world

wars that occurred in the three decades prior to that date. On the issue of liberalism, consider the fact that the number of democracies in the world has skyrocketed since World War II. On these issues, and the connections to U.S. policy, see Mandelbaum, 2006; Kagan, 2012a; Huntington, 1991; and Brands, 2016a, Chapter 3. It should be noted, of course, that some analysts argue that other factors—such as the advent of nuclear weapons—have been primarily responsible for the avoidance of great-power war since 1945. See Campbell Craig, Benjamin H. Friedman, Brendan Rittenhouse Greenspan, Justin Logan, Stephen Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William Wohlforth, “Correspondence: Debating American Engagement: The Future of U.S. Grand Strategy,” *International Security*, Vol. 38, No. 2, Fall 2013. Yet it might also be noted that even some offshore balancers concede the pacifying effect of U.S. grand strategy (see, for example, Mearsheimer, 2010). It might also be noted that these various factors (stability, liberalism, and nuclear weapons) are not mutually exclusive; it is possible, for instance, that they might all be necessary but not sufficient in and of themselves.

⁶⁰ To the extent that this approach is similar to any position in ongoing academic debates on grand strategy, it is perhaps closest to the neo-isolationist position advocated by Eric Nordlinger (see Eric Nordlinger, *Isolationism Reconfigured: American Foreign Policy for a New Century*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996). It is worth noting, though, that many neo-isolationists would still take a more liberal approach to the international economy than the *zero-sum* approach would favor.

⁶¹ Elements of this approach can be seen in Rucker and Costa, 2016; Post Opinions Staff, “A Transcript of Donald Trump’s Meeting with the Washington Post Editorial Board,” *Washington Post*, March 21, 2016; Thomas Wright, “Trump’s 19th Century Foreign Policy,” *Politico*, January 20, 2016; and “Transcript: Donald Trump Expounds on His Foreign Policy Views,” *New York Times*, March 26, 2016.

⁶² On the jobs issue, see Jim Tankersley, “What Republicans Did 15 Years Ago That Helped Create Donald Trump Today,” *Washington Post*, March 21, 2016.

⁶³ On overstating the cost of overseas deployments, see Anna Fitfield, “Donald Trump Says U.S. is Bankrolling Asian Allies’ Defense. That’s Not Really True,” *Washington Post*, March 30, 2016. See also Patrick Mills, Adam Grissom, Jennifer Kavanagh, Leila Mahnad, and Stephen M. Worman, *A Cost Analysis of the U.S. Air Force Overseas Posture: Informing Strategic Choices*, Santa Monica, Calif., RAND Corporation, RR-150-AF, 2013.

⁶⁴ The benefits of the liberal order for the United States are well described in Ikenberry, 2011. On the issue of democracy promotion in particular, the idea that the spread of democracy has made the United States more secure and influential, and the international system more stable and peaceful, is widely accepted by policymakers and has been supported by scholarship (see, for example, Huntington, 1991; Russett, 1994). There are, however, some scholarly dissents, including from scholars who argue that democratization can actually lead to a heightened risk of war (see Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, *Electing to Fight: Why Emerging Democracies Go to War*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005). Even if this argument is true, it does not necessarily mean that the spread of democracy is bad for the United States or international stability over the long run; it simply indicates that there are growing pains along the way.

⁶⁵ Smith, 1994.

⁶⁶ Many of these issues are discussed in the foregoing section on offshore balancing. For additional work exposing the flawed assumptions and logic of that strategy, see Hal Brands, *The Limits of Offshore Balancing*, Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, 2015a; Art, 2003, especially pp. 176–177, 181–191, 198–222; James Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, “An Ocean Too Far: Offshore Balancing in the Indian Ocean,” *Asian Security*, Vol. 8, No. 1, March 2012; and Stephen G. Brooks and William Wohlforth, *America Abroad: The United States’ Global Role in the 21st Century*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

⁶⁷ In addition to the sources on the flaws of offshore balancing cited in the previous note, the analysis in this conclusion draws on Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth, 2012/2013; Gaddis, 1997, 2005; Ikenberry, 2001, 2011; and Leffler, 1992.

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About This Perspective

Since the end of World War II, the United States has pursued its global interests through a policy of consistent but evolving support for a liberal international order. In recent years, however, international challenges—such as the rise of new powers, climate change, and failed states—have led to a debate about the future of the U.S. relationship with that order. To inform this debate, this Perspective identifies areas of continuity and change in the historical U.S. approach to international order. It then outlines four alternative strategies that the United States might pursue vis-à-vis the liberal order in the future and proposes criteria for choosing among these options.

This paper is part of Building a Sustainable International Order, a larger RAND project that seeks to understand the existing international order, assess current challenges to the order, and recommend future U.S. policies with respect to the order. For more information on the project, please visit www.rand.org/nsrd/projects/international-order.

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