

# The Open World

## What America Can Achieve After Trump

*Mira Rapp-Hooper and Rebecca Friedman Lissner*

**S**ince the election of U.S. President Donald Trump in 2016, it has become commonplace to bemoan the fate of the U.S.-led liberal international order—the collection of institutions, rules, and norms that has governed world politics since the end of World War II. Many experts blame Trump for upending an otherwise sound U.S. grand strategy. They hope that once he is gone, the United States will resume the role it has occupied since the fall of the Soviet Union: as the uncontested hegemon ruling benevolently, albeit imperfectly, over a liberalizing world.

It won't. Washington's recent dominance was a historical anomaly that rested on a rare combination of favorable conditions that simply no longer obtain, including a relatively unified public at home and a lack of any serious rivals abroad. American leaders must recognize this truth and adjust their strategy accordingly.

Although the post–Cold War order was never a monolith, it aspired to a form of liberal universalism. U.S.

leaders assumed that gradually, the rest of the world would come to accept the basic premises of the liberal order, including democracy, free trade, and the rule of law. And with a level of economic and military power unrivaled in human history, the United States could pursue a foreign policy that sought to preclude the emergence of great-power rivals. By 2008, however, the United States was stumbling. U.S. missteps in the Middle East, followed by the global financial crisis, signaled to would-be competitors that Washington was no longer invulnerable. Today, rival powers such as China and Russia actively participate in the liberal order even as they openly challenge the primacy of liberalism. Technological advances in computing and artificial intelligence (AI) are giving weaker actors the means to compete directly with the United States. And domestic divisions and global rivalries are making international cooperation harder to sustain.

Liberal universalism is no longer on the table. Instead, the United States should make the defense of openness the overarching goal of its global strategy. This will mean preventing the emergence of closed regional spheres of influence, maintaining free access to the global commons of the sea and space, defending political independence, and abandoning democracy promotion for a more tempered strategy of democracy support. Washington should continue to pursue great-power cooperation where possible, through both global institutions such as the UN and the World Trade Organization (WTO) and regulatory regimes such as the one set out in the Paris climate accord. But in domains not already

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**MIRA RAPP-HOOPER** is a Senior Fellow at the Paul Tsai China Center and a Senior Research Scholar at Yale Law School.

**REBECCA FRIEDMAN LISSNER** is an Assistant Professor at the U.S. Naval War College.



*Everything in order: U.S. Navy vessels in the Caribbean Sea, September 2017*

governed by international rules, such as AI, biotechnology, and cyberspace, it must prepare to compete with its rivals while working with its allies to establish new rules of the road.

An openness-based strategy would represent a clear departure from the principles of liberal universalism that have guided U.S. strategy since the end of the Cold War. Instead of presuming the eventual triumph of liberalism, it would signal U.S. willingness to live alongside illiberal states and even to accept that they may take a leading role in international institutions. Such a strategy would preserve existing structures of the liberal order while recognizing that they will often fall short; and when they do, it would call on the United States and like-minded partners to create new rules and regimes, even if these lack universal appeal. Harboring

no illusions about geopolitical realities, an openness-based strategy would prepare to defend U.S. interests when cooperation proved impossible. But it would define those interests selectively, sharpening the nation's focus and eschewing the unending crusades of liberal universalism.

Rather than wasting its still considerable power on quixotic bids to restore the liberal order or remake the world in its own image, the United States should focus on what it can realistically achieve: keeping the international system open and free.

#### **THE RETURN OF RIVALRY**

For nearly three decades after the fall of the Soviet Union, the United States had no significant geopolitical rivals. Today, it has two. The first, Russia, is a revanchist power, but its economic

stagnation renders it more a spoiler than a genuine challenger. With an acute dependency on oil and a projected economic growth rate hovering around two percent, Russia is likely to see its international power decline over the next decade. Yet Russia is far more economically and politically stable today than it was in the 1990s, allowing it to project power far beyond its borders. And Russian President Vladimir Putin has played a bad hand well: he has integrated Russia's significant hybrid warfare, cyberwar, and nuclear capabilities into an asymmetric defense strategy that lets the country punch well above its weight. Moscow will never truly challenge U.S. dominance, but it will disrupt the democratic processes of EU and NATO members and threaten former Soviet states for the foreseeable future.

The United States' second rival, China, is on track to become its only real peer competitor. During the 1990s and the first decade of this century, the United States benefited from Chinese leaders' fixation on economic growth and internal stability at the expense of geopolitical power. But since President Xi Jinping assumed office in 2012, Beijing has explicitly sought to reestablish its regional hegemony in Asia. China is now on track to be the world's largest economy by 2030 in terms of GDP, and China's technology sector already approaches that of the United States in both research-and-development spending and market size. By the early 2020s, China's military power in Asia will rival that of the United States, although the U.S. military will retain considerable global advantages.

Traditional measures of power are only part of the story, thanks to disruptive

technologies such as AI. AI is likely to spread quickly but unevenly, and it may encourage escalation by lowering the costs of conflict, as militaries become less dependent on manpower and destruction becomes more precisely targeted. Countries such as China, with its government access to massive citizen databases, state control over media, and lack of privacy rights and other individual freedoms, may create new forms of "digital authoritarianism" that allow them to fully exploit AI for military and political uses. And although the U.S. technology sector is the most advanced in the world, there are signs that the U.S. government may have trouble harnessing it. Silicon Valley's supranational self-image and global business interests make it skeptical of cooperating with the government—late last year, Google withdrew its bid for a \$10 billion cloud-computing contract with the Pentagon, citing ethical concerns. Washington's lack of technical expertise, meanwhile, could lead it to regulate Silicon Valley in unproductive ways.

Tension between the U.S. government and the U.S. technology sector is one problem, but domestic polarization is a more fundamental issue. The virtual elimination of any middle ground between Democrats and Republicans means that nearly any issue—including foreign policy initiatives that used to be bipartisan—can get politicized by lawmakers, the media, and the public. This will not only foment dissension on the most consequential foreign policy choices, such as when and where to use military force; it could also generate dramatic foreign policy swings as the presidency passes from one party to the

other, making the United States a persistently unpredictable global actor. And by ensuring that nearly every issue divides along partisan lines, polarization creates domestic fissures that foreign powers can exploit, as Russia did with its hacking and disinformation campaigns in the 2016 presidential election. Taken together, these domestic trends will make it harder for the United States to sustain a consistent global strategy and easier for its rivals to assert themselves.

Although war will remain a threat, renewed great-power competition is more likely to manifest itself in persistent, low-level conflict. Post–World War II international law prohibits aggressive conventional and nuclear war but says nothing about coercion below the threshold of military force. States have always tried to pursue their interests through coercive means short of war, but in recent years, interstate competition has flourished in new domains, such as cyberspace, that largely operate beyond the reach of international law. China and Russia possess devastating conventional and nuclear capabilities, but both wish to avoid a full-scale war. Instead, they will pursue disruptive strategies through subtler means, including hacking, political meddling, and disinformation. Sustained competition of this sort has not been seen since the Cold War, and U.S. strategy will need to prepare for it.

As new forms of conflict emerge, traditional forms of cooperation are unlikely to keep pace. The United States is striking ever-fewer formal international agreements. During the Obama administration, the United

States ratified fewer treaties per year than at any time since 1945. In 2012, for the first time since World War II, the United States joined zero treaties, and then it did the same in 2013 and 2015. The international community has similarly stalled in its efforts to pass new multilateral accords. Issues such as digital commerce and cyberconflict remain un- or undergoverned, and their sheer complexity makes it unlikely that new international rules on them will be passed anytime soon.

## THE OPEN ROAD

The emerging world order is one in which the United States will face major internal and external constraints. The country will remain tremendously powerful, continuing to dominate the international financial system and maintaining a level of military and economic power enjoyed by few nations in history. Yet its capabilities will be more limited, and the challenges it faces, more diffuse. A shrewd strategy must therefore be discerning in its priorities and guided by clear principles.

Washington's first priority should be to maintain global openness. Rather than attempting to spread liberal economic and political values, that is, the United States should focus on a more modest goal: ensuring that all countries are free to make independent political, economic, and military decisions. Geopolitically, a commitment to openness means that Washington will have to prevent a hegemonic adversary or bloc from controlling Asia, Europe, or both through a closed sphere of influence. If a competitor came to dominate part or all of Eurasia in a manner that displaced the United States, it would pose

a direct threat to U.S. prosperity and national security.

The greatest challenge to openness can be found in the Indo-Pacific, where China will increasingly assume regional leadership. In some respects, this is only natural for a country that has grown in power so much over the last four decades. But accepting Beijing as a regional leader is not the same as accepting a closed Chinese sphere of influence. China, for instance, has already become the dominant trading and development partner for many nations in Southeast Asia; if it were to use the artificial island bases it has built to block freedom of navigation in the South China Sea or attempt to coerce its partners using the leverage it has acquired through its infrastructure investments, a closed sphere would be in the offing. To keep the Indo-Pacific region open, the United States should maintain its military presence in East Asia and credibly commit to defending its treaty allies in the region, including Japan, the Philippines, and South Korea. It must also support regional states' political autonomy by recommitting itself to regional diplomacy and working with multilateral coalitions to ensure that any rules that Beijing seeks to set are transparent and noncoercive.

In Europe, the threat is less severe. Russia is in no position to dominate Europe, nor can it engage in sustained regional peer competition with the United States. Yet Moscow still has formidable military capabilities—particularly its nuclear arsenal—and the country's physical proximity to eastern Europe allows it to exert considerable influence there. It is deeply opposed to the

U.S.-led security order in Europe and has demonstrated a high tolerance for risk in pursuit of its core interests. Ultimately, however, Russia lacks the ability to craft a closed sphere of influence. U.S. interests therefore lie in deterring Russia's attempts to play spoiler—something Washington has failed to do since 2016, thanks to the Trump administration's pathological warmth toward Moscow and tense relations with the United States' European allies.

Washington should also prioritize openness in the global commons, particularly the sea and space. Maritime openness, or the ability of ships to pass unrestricted through international waters, is essential to global trade and commerce and thus U.S. national interests. Although China has not blocked commercial shipping near its shores (and is unlikely to do so in the future), it has regularly violated international law by obstructing military freedom of navigation in the South China Sea—something that the United States should refuse to accept. In space, which has become part of the commons thanks to the profusion of satellite technology, maintaining openness requires spacecraft to be allowed to operate unhindered. In 2007, for example, China destroyed one of its own satellites as part of an antisatellite missile test, polluting space with thousands of pieces of debris that continue to threaten commercial, civilian, and military spacecraft. This is precisely the sort of activity that an openness-based strategy should seek to prevent. In newer domains, such as cyberspace, however, there are no existing legal or normative edifices comparable to those governing the sea and space, and the United States

cannot expect others to forge global arrangements that reflect its unilateral preferences. Managing threats in these areas will be more a matter of deterrence than multilateral agreement.

Promoting openness will require a newfound emphasis on political independence as a foundation of U.S. strategy and as an organizing principle of international politics. Political independence is one of the foundational premises of the UN Charter, and most states, even authoritarian ones, claim to value it. Yet revisionist states, such as China and Russia, shroud their grievances in the rhetoric of sovereignty while freely violating the sovereignty of others. In order to credibly promote political independence, the United States will have to forgo efforts at regime change, such as those in 2003 in Iraq and 2011 in Libya, and stop aggressively promoting democracy overseas, as the Trump administration is currently attempting to do with its Iran policy. It should continue to support democracy, but it should do so by providing assistance to democracies when they seek it and working with partners to help them preserve their sovereignty against encroachments by rival powers. This means accepting the lamentable fact that, for now, authoritarianism will reign in Beijing, Moscow, and elsewhere.

Even as U.S. relations with China and Russia become more adversarial, however, it would be a mistake to allow them to become completely zero-sum. The world is not entering a new Cold War pitting liberal democracies against authoritarian regimes: China and Russia are revisionist participants within the existing international order, not enemies standing outside of it.

The book cover features a dark background with a large, white, sans-serif font title 'MEDIA AND MASS ATROCITY' in all caps. Below the title, in a smaller white font, is 'THE RWANDA GENOCIDE AND BEYOND'. To the right of the title, the word 'Foreword' is above 'ROMÉO DALLAIRE' and 'Editor' is above 'ALLAN THOMPSON'. At the bottom of the cover, there is a dark horizontal bar with the text '25 YEARS SINCE THE RWANDA GENOCIDE, THERE IS STILL MUCH TO LEARN' in white, all-caps, sans-serif font. The overall design is minimalist and high-contrast.

When human beings are at their worst — as they most certainly were in Rwanda during the 1994 genocide — the world needs the institutions of journalism and the media to be at their best. *Media and Mass Atrocity: The Rwanda Genocide and Beyond* revisits the case of Rwanda, but also questions what the lessons of Rwanda mean now, in an age of communications so dramatically influenced by social media and the relative decline of traditional news media.

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They share interests with the United States on international challenges such as terrorism, disease, and climate change, and Washington must work hard to capitalize on these opportunities for great-power cooperation. The UN, and the UN Security Council in particular, has a major role to play in enabling such collaboration. Beijing and Moscow are both highly invested in the council's legitimacy, and although it will be paralyzed on the most divisive geopolitical questions, it can serve as a useful coordinating mechanism on issues where great-power interests overlap, especially if it is reformed to include states such as Germany, India, and Japan.

Trade offers another potentially promising avenue for cooperation. China, Russia, and the United States are all members of the WTO. Their membership implies at least notional agreement that principles such as reciprocity and nondiscrimination should govern the international economic order. But currently, China subsidizes domestic industries and promotes state-owned enterprises in violation of those principles. Such policies are antithetical to the operation of an open system. Washington should not expect China to fully reform its economy, but neither should it allow the country to enjoy the benefits of trade while shielding Chinese companies from international competition. Changes to the WTO—for instance, reforming the appellate bodies that regulate disputes among member states—may help the trade regime function more efficiently in areas where significant agreement exists. But given its reliance on consensus, the WTO is unlikely to force Beijing's hand. The United States and its allies should thus be prepared

to exert multilateral pressure on China and other rule breakers, including through new agreements that disincentivize unfair trade policies.

### **THE FUTURE ORDER**

In this new environment, it no longer makes sense for the United States to promote the liberal universalism of the post–Cold War international order. The United States need not dominate every corner of the globe in order to pursue its interests, and its strategy should recognize that illiberal great powers will have some influence over world affairs, especially in their own backyards. Washington must avoid convincing rising powers such as China that their only chance at improving their international position is through catastrophic war. Openness, not dominance, should be the goal.

In addition to departing from liberal universalism, an openness-based strategy would differ from contemporary efforts to transform the liberal international order into a coalition of democratic states united in their opposition to rising authoritarianism. The liberal international relations scholar Michael Mandelbaum has argued that the United States and its democratic allies should adopt a “triple containment” strategy toward its three illiberal rivals, China, Iran, and Russia; the conservative analysts Derek Scissors and Daniel Blumenthal, meanwhile, have exhorted Washington to “begin cutting some of its economic ties with China” in a move toward decoupling. Ostensibly, such efforts aim to prevent the formation of authoritarian spheres of influence; in fact, they would help bring those spheres about. Instead of attempting to prevent its illiberal rivals

from gaining any formalized influence whatsoever, Washington should press them to accept the principles of openness and independence as a condition of continuing to operate within the existing institutions of the old liberal order—and of creating new ones. Preserving the older institutions, including through reforms to the Security Council and the WTO that enhance those institutions' international legitimacy, will be essential to preserving a venue for great-power cooperation.

Accepting that U.S. rivals will have some influence is not the same as ceding the field to them. To defend against traditional forms of aggression, the United States must retain the military strength to deter China from making a violent bid for dominance in Asia and Russia from forcibly upending the status quo in Europe.

Washington should prepare to deter nonmilitary aggression, too, especially in new domains where international laws are weak or nonexistent, such as AI, biotechnology, and cyberspace. It is unlikely that the UN or other global institutions will be able to achieve sufficient consensus to pass new and binding compacts to regulate these domains. In the absence of international law, the actions of the United States and its allies will define the boundaries of acceptable state behavior. Washington will have to work with like-minded states to establish norms that its rivals will not necessarily support, such as Internet governance that relies on public-private cooperation rather than granting all authority to the state. But by generating a partial international consensus, the United States can make it more difficult for anti-thetical norms to crystallize.

The end of its uncontested primacy will also require the United States to modernize its alliances and adopt a pluralistic approach to international partnerships. At present, U.S. alliances are primarily designed to defend against interstate military conflict. Washington should begin focusing on the full range of strategic contributions allies can make to collective defense, including in areas such as technological expertise, intelligence sharing, resilience planning, and economic statecraft. The United States can also develop transient but expedient partnerships with democratic and nondemocratic states alike, particularly those that fear dominance by assertive regional powers.

The unipolar moment that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union granted the United States tremendous freedom of action and demanded few concessions. For those who harbor nostalgia for post-Cold War U.S. dominance, it is tempting to try to regain it. Unfortunately, the world of the twenty-first century will not afford such luxuries. The United States must accept that although its absolute power remains formidable, its relative power is reduced: it cannot unilaterally dictate outcomes to the world.

This recognition need not—and, indeed, must not—entail the acceptance of closed spheres of influence, emerging either by design or by default. Rather than seeking to transform the world along liberal lines, the United States should prioritize openness and political independence. Such a strategy will preserve essential elements of the liberal international order while preparing for the twenty-first century, in which limited cooperation will persist alongside newly intensified rivalry and conflict. ☈

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