

# WHO WILL RUN THE WORLD?

**T**wo decades ago, the U.S.-sponsored liberal international order seemed to be going from strength to strength. Now, both order and sponsor are in crisis, and the future is up for grabs. There are many elements of the story—military and economic blunders, stagnation for the middle and lower classes in the developed world, a populist backlash against globalization, dizzying technological change—but a shifting balance of power may be the most important of all. That's why we've focused on how the troubled hegemon and the confident challenger are trying to write the story's next chapter.

We've chosen four takes, two on the United States and two on China. Collectively, they map a range of possibilities for world order in the coming years. Readers can decide which they find persuasive now, pending history's actual verdict later.

I kick things off by arguing that rumors of the liberal order's demise are greatly exaggerated. The order is the deeply entrenched outcome of a century of U.S. efforts to promote a better kind of international relations, and it has delivered more benefits than any alternative could. The next U.S. president is likely to try to revive it, with the support of U.S. allies. But whether Washington can muster domestic backing for a constructive foreign policy remains unclear.

Richard Haass sees the glass half empty and getting emptier. The order can't be revived; Washington must accept that fate and put its efforts into

managing its deterioration. The demise of the Concert of Europe, the world's last great order-building effort, showed the risks of catastrophe—and offers lessons for policymakers today who want to avert one. Washington needs to be selective in its commitments, avoid unforced errors, and shed its reflexive opposition to multilateralism.

Oriana Skylar Mastro argues that China is not trying to replace the United States as a hegemon; it is trying to check the United States globally while expelling it from a Chinese sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific. Beijing has so far managed to avoid undue attention and unwanted confrontation by quietly focusing on regional diplomacy, the issuance of carefully orchestrated threats and promises, and attempts to Finlandize U.S. allies. By the time Washington pays attention and responds appropriately, the chance to avert disaster may be lost.

Yan Xuetong, finally, offers a view from Beijing. The temporary U.S. hegemony of the post-Cold War era has vanished, and bipolarity is set to return. Chinese leaders understand this, but they haven't yet worked out detailed plans for how to use their newfound strength to shape the world. Whether Washington tries to restart the old order or not is irrelevant, because it can't be done. Nuclear deterrence should keep hot war at bay, but look for rising tensions and fierce competition at the levels just below.

Happy New Year!

—Gideon Rose, *Editor*

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