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The Future of the Liberal Order Is Conservative: A Strategy to Save the System

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The liberal world order is in peril. Seventy-five years after the United States helped found it, this global system of alliances, institutions, and norms is under attack like never before. From within, the order is contending with growing populism, nationalism, and authoritarianism. Externally, it faces mounting pressure from a pugnacious Russia and a rising China. At stake is the survival of not just the order itself but also the unprecedented economic prosperity and peace it has nurtured.

The order is clearly worth saving, but the question is how. Keep calm and carry on, some of its defenders argue; today's difficulties will pass, and the order is resilient enough to survive them. Others appreciate the gravity of the crisis but insist that the best response is to vigorously reaffirm the order's virtues and confront its external challengers. Bold Churchillian moves--sending more American troops to Syria, offering Ukraine more help to kick out pro-Russian forces--would help make the liberal international order great again. Only by doubling down on the norms and institutions that made the liberal world order so successful, they say, can that order be saved.

Such defenders of the order tend to portray the challenge as a struggle between liberal countries trying to sustain the status quo and dissatisfied authoritarians seeking to revise it. What they miss, however, is that for the past 25 years, the international order crafted by and for liberal states has itself been profoundly revisionist, aggressively exporting democracy and expanding in both depth and breadth. The scale of the current problems means that more of the same is not viable; the best response is to make the liberal order more conservative. Instead of expanding it to new places and new domains, the United States and its partners should consolidate the gains the order has reaped.

The debate over U.S. grand strategy has traditionally been portrayed as a choice between retrenchment and ambitious expansionism. Conservatism offers a third way: it is a prudent option that seeks to preserve what has been won and minimize the chances that more will be lost. From a conservative vantage point, the United States' other choices--at one extreme, undoing long-standing alliances and institutions or, at the other extreme, further extending American power and spreading American values--represent dangerous experiments. This is especially so in an era when great-power politics has returned and the relative might of the countries upholding the order has shrunk.

It is time for Washington and its liberal allies to gird themselves for a prolonged period of competitive coexistence with illiberal great powers, time to shore up existing alliances rather than add new ones, and time to get out of the democracy-promotion business. Supporters of the order may protest this shift, deeming it capitulation. On the contrary, conservatism is the best way to preserve the global position of the United States and its allies--and save the order they built.

A REVISIONIST ORDER

Since World War II, the United States has pursued its interests in part by creating and maintaining the web of institutions, norms, and rules that make up the U.S.-led liberal order. This order is not a myth, as some allege, but a living, breathing framework that shapes much of international politics. It is U.S.-led because it is built on a foundation of American hegemony: the United States provides security guarantees to its allies in order to restrain regional competition, and the U.S. military ensures an open global commons so that trade can flow uninterrupted. It is liberal because the governments that support it have generally tried to infuse it with liberal norms about economics, human rights, and politics. And it is an order--something bigger than Washington and its policies--because the United States has partnered with a posse of like-minded and influential countries and because its rules and norms have gradually assumed a degree of independent influence.

This order has expanded over time. In the years after World War II, it grew both geographically and functionally, successfully integrating two rising powers, West Germany and Japan. Supporting liberalism and interweaving their security policies with the United States', these countries accepted the order, acting as "responsible stakeholders" well before the term was optimistically applied to China. As the Cold War played out, NATO added not just West Germany but also Greece, Turkey, and Spain. The European Economic Community (the EU'S predecessor) doubled its membership. And core economic institutions, such as the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), broadened their remits.

After the Cold War, the liberal order expanded dramatically. With the Soviet Union gone and China still weak, the states at the core of the order enjoyed a commanding global position, and they used it to expand their system. In the Asia-Pacific, the United States strengthened its security commitments to Australia, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, and other partners. In Europe, NATO and the EU took on more and more members, widened and deepened cooperation among their members, and began intervening far beyond Europe's borders. The EU developed "neighborhood policies" to enhance security, prosperity, and liberal practices across Eurasia, the Middle East, and North Africa; NATO launched missions in Afghanistan, the Gulf of Aden, and Libya.

For liberals, this is simply what progress looks like. And to be sure, much of the order's dynamism--say, the GATT'S transformation into the more permanent and institutional World Trade Organization, or the UN'S increasingly ambitious peacekeeping agenda--met with broad support among liberal and authoritarian countries alike. But some key additions to the order clearly constituted revisionism by liberal countries, which, tellingly, were the only states that wanted them.

Most controversial were the changes that challenged the principle of sovereignty. Under the banner of "the responsibility to protect," governments, nongovernmental organizations, and activists began pushing a major strengthening of international law with the goal of holding states accountable for how they treated their own people. Potent security alliances such as NATO and powerful economic institutions such as the IMF joined the game, too, adding their muscle to the campaign to spread liberal conceptions of human rights, freedom of information, markets, and politics.

Democracy promotion assumed a newly prominent role in U.S. grand strategy, with President Bill Clinton speaking of "democratic enlargement" and President George W. Bush championing his "freedom agenda." The United States and its allies increasingly funded nongovernmental organizations to build civil society and spread democracy around the world, blurring the line between public and private efforts. U.S. taxpayers, for example, have footed the bill for the National Endowment for Democracy, a nonprofit that promotes democracy and human rights in China, Russia, and elsewhere. Meddling in other states' domestic affairs is old hat, but what was new was the overt and institutionalized nature of these activities, a sign of the order's postCold War mojo. As Allen Weinstein, the co-founder of the National Endowment for Democracy, admitted in a 1991 interview, "A lot of what we do today was done covertly 25 years ago by the CIA."

As never before, state power, legal norms, and public-private partnerships were harnessed together to expand the order's--and Washington's--geopolitical reach. Perhaps the clearest example of these heightened ambitions came in the Balkans, where, in 1999, NATO harnessed its military power to the emerging "responsibility to protect" norm and coerced Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic to acquiesce to Kosovo's de facto independence--after which the United States and its allies openly joined forces with local civil society groups to topple him from power. It was a remarkably bold move. In just a few months, the United States and its allies transformed the politics of an entire region that had traditionally been considered peripheral, priming it for incorporation into the security and economic structures dominated by the liberal West.

To say that all of this represented revisionism is not to equate it morally with, say, Beijing's militarization in the South China Sea or Moscow's invasion of Ukraine and electoral meddling in the United States and Europe. Rather, the point is that the order's horizons have expanded dramatically, with state power, new legal norms, overt and covert actions, and public-private partnerships together stretching the order wider and pushing it deeper. No country these days is consistently interested in maintaining the status quo; we are all revisionists now. Revisionism undertaken by illiberal states is often seen as mere power grabbing, but revisionism undertaken by liberal states has also resulted in geopolitical rewards: expanded alliances, increased influence, and more perquisites for the chief sponsors of the order, the United States above all.

A WHOLE NEW WORLD

There are appropriate times to expand, but today is not one of them. Although the liberal order is still backed by a powerful coalition of states, that coalition's margin of superiority has narrowed markedly. In 1995, the United States and its major allies produced some 60 percent of global output (in terms of purchasing power parity); now, that figure stands at 40 percent. Back then, they were responsible for 80 percent of global defense expenditures; today, they account for just 52 percent. It is becoming more difficult to maintain the order, let alone expand it. All the while, the order is suffering from an internal crisis of legitimacy that is already proving to be a constraint, as warweary Americans, Euroskeptical Britons, and others across the West have taken to the polls to decry so-called globalist elites.

The order's illiberal challengers, meanwhile, have gotten savvier about acting on their long-held dissatisfaction. China and Russia have insulated themselves from external influences by manipulating information, controlling the media, and deploying new informationage techniques to monitor their populations and keep them docile. They have modernized their militaries and embraced clever asymmetric strategies to put the order's defenders on the back foot. The result is that the United States and its allies not only command a slimmer power advantage relative to in the halcyon 1990s but also face a tougher task in sustaining the order.

One might argue that the order should neutralize these challengers by bringing them in. Indeed, such was the motivation behind the U.S. strategy of engaging a rising China. But even though illiberal countries can participate productively in many aspects of the order, they can never be true insiders. Their statist approach to economics and politics makes it impossible for them to follow Germany's and Japan's path and accept any order that is U.S.-led or liberal. They see U.S.-dominated security arrangements as potential threats directed at them. And they have no interest in making concessions on democracy and human rights, since doing so would undermine vital tools of their authoritarian control. Nor do they wish to embrace liberal economic principles, which run afoul of the (often corrupt) role of the state in their economies.

Given their fundamental aversion to the core precepts of the liberal order, it's no wonder that illiberal powers have invested resources in creating alternative institutions reflecting their own statist principles--bodies such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the New Development Bank, the Eurasian Economic Union, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. There was never a chance that a powerful, undemocratic Russia was going to join NATO, just as there was never a chance that China was going to be satisfied with U.S. military dominance in Asia. U.S. security commitments are directed against these very states. Washington and its allies buy into rules and values that these countries see as threatening. As long as the security commitments remain in place and the expansionist project continues, illiberal states will never fully integrate into the order.

Perhaps, one might argue, the order's authoritarian adversaries are paper tigers. In that case, the order has no reason to adopt a conservative stance; all it has to do is wait for these fragile governments to meet their inevitable demise. The problem with this bet is that it lay behind the liberal order's recent expansion, and yet over the past couple of decades, illiberal governments have only grown more authoritarian. Indeed, history has shown that great powers' domestic regimes rarely collapse in peacetime; the Soviet case was an anomaly. Cheering on political dissent within great powers from afar rarely succeeds, and by feeding narratives about their being encircled by threats, it often backfires.

The bottom line is that the external challenges to the order are happening now. Insisting on continued expansion while waiting for adversaries to decline, liberalize, and accept American leadership is likely to only exacerbate the problems afflicting the order. If that happens, the ability of the United States and its allies to sustain the order will decline faster than will the capability of their opponents to challenge it. And a failure to head off the rising costs of maintaining the order will only increase the domestic political pressure to abandon it altogether.

CONSERVATISM IN PRACTICE

A more conservative order would recognize that both internal and external circumstances have changed and would adjust accordingly. First and most important, this demands a shift to a status quo mindset in Washington and allied capitals. Despite U.S. President Donald Trump's occasional bluster about withdrawing from the world, his administration has retained all of the United States' existing commitments while adding ambitious new ones, notably an effort to radically scale back Iran's influence. And although the Obama administration was often accused of retrenchment, it, too, kept U.S. commitments in place and even tried its hand at regime change in Libya. Under a conservative approach, Washington would set aside such revisionist projects in order to concentrate its attention and resources on managing greatpower rivalries.

As part of this, the United States should reduce the expectation that it will take on new allies. At the very least, any prospective ally should bring more capabilities than costs--a litmus test that has not been applied in recent years. Because the liberal order is in dire need of consolidation rather than expansion, it makes no sense to add small and weak states facing internal problems, especially if including them will exacerbate tensions among existing allies or, worse, with great-power rivals. In July 2018, NATO, with U.S. support, formally invited Macedonia to join the alliance (reviving a dispute with Greece over the name of the country), and the Trump administration has backed NATO membership for Bosnia, too (over the objections of the Serbian minority there). These straws may not break the camel's back, but the principle of limitless expansion might.

The case of Taiwan shows what a successful conservative approach looks like in practice, demonstrating how the United States can deter a rival great power from expanding while preventing a partner from provoking it. For decades, Washington has declared that the island's future should be resolved peacefully. Leaders on both sides of the Taiwan Strait have sometimes sought to overturn the status quo, as when Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian began making pro-independence moves after he was elected in 2000. In response, U.S. President George W. Bush publicly warned Chen against unilaterally changing the status quo--a tough stance toward a longtime U.S. partner that helped keep the peace. This policy may be tested again, as demographic and economic trends strengthen the Taiwanese people's sense of national identity, as China grows more assertive, and as voices in the United States call for an unambiguously pro-Taiwan policy. But Washington should hold fast: for decades, conservatism has served it, and the region, well.

A conservative order would also entail drawing clearer lines between official efforts to promote democracy and those undertaken independently by civil society groups. By example and activism, vibrant civil societies in the United States and other liberal countries can do much to further democracy abroad. When governments get in the game, however, the results tend to backfire. As the political scientists Alexander Downes and Lindsey O'Rourke found in their comprehensive study, foreign-imposed regime change rarely leads to improved relations and frequently has the opposite effect. Liberal states should stand ready to help when a foreign government itself seeks assistance. But when one resists help, it is best to stay out. Meddling will only aggravate that government's concerns about violations of sovereignty and tar opposition forces with the charge of being foreign pawns.

Far from ceding power to illiberal great powers, a strategy of conservatism would directly address those external threats. Part of the reason those countries contest the order is that it exacerbates their insecurities. Restraining the order's expansionist impulses would reveal just how much of illiberal states' current revisionism is defensive in nature and how much is driven by sheer ambition. It could also stymie potential balancing against the order by illiberal states--China, Iran, Russia, and others. Although these revisionists have many divergent geopolitical and economic interests that currently limit their cooperation, the more their rulers worry that their grip on power is under threat from a liberal order, the more they will be inclined to overcome their differences and team up to check liberal powers. Reduce that fear, and there will be more opportunities for the liberal states to divide and rule, or at least divide and deter.

A less revisionist order could take the edge off of growing greatpower rivalry in another way, by fully exploiting the advantages of a defensive, rather than offensive, stance. In general, preserving the status quo is cheaper, easier, and less dangerous than overturning it, as strategists from Sun-tzu to Thomas Schelling have argued. The order is deeply set, legitimate, and institutionalized. When it remains committed to the status quo, it is easy for its defenders to set redlines clarifying which challenges will be reversed and which won't, a strategy that can help contain adversaries and limit rivalry. Yet when all the players in the game are revisionists, setting unambiguous lines becomes much more difficult; what is acceptable today could become unacceptable tomorrow. Shifting to a more clearly status quo orientation would increase the chances that the United States and its allies could strike explicit or, more likely, implicit bargains with their rivals. Like any strategic approach, conservatism offers no guarantees and requires skilled statecraft. But by setting more realistic goals, it can dramatically increase the likelihood of success.

Greater conservatism would also help bolster the order against internal challenges. Although these will require domestic policies to address, because a less ambitious order would provoke less pushback from authoritarian states--and such pushback is costly to deal with--it would also be a more sustainable order. The higher the costs of maintaining the order, the more suspicion about it grows, and the harder it gets to maintain domestic support for it. Polls show that American voters like the country's existing alliances. What many balk at are commitments they see as costly adventures unrelated to core national security concerns. Continued expansion risks feeding those perceptions and generating a popular backlash that would throw the baby out with the bath water. Conservatism, by contrast, would minimize that risk.

Conservatism today need not mean conservatism forever. Any ambitious enterprise, whether it be a political movement or a corporation, undergoes phases of expansion and phases of consolidation. After a firm engages in acquisition, for example, the C-suite must ask whether the new management and workers are fully on board with the firm's culture and mission and must address any dislocations caused by the recent changes. Consolidation, then, should be seen as a prudent reaction to expansion. In the future, conditions may change such that the order can responsibly start looking for ways to grow, but that day has not yet arrived.

A TIME TO HEAL

One might wonder whether an order grounded in liberal principles can in fact practice restraint. In the mid-eighteenth century, the philosopher David Hume warned that the United Kingdom was prosecuting its wars against illiberal adversaries with "imprudent vehemence," contradicting the dictates of the balance of power and risking national bankruptcy. Perhaps such imprudence is part and parcel of the foundational ideology and domestic politics of liberal powers. As the political scientist John Mearsheimer has put it, "Liberal states have a crusader mentality hardwired into them."

Indeed, the principles of liberalism apply to all individuals, not just those who happen to be citizens of a liberal country. On what basis, then, can a country committed to liberal ideals stand idly by when they are trampled abroad--especially when that country is powerful enough to do something about it? In the United States, leaders often try to square the circle by contending that spreading democracy actually serves the national interest, but the truth is that power and principle don't always go together.

Because liberal convictions are part of their identity, Americans often feel they should support those who rise up against tyranny. Perhaps in the abstract one can promise restraint, but when demonstrators take to Tahrir Square in Cairo, Maidan in Kiev, or Bolotnaya Square in Moscow, many Americans want their government to stand with those flying freedom's flag. And when countries want to join the order's key security and economic institutions, Americans want the United States to say yes, even when there is scant strategic sense in it. Political incentives encourage this impulse, since politicians in the United States know that they can score points by bashing any leader who sells out lovers of liberty.

There is evidence, however, that liberal countries can check their appetite for spreading virtue. Nineteenth-century British statesmen liked to think that liberal principles and imperial interests often coincided, but when the two clashed, they almost always chose realism over idealism--as when the United Kingdom backed the Ottoman Empire for reasons of realpolitik despite domestic pressure to take action on behalf of persecuted Christians in the empire. The United States in the twentieth century had idealistic presidents, such as Woodrow Wilson and Jimmy Carter, but it also had more pragmatic ones, such as Theodore Roosevelt and Richard Nixon.

The period of detente in U.S.-Soviet relations, which lasted throughout the 1970s, exemplifies the possibility of a liberal order going on the defensive. During this period, the West largely followed a live-and-let-live strategy informed by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's controversial maxim to not hold detente hostage to improvements in Moscow's human rights record. Washington negotiated with Moscow on arms control and a range of other security issues and held frequent summits symbolizing its acceptance of the Soviet Union as a superpower equal. In the 1975 Helsinki Accords, aimed at reducing East-West tensions, the United States effectively accommodated itself to the reality of Soviet suzerainty in Eastern Europe.

The essence of the deal was that the United States would render unto the Soviets roughly a third of the world--while making it clear that they should not dare come after its two-thirds. To be sure, superpower competition never truly ceased, and in the 1980s, detente died out altogether. But while it was in place, the strategy worked to limit U.S.-Soviet rivalry and facilitate rapprochement with China. This gave the United States and its allies the breathing room they needed to get their own houses in order and patch up alliances torn apart by domestic upheavals, the Vietnam War, and wrangling over trade and monetary policy. What this history suggests is that today's liberal order, for a time at least, can be conservative.

Liberal countries can never be thoroughly status quo actors, for they foster relatively free economies and civil societies presided over by governments committed to giving those vibrant forces free rein. Left to their own devices, those forces will always be revisionist--such is the nature of liberalism. But that inherent revisionism need not prevent leaders of liberal states, responsible for dealing with the world as it is, from recognizing that conditions have changed and deciding to trim their sails and tack away from expansion. That is what those leaders must do now: to protect an order based on liberalism, they must embrace conservatism.

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