How Hegemony Ends

The Unraveling of American Power

By Alexander Cooley and Daniel H. Nexon July/August 2020

Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese leader Xi Jinping in Vladivostok, Russia, September 2018
Mikhail Metzel / TASS Host Photo Agency / Reuters

Multiple signs point to a crisis in global order. The uncoordinated international response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the resulting economic downturns, the resurgence of nationalist politics, and the hardening of state borders all seem to herald the emergence of a less

cooperative and more fragile international system. According to many observers, these developments underscore the dangers of U.S. President Donald Trump's "America first" policies and his retreat from global leadership.

Even before the pandemic, Trump routinely criticized the value of alliances and institutions such as NATO, supported the breakup of the European Union, withdrew from a host of international agreements and organizations, and pandered to autocrats such as Russian President Vladimir Putin and the North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. He has questioned the merits of placing liberal values such as democracy and human rights at the heart of foreign policy. Trump's clear preference for zero-sum, transactional politics further supports the notion that the United States is abandoning its commitment to promoting a liberal international order.

Some analysts believe that the United States can still turn this around, by restoring the strategies by which it, from the end of World War II to the aftermath of the Cold War, built and sustained a successful international order. If a post-Trump United States could reclaim the responsibilities of global power, then this era—including the

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pandemic that will define it—could stand as a temporary aberration rather than a step on the way to permanent disarray.

After all, predictions of American decline and a shift in international order are far from new—and they have been consistently wrong. In the middle of the 1980s, many analysts believed that U.S. leadership was on the way out. The Bretton Woods system had collapsed in the 1970s; the United States faced increasing competition from European and East Asian economies, notably West Germany and Japan; and the Soviet Union looked like an enduring feature of world politics. By the end of 1991, however, the Soviet Union had formally dissolved, Japan was entering its "lost decade" of economic stagnation, and the expensive task of integration consumed a reunified Germany. The United States experienced a decade of booming technological innovation and unexpectedly high economic growth. The result was what many hailed as a "unipolar moment" of American hegemony.

But this time really is different. The very forces that made U.S. hegemony so durable before are today driving its dissolution. Three developments enabled the post–Cold War U.S.-led order. First, with the defeat of communism, the United States faced no major global ideological project that could rival its own. Second, with the disintegration of the Soviet Union and its accompanying infrastructure of institutions and partnerships, weaker states lacked significant alternatives to the United States and its Western allies when it came to securing military, economic, and political support. And third, transnational activists and movements were spreading liberal values and norms that bolstered the liberal order.

Today, those same dynamics have turned against the United States: a vicious cycle that erodes U.S. power has replaced the virtuous cycles that once reinforced it. With the rise of great powers such as China and Russia, autocratic and illiberal projects rival the U.S.-led liberal international system. Developing countries—and even many developed ones—can seek alternative patrons rather than remain dependent on Western largess and support. And illiberal, often right-wing transnational networks are pressing against the norms and pieties of the liberal international

order that once seemed so implacable. In short, U.S. global leadership is not simply in retreat; it is unraveling. And the decline is not cyclical but permanent.

THE VANISHING UNIPOLAR MOMENT

It may seem strange to talk of permanent decline when the United States spends more on its military than its next seven rivals combined and maintains an unparalleled network of overseas military bases. Military power played an important role in creating and maintaining U.S. preeminence in the 1990s and early years of this century; no other country could extend credible security guarantees across the entire international system. But U.S. military dominance was less a function of defense budgets—in real terms, U.S. military spending decreased during the 1990s and only ballooned after the September 11 attacks—than of several other factors: the disappearance of the Soviet Union as a competitor, the growing technological advantage enjoyed by the U.S. military, and the willingness of most of the world's second-tier powers to rely on the United States rather than build up their own military forces. If the emergence of the United States as a

unipolar power was mostly contingent on the dissolution of the Soviet Union, then the continuation of that unipolarity through the subsequent decade stemmed from the fact that Asian and European allies were content to subscribe to U.S. hegemony.

Talk of the unipolar moment obscures crucial features of world politics that formed the basis of U.S. dominance. The breakup of the Soviet Union finally closed the door on the only project of global ordering that could rival capitalism. Marxism-Leninism (and its offshoots) mostly disappeared as a source of ideological competition. Its associated transnational infrastructure—its institutions, practices, and networks, including the Warsaw Pact, the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, and the Soviet Union itself—all imploded. Without Soviet support, most Moscow-affiliated countries, insurgent groups, and political movements decided it was better to either throw in the towel or get on the U.S. bandwagon. By the middle of the 1990s, there existed only one dominant framework for international norms and rules: the liberal international system of alliances and institutions anchored in Washington.

The United States and its allies—referred to in breezy shorthand as "the West"—together enjoyed a de facto patronage monopoly during the period of unipolarity. With some limited exceptions, they offered the only significant source of security, economic goods, and political support and legitimacy. Developing countries could no longer exert leverage over Washington by threatening to turn to Moscow or point to the risk of a communist takeover to shield themselves from having to make domestic reforms. The sweep of Western power and influence was so untrammeled that many policymakers came to believe in the permanent triumph of liberalism. Most governments saw no viable alternative.

During the 1990s, most governments saw no viable alternative to Western sources of support.

With no other source of support, countries were more likely to adhere to the conditions of the Western aid they received. Autocrats faced severe international criticism and heavy demands from Western-controlled international organizations. Yes, democratic powers continued to protect certain autocratic states (such as oil-rich Saudi

Arabia) from such demands for strategic and economic reasons. And leading democracies, including the United States, themselves violated international norms concerning human, civil, and political rights, most dramatically in the form of torture and extraordinary renditions during the so-called war on terror. But even these hypocritical exceptions reinforced the hegemony of the liberal order, because they sparked widespread condemnation that reaffirmed liberal principles and because U.S. officials continued to voice commitment to liberal norms.

Meanwhile, an expanding number of transnational networks—often dubbed "international civil society"—propped up the emerging architecture of the post–Cold War international order. These groups and individuals served as the foot soldiers of U.S. hegemony by spreading broadly liberal norms and practices. The collapse of centrally planned economies in the postcommunist world invited waves of Western consultants and contractors to help usher in market reforms—sometimes with disastrous consequences, as in Russia and Ukraine, where Western-backed shock therapy impoverished tens of millions while creating a class of wealthy oligarchs who turned former state assets into

personal empires. International financial institutions, government regulators, central bankers, and economists worked to build an elite consensus in favor of free trade and the movement of capital across borders.

Civil society groups also sought to steer postcommunist and developing countries toward Western models of liberal democracy. Teams of Western experts advised governments on the design of new constitutions, legal reforms, and multiparty systems. International observers, most of them from Western democracies, monitored elections in far-flung countries. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) advocating the expansion of human rights, gender equality, and environmental protections forged alliances with sympathetic states and media outlets. The work of transnational activists, scholarly communities, and social movements helped build an overarching liberal project of economic and political integration. Throughout the 1990s, these forces helped produce an illusion of an unassailable liberal order resting on durable U.S. global hegemony. That illusion is now in tatters.

THE GREAT-POWER COMEBACK

Today, other great powers offer rival conceptions of global order, often autocratic ones that appeal to many leaders of weaker states. The West no longer presides over a monopoly of patronage. New regional organizations and illiberal transnational networks contest U.S. influence. Long-term shifts in the global economy, particularly the rise of China, account for many of these developments. These changes have transformed the geopolitical landscape.

In April 1997, Chinese President Jiang Zemin and Russian President Boris Yeltsin pledged "to promote the multipolarization of the world and the establishment of a new international order." For years, many Western scholars and policymakers downplayed or dismissed such challenges as wishful rhetoric. Beijing remained committed to the rules and norms of the U.S.-led order, they argued, pointing out that China continued to benefit from the current system. Even as Russia grew increasingly assertive in its condemnation of the United States in the first decade of this century and called for a more multipolar world, observers didn't think that Moscow could muster support from any significant allies. Analysts in the West specifically doubted that Beijing and Moscow could

overcome decades of mistrust and rivalry to cooperate against U.S. efforts to maintain and shape the international order.

Such skepticism made sense at the height of U.S. global hegemony in the 1990s and even remained plausible through much of the following decade. But the 1997 declaration now looks like a blueprint for how Beijing and Moscow have tried to reorder international politics in the last 20 years. China and Russia now directly contest liberal aspects of the international order from within that order's institutions and forums; at the same time, they are building an alternative order through new institutions and venues in which they wield greater influence and can de-emphasize human rights and civil liberties.

Xi hosts guests at the launch of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank in Beijing, China, October 2014
Takaki Yajima / Reuters

At the United Nations, for example, the two countries routinely consult on votes and initiatives. As permanent members of the UN Security Council, they have coordinated their opposition to criticize Western interventions and calls for regime change; they have vetoed Western-sponsored proposals on Syria and efforts to impose sanctions on Venezuela and Yemen. In the UN General Assembly, between 2006 and 2018, China and Russia voted the same way 86 percent of the time, more frequently than during the 78 percent voting accord the two shared between 1991 and 2005. By contrast, since 2005, China and the United States have agreed only 21 percent of the time. Beijing and Moscow have also led UN initiatives to promote new norms, most notably in the arena of cyberspace, that privilege national sovereignty over individual rights, limit the doctrine of the responsibility to protect, and curtail the power of Western-sponsored human rights resolutions.

China and Russia have also been at the forefront of creating new international institutions and regional forums that exclude the United States and the West more broadly. Perhaps the most well known of these is the BRICS grouping, which includes Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South

Africa. Since 2006, the group has presented itself as a dynamic setting for the discussion of matters of international order and global leadership, including building alternatives to Western-controlled institutions in the areas of Internet governance, international payment systems, and development assistance. In 2016, the BRICS countries created the New Development Bank, which is dedicated to financing infrastructure projects in the developing world.

China and Russia have each also pushed a plethora of new regional security organizations—including the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism—and economic institutions, including the Chinese-run Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Russian-backed Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)—a security organization that promotes cooperation among security services and oversees biennial military exercises—was founded in 2001 at the initiative of both Beijing and Moscow. It added India and Pakistan as full members in 2017. The net result is the emergence of parallel structures of

global governance that are dominated by authoritarian states and that compete with older, more liberal structures.

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Critics often dismiss the BRICS, the EAEU, and the SCO as "talk shops" in which member states do little to actually resolve problems or otherwise engage in meaningful cooperation. But most other international institutions are no different. Even when they prove unable to solve collective problems, regional organizations allow their members to affirm common values and boost the stature of the powers that convene these forums. They generate denser diplomatic ties among their members, which, in turn, make it easier for those members to build military and political coalitions. In short, these organizations constitute a critical part of the infrastructure of international order, an infrastructure that was dominated by Western democracies after the end of the Cold War. Indeed, this new array of non-Western organizations has brought transnational governance mechanisms into regions such as

Central Asia, which were previously disconnected from many institutions of global governance. Since 2001, most Central Asian states have joined the SCO, the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization, the EAEU, the AIIB, and the Chinese infrastructure investment project known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

China and Russia are also now pushing into areas traditionally dominated by the United States and its allies; for example, China convenes the 17+1 group with states in central and eastern Europe and the China-CELAC (Community of Latin American and Caribbean States) Forum in Latin America. These groupings provide states in these regions with new arenas for partnership and support while also challenging the cohesion of traditional Western blocs; just days before the 16+1 group expanded to include the EU member Greece in April 2020, the European Commission moved to designate China a "systemic rival" amid concerns that BRI deals in Europe were undercutting EU regulations and standards.

Beijing and Moscow appear to be successfully managing their alliance of convenience, defying predictions that they would be unable to tolerate each other's international projects. This has even

been the case in areas in which their divergent interests could lead to significant tensions. Russia vocally supports China's BRI, despite its inroads into Central Asia, which Moscow still considers its backyard. In fact, since 2017, the Kremlin's rhetoric has shifted from talking about a clearly demarcated Russian "sphere of influence" in Eurasia to embracing a "Greater Eurasia" in which Chinese-led investment and integration dovetails with Russian efforts to shut out Western influence. Moscow followed a similar pattern when Beijing first proposed the formation of the AIIB in 2015. The Russian Ministry of Finance initially refused to back the bank, but the Kremlin changed course after seeing which way the wind was blowing; Russia formally joined the bank at the end of the year.

China has also proved willing to accommodate Russian concerns and sensitivities. China joined the other BRICS countries in abstaining from condemning Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, even though doing so clearly contravened China's long-standing opposition to separatism and violations of territorial integrity. Moreover, the Trump administration's trade war with China has given Beijing additional incentives to support Russian efforts to develop alternatives to the

Western-controlled SWIFT international payment system and dollar-denominated trade so as to undermine the global reach of U.S. sanctions regimes.

THE END OF THE PATRONAGE MONOPOLY

China and Russia are not the only states seeking to make world politics more favorable to nondemocratic regimes and less amenable to U.S. hegemony. As early as 2007, lending by "rogue donors" such as then oil-rich Venezuela raised the possibility that such no-strings-attached assistance might undermine Western aid initiatives designed to encourage governments to embrace liberal reforms.

Since then, Chinese state-affiliated lenders, such as the China Development Bank, have opened substantial lines of credit across Africa and the developing world. In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, China became an important source of loans and emergency funding for countries that could not access, or were excluded from, Western financial institutions. During the financial crisis, China extended over $75 billion in loans for energy deals to countries in Latin

America—Brazil, Ecuador, and Venezuela—and to Kazakhstan, Russia, and Turkmenistan in Eurasia.

China is not the only alternative patron. After the Arab Spring, Gulf states such as Qatar lent money to Egypt, allowing Cairo to avoid turning to the International Monetary Fund during a turbulent time. But China has been by far the most ambitious country in this regard. An AidData study found that total Chinese foreign aid assistance between 2000 and 2014 reached $354 billion, nearing the U.S. total of $395 billion. China has since surpassed annual U.S. aid disbursals. Moreover, Chinese aid undermines Western efforts to spread liberal norms. Several studies suggest that although Chinese funds have fueled development in many countries, they also have stoked blatant corruption and habits of regime patronage. In countries emerging from war, such as Nepal, Sri Lanka, Sudan, and South Sudan, Chinese development and reconstruction aid flowed to victorious governments, insulating them from international pressure to accommodate their domestic foes and adopt more liberal models of peacemaking and reconciliation.

The end of the West's

Chinese state-affiliated lenders have opened substantial lines of credit across the developing world.

monopoly on patronage has seen the concurrent rise of fiery populist nationalists even in countries that were firmly embedded in the United States' economic and security orbit. The likes of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte have painted themselves as guardians of domestic sovereignty against liberal subversion. They dismiss Western concerns about democratic backsliding in their countries and emphasize the growing importance of their economic and security relationships with China and Russia. In the case of the Philippines, Duterte recently terminated a two-decade-old military treaty with the United States after Washington canceled the visa of the former national chief of police, who is accused of human rights violations in the Philippines' bloody and controversial war on drugs.

Of course, some of these specific challenges to U.S. leadership will wax and wane since they stem from shifting political circumstances and the

dispositions of individual leaders. But the expansion of "exit options"—of alternative patrons, institutions, and political models—now seems a permanent feature of international politics. Governments have much more room to maneuver. Even when states do not actively switch patrons, the possibility that they could provides them with greater leverage. As a result, China and Russia have the latitude to contest U.S. hegemony and construct alternative orders.

CENTRIFUGAL FORCES

Another important shift marks a break from the post–Cold War unipolar moment. The transnational civil society networks that stitched together the liberal international order no longer enjoy the power and influence they once had. Illiberal competitors now challenge them in many areas, including gender rights, multiculturalism, and the principles of liberal democratic governance. Some of these centrifugal forces have originated in the United States and western European countries themselves. For instance, the U.S. lobbying group the National Rifle Association worked transnationally to successfully defeat a proposed antigun referendum in Brazil in

2005, where it built an alliance with domestic right-wing political movements; over a decade later, the Brazilian political firebrand Jair Bolsonaro tapped into this same network to help propel himself to the presidency. The World Congress of Families, initially founded by U.S.-based Christian organizations in 1997, is now a transnational network, supported by Eurasian oligarchs, that convenes prominent social conservatives from dozens of countries to build global opposition to LGBTQ and reproductive rights.

Autocratic regimes have found ways to limit—or even eliminate—the influence of liberal transnational advocacy networks and reform-minded NGOs. The so-called color revolutions in the post-Soviet world in the first decade of this century and the 2010–11 Arab Spring in the Middle East played a key role in this process. They alarmed authoritarian and illiberal governments, which increasingly saw the protection of human rights and the promotion of democracy as threats to their survival. In response, such regimes curtailed the influence of NGOs with foreign connections. They imposed tight restrictions on receiving foreign funds, proscribed various political activities, and labeled certain

activists “foreign agents.”

Some governments now sponsor their own NGOs both to suppress liberalizing pressures at home and to contest the liberal order abroad. For example, in response to Western support of young activists during the color revolutions, the Kremlin founded the youth group Nashi to mobilize young people in support of the state. The Red Cross Society of China, China’s oldest government-organized NGO, has delivered medical supplies to European countries in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic as part of a carefully orchestrated public relations campaign. These regimes also use digital platforms and social media to disrupt antigovernment mobilization and advocacy. Russia has likewise deployed such tools abroad in its information operations and electoral meddling in democratic states.

Some of the forces driving the unraveling of the liberal order have originated in the United States itself.

Two developments helped accelerate the illiberal turn in the West: the Great Recession of 2008 and the refugee crisis in Europe in 2015. Over the last decade, illiberal networks—generally but not

exclusively on the right—have challenged the establishment consensus within the West. Some groups and figures question the merits of continued membership in major institutions of the liberal order, such as the European Union and NATO. Many right-wing movements in the West receive both financial and moral support from Moscow, which backs "dark money" operations that promote narrow oligarchic interests in the United States and far-right political parties in Europe with the hope of weakening democratic governments and cultivating future allies. In Italy, the anti-immigrant party Lega is currently the most popular party despite revelations of its attempt to win illegal financial support from Moscow. In France, the National Rally, which also has a history of Russian backing, remains a powerful force in domestic politics.

These developments echo the ways in which "counter-order" movements have helped precipitate the decline of hegemonic powers in the past. Transnational networks played crucial roles in both upholding and challenging prior international orders. For example, Protestant networks helped erode Spanish power in early modern Europe, most notably by supporting the

Dutch Revolt in the sixteenth century. Liberal and republican movements, especially in the context of the revolutions across Europe in 1848, played a part in undermining the Concert of Europe, which tried to manage international order on the continent in the first half of the nineteenth century. The rise of fascist and communist transnational networks helped produce the global power struggle of World War II. Counter-order movements achieved political power in countries such as Germany, Italy, and Japan, leading those nations to break from or try to assail existing structures of international order. But even less successful counter-order movements can still undermine the cohesion of hegemonic powers and their allies.

Not every illiberal or right-wing movement that opposes the U.S.-led order seeks to challenge U.S. leadership or turns to Russia as an exemplar of strong cultural conservatism. Nonetheless, such movements are helping polarize politics in advanced industrial democracies and weaken support for the order's institutions. One of them has even captured the White House: Trumpism, which is best understood as a counter-order movement with a transnational reach that targets the alliances and partnerships central to U.S.

hegemony.

CONSERVING THE U.S. SYSTEM

Great-power contestation, the end of the West's monopoly on patronage, and the emergence of movements that oppose the liberal international system have all altered the global order over which Washington has presided since the end of the Cold War. In many respects, the COVID-19 pandemic seems to be further accelerating the erosion of U.S. hegemony. China has increased its influence in the World Health Organization and other global institutions in the wake of the Trump administration's attempts to defund and scapegoat the public health body. Beijing and Moscow are portraying themselves as providers of emergency goods and medical supplies, including to European countries such as Italy, Serbia, and Spain, and even to the United States. Illiberal governments worldwide are using the pandemic as cover for restricting media freedom and cracking down on political opposition and civil society. Although the United States still enjoys military supremacy, that dimension of U.S. dominance is especially ill suited to deal with this global crisis and its ripple effects.

Even if the core of the U.S. hegemonic system—which consists mostly of long-standing Asian and European allies and rests on norms and institutions developed during the Cold War—remains robust, and even if, as many champions of the liberal order suggest will happen, the United States and the European Union can leverage their combined economic and military might to their advantage, the fact is that Washington will have to get used to an increasingly contested and complex international order. There is no easy fix for this. No amount of military spending can reverse the processes driving the unraveling of U.S. hegemony. Even if Joe Biden, the presumptive Democratic nominee, knocks out Trump in the presidential election later this year, or if the Republican Party repudiates Trumpism, the disintegration will continue.

The key questions now concern how far the unraveling will spread. Will core allies decouple from the U.S. hegemonic system? How long, and to what extent, can the United States maintain financial and monetary dominance? The most favorable outcome will require a clear repudiation of Trumpism in the United States and a commitment to rebuild liberal democratic institutions in the core. At both the domestic and

the international level, such efforts will necessitate alliances among center-right, center-left, and progressive political parties and networks.

What U.S. policymakers can do is plan for the world after global hegemony. If they help preserve the core of the American system, U.S. officials can ensure that the United States leads the strongest military and economic coalition in a world of multiple centers of power, rather than finding itself on the losing side of most contests over the shape of the new international order. To this end, the United States should reinvigorate the beleaguered and understaffed State Department, rebuilding and more effectively using its diplomatic resources. Smart statecraft will allow a great power to navigate a world defined by competing interests and shifting alliances.

U.S. policymakers must plan for the world after global hegemony.

The United States lacks both the will and the resources to consistently outbid China and other emerging powers for the allegiance of governments. It will be impossible to secure the commitment of some countries to U.S.

visions of international order. Many of those governments have come to view the U.S.-led order as a threat to their autonomy, if not their survival. And some governments that still welcome a U.S.-led liberal order now contend with populist and other illiberal movements that oppose it.

Even at the peak of the unipolar moment, Washington did not always get its way. Now, for the U.S. political and economic model to retain considerable appeal, the United States has to first get its own house in order. China will face its own obstacles in producing an alternative system; Beijing may irk partners and clients with its pressure tactics and its opaque and often corrupt deals. A reinvigorated U.S. foreign policy apparatus should be able to exercise significant influence on international order even in the absence of global hegemony. But to succeed, Washington must recognize that the world no longer resembles the historically anomalous period of the 1990s and the first decade of this century. The unipolar moment has passed, and it isn't coming back.

ALEXANDER COOLEY is Claire Tow Professor of Political Science at Barnard College and Director of Columbia University's Harriman Institute.

DANIEL H. NEXON is an Associate Professor in the Department of Government and at the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University.

They are the authors of *Exit From Hegemony: The Unraveling of the American Global Order*.

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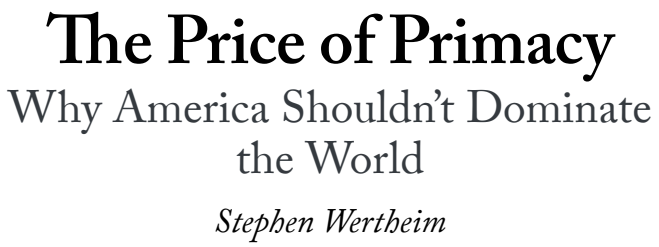

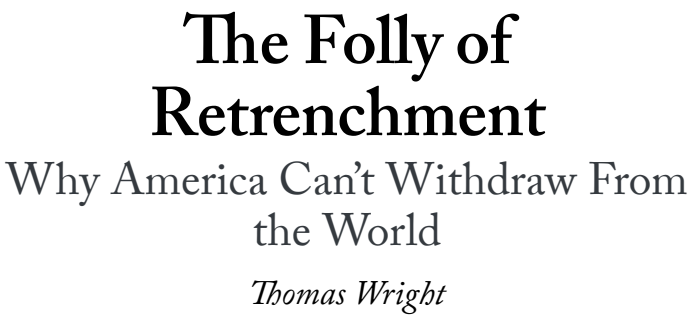

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