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Don't Give Up on Global Order

America Depends on It—and Can Restore It

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Americans these days agree on very little about politics and international relations. But there is a growing consensus around two fundamental points. One is that the long-standing liberal world order—founded after World War II and based on a system of U.S.-led alliances, multilateral institutions, relatively open trade, and the defense of rules and norms such as state sovereignty, nonaggression, and freedom of navigation—is now dead and buried. It had been waning for some time, the logic goes, but the second Trump administration is proving to be the final nail in the coffin. The second point of emerging consensus is that a fundamental remaking of that order has become essential. The American role in preserving the old order had become counterproductive and unsustainable, and it is long past time that Americans shed the burdens required to try to maintain it.

The problem with this line of thinking is that neither assertion is true, and assuming otherwise could create a dangerous, self-fulfilling prophecy. U.S. President Donald Trump certainly doesn't believe in a

liberal, rules-based, U.S.-led order, and there is no guarantee that order will survive four years of the damage his administration is inflicting on it. At the same time, it would be premature to succumb to the fatalistic conclusion that there is no hope for more principled and reliable U.S. leadership after Trump, whose policies are now reminding many Americans what they lose when such leadership is abandoned. It would be even more misguided to presume that if the U.S.-led world order really is dying, it won't be sorely missed when it is gone. To paraphrase what British Prime Minister Winston Churchill once said about democracy, a U.S.-led world order is probably the worst of all possible orders—except for all the others that have ever been tried.

Cynics (or frankly any honest observer) might question the degree to which a liberal rules-based order ever actually existed; it would be easy to make a long list of examples of how rules have been bent, broken, or ignored, not least by the United States itself. As Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney acknowledged in his landmark address to the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2026, the notion of a rules-based order was always "partially false." The world's strongest powers would consistently "exempt themselves when convenient," trade rules were "enforced asymmetrically," and international law was "applied with varying rigor depending on the identity of the accused or the victim." At the same time, as Carney also acknowledged, the liberal international order was also partially true, and for eight decades, American hegemony "helped provide public goods, open sea lanes, a stable financial system, collective security, and support for frameworks for resolving disputes." The United States during that period adopted and maintained a broad, enlightened view—historically unprecedented among great powers—that it had a national self-interest in making other countries secure, prosperous, and free. That view in turn gave other countries an interest in supporting U.S. leadership and the order that came with it.

The U.S.-led international system that has been in place since just after World War II has been marred by wars, injustices, inequalities, and other horrors. But it has also underpinned the most stable, secure, and prosperous 80-year period in world history. Much of that is because every U.S. president before Trump believed in it, defended it, and had the necessary public support to do so. Rather than complacently accepting its demise—let alone celebrating or contributing to it—the American president who comes after Trump should set out to update, improve, and sell the idea of an enlightened and U.S.-led world where leadership, rules, values, institutions, and norms still matter.

SILVER LININGS

In the 1979 film *Monty Python's Life of Brian*, set in AD 33, the character Reg (played by the comedian John Cleese) famously asks fellow members of his Judean resistance group, "What have the Romans ever done for us?," only for them to mention aqueducts, sanitation, roads, irrigation, medicine, education, public order, and even wine. Reg is reduced to responding, "Apart from the sanitation, the medicine, education, . . . what have the Romans ever done for us?" A similar joke could be made about American critics who dismiss the benefits of U.S. global leadership over the past 80 years: apart from avoiding great-power war (for the first time in history), keeping sea-lanes open, curbing nuclear proliferation, fostering unparalleled prosperity, advancing democracy, and granting the United States the unique benefits of global preeminence, what did the U.S.-led order ever do for Americans?

To say this is not to ignore the conflicts, injustices, and hypocrisies of the past eight decades but to note how favorably that period compares with any previous one in world history. Consider, for example, the prevention of wars between major powers. In the 80 years that preceded 1945 or any similar period before that, the world's strongest countries fought regularly and repeatedly, wreaking havoc on

humanity. World War I and World War II alone killed roughly 100 million people. By this standard, the last 80 years compare rather favorably. To be sure, what the historian John Lewis Gaddis has called "the long peace" that followed World War II was due in part to the deterrent effect of nuclear weapons, whose invention coincided with the dawn of the U.S.-led world order. As the political scientist John Mueller has pointed out, it was also due to the simple reality that modern military technology, even beyond nuclear weapons, makes war so catastrophic that major powers are largely deterred from waging it against each other. But much of the long peace also had to do with the presence and power of American military forces, alliances, and defense agreements all over the world, which have deterred the sort of territorial aggression and great-power wars that used to be commonplace.

Nuclear weapons nonproliferation provides another case in point. U.S. President John F. Kennedy's famous 1963 warning that the world could see some 15 to 25 nuclear states by the 1970s—a thought that "haunted" him—was hardly implausible. Many experts and intelligence services concurred. But it didn't happen, not because nuclear know-how, material, or technology was not available to states but because the United States gave credible security guarantees to many of the states that might have considered that option and set up multilateral institutions to deny access to adversarial potential proliferators. The system was far from perfect—five countries developed nuclear weapons after Kennedy's warning—but others were deterred from or incentivized against doing so. More nuclear weapons proliferation will not necessarily lead to nuclear weapons use, accidents, or terrorist threats, but it does not seem to be a gamble worth taking.

The liberal international order—anchored by American security guarantees that provided stability for large parts of Europe and Asia, open sea-lanes for the entire world, and U.S.-led institutions such as

the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization—also helped to foster the largest expansion of global prosperity in history. Critics may claim that the U.S.-led order benefited only the United States and other advanced industrial countries, and that economic growth was unevenly distributed among and within countries. But from 1945 to today, global GDP increased more than tenfold, thanks in no small part to rising levels of wealth in so-called developing countries. Average incomes tripled, and the share of humanity living in extreme poverty fell from nearly 60 percent in 1950 to around ten percent in 2025. The rise in global income lifted over a billion people out of poverty altogether, and the global middle class grew to include more than half the world's population. Life expectancy rose from 46 years in 1950 to 73 years in 2024. This economic growth cannot be solely attributed to the U.S.-led world order. But that order did provide unusually propitious conditions for it to take place.

American global leadership also helped promote the greatest expansion of individual freedom and democracy the world has ever seen. In 1945, most of the world lived under authoritarian rule. By the 1990s, more than half of all states were democracies; by 2016 it was six out of ten. Even with the democratic recession of the past decade, the world remains far more democratic than in any previous era. The United States often wielded its great power selfishly, but it nonetheless provided a model and the space for promoting open societies, rule of law, and human rights far beyond anything before.

NOT DEAD YET

Some critics of the U.S.-led order might grant that it has been great for the world. But they believe it has been an unsustainable drain on American resources. Trump, for example, framed his campaign for president in 2024 on a narrative of U.S. weakness and global decline, and many voters seemed to believe him. According to a February 2024 Gallup poll, just 33 percent of Americans were satisfied with the

position of the United States in the world—a decrease of 20 percentage points from just four years prior. Many Americans feel the United States has not been well served by the international system that preceded Trump and have become convinced that the country is no longer capable of playing a global leadership role.

But neither of these assumptions hold up to scrutiny. U.S. economic growth over the past two decades has dwarfed that of other wealthy countries, and the economy that Trump inherited was what *The Economist* in October 2024 called "the envy of the world." Whereas in 2008 the European Union's economy was larger than that of the United States, U.S. GDP is now more than 40 percent higher than that of the EU and more than seven times that of Japan. Once common predictions that China would soon surpass the United States economically have largely ceased as Beijing's decades-long trend of double-digit growth has ended and its economy faces demographic challenges, weak consumption, and a bloated property market. Russia's already much weaker economy has been devastated by sanctions, export controls, and over four years of war—to the point that the U.S. defense budget alone is now half the size of Russia's entire GDP. The United States obviously faces real economic problems—particularly growing inequality and rising debt—but it still accounts for 26 percent of global GDP, the highest share in nearly two decades and about where it stood at the end of the Reagan administration.

Other measures of relative power underscore Washington's global strength. U.S. military power eclipses that of any other country, with a defense budget more than three times China's and larger than the top ten other biggest spenders' combined. U.S. energy production has reached a record high: Washington leads global production of both oil and natural gas, at 20 percent and 25 percent, respectively. American technology companies dominate global markets and far outcompete rivals in the field of artificial intelligence. The U.S. dollar is used in

nearly 90 percent of foreign exchange transactions and makes up 60 percent of foreign exchange reserves, which gives Washington broad power to impose sanctions, freeze assets, and run deficits.

The United States still faces considerable domestic and international challenges, and Trump's policies—not least his inflationary tariffs, cuts to top research institutions, indiscriminate restrictions on immigration, and weakening of democratic norms and the rule of law—are doing serious damage to the sources of its strength. But the notion that the United States is no longer capable of playing a global leadership role or that its exercise of such a role for the past 80 years has not served it well is not backed up by the facts.

WORTH THE RISK?

As Americans have grown tired of their global role, the track record and consequences of the U.S.-led order have been harshly and increasingly criticized from both sides of the political spectrum. The right, once internationalist but now dominated by Trump loyalists and "America first" proponents, believes that American foreign policy elites have squandered vast amounts of blood and treasure in search of "permanent American domination of the entire world," as the 2025 National Security Strategy put it. In contrast to postwar American leaders such as President Harry Truman or Secretaries of State Dean Acheson and George Marshall, Trump sees the world in zero-sum terms. He has little appreciation for concepts such as public goods or the global commons. He sees alliances not as force multipliers but as mechanisms for allies to exploit the United States, and he harbors nothing but disdain for multilateral institutions, rules, laws, or norms.

On the left is a different but overlapping critique: that the history of the U.S.-led world order has been one of an unnecessary quest for domination, excessive defense spending, failed military interventions, hypocrisy, and the neglect of human rights. Many progressives recognize the challenges posed by various U.S. adversaries but often

blame American policies and provocations as much as the adversaries themselves. They note that high U.S. defense expenditures incentivized allies' free-riding and came at the expense of American workers, and that U.S. bases abroad provided targets for Washington's enemies as much as they deterred them. These critics question the United States' capacity for responsible global leadership and oppose the defense spending that leadership requires.

There are of course huge differences between (and within) these two schools of thought. But what they have in common is that neither believes the U.S.-led liberal order is in the United States' continued interest. They also tend to take the benefits of U.S. leadership for granted and fail to recognize the dangers that would loom if Americans gave up on it.

The biggest risk in a world without a strong United States committed to allies, rules, and norms would be a lower cost of aggression and a higher risk of major conflict as a result. As Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine showed, outright territorial conquest is hardly extinct, and it would be naive to conclude that ambitious or insecure states would not seek to take advantage of a withering of American military power and security commitments. Trump likes to brag about (and overstate) how he persuaded NATO allies to spend more on defense. But if the U.S. defense commitment is made conditional and U.S. forces deployed in Europe are reduced, the continent as a whole will be less secure, and Russia could be tempted to think it could get away with further aggression beyond Ukraine. If U.S. security commitments in the Indo-Pacific are no longer backed by credible military forces, deterrence for Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan could fail. Trump's war of choice in Iran was reckless and irresponsible, but if the United States withdrew its forces from the Middle East and left its rivals to their own devices, nothing in history suggests these states would just get along peacefully or that the United States would be immune to the consequences if they didn't.

There is no guarantee that the U.S.-led order will survive Trump.

Also at risk would be critical public goods such as open sea-lanes, which have been taken for granted since the United States embraced the principle of freedom of navigation after World War II and built up its navy to enforce it. Skeptics of that role were given a sharp reminder of its importance when Iran responded to U.S. attacks in February 2026 by closing the Strait of Hormuz, sending fuel and other commodity prices skyrocketing. For more than 40 years, U.S. forces in the region had successfully deterred an Iranian closure of the strait—even in periods of conflict—until Trump launched a war that left the regime with little to lose. In a matter of weeks, American gas prices rose by 50 percent, some Asian countries had to move to four-day workweeks because of lack of fuel, farmers in Africa and other regions didn't have fertilizer for spring planting, and rising inflation and interest rates put the entire global economy at risk. If the United States were now to give up on the principle of freedom of navigation or the means to enforce it, other key waterways—including the Strait of Malacca, the South China Sea, and the Suez Canal—would be vulnerable either to adversarial domination or conflict among competing powers. To the argument that such a role is too costly for the United States to maintain, consider that a one percent reduction in U.S. GDP, which could easily result from the closure of any of these key waterways, would cost Americans over $300 billion in a year. A similar blow to the global economy would cost over $10 trillion.

Nor can it be assumed that Kennedy's nightmare of further nuclear proliferation could be avoided. Indeed, mounting questions about continued U.S. security commitments may have already set the stage for such an expansion. Over 75 percent of South Koreans now support the development of an independent arsenal. Polish President Karol Nawrocki has suggested that his country develop its own nuclear

weapons, and Germany is pursuing nuclear cooperation with France and the United Kingdom. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, whose country signed a comprehensive defense agreement with nuclear-armed Pakistan in September 2025, has said since 2018 that his country would develop its own nuclear weapons "as soon as possible" if Iran did so, and the Turkish foreign minister said in February of this year that Turkey and others in the region would consider doing so as well. Even Japan—the world's only victim of nuclear weapons use so far—is starting to debate the need for an independent nuclear deterrent. The Trump administration's mishandling of its war in Iran does not negate the reality that without the U.S. capacity to prevent it from doing so, the Islamic Republic might have produced nuclear weapons a long time ago.

Critics of the U.S.-led order tend to downplay or wish away all these risks, hoping that if Washington reduced its role, others would step up to fill the gap. Some think that countries would start recognizing great powers' spheres of influence and, in doing so, avoid conflict. But in truth, there is no replacement for what the United States provides. By taking relative peace, prosperity, and stability for granted and focusing solely on the costs of U.S. leadership rather than the benefits, these critics are setting aside many of the lessons of the past century and proposing an extraordinary gamble that those lessons no longer apply.

DON'T NIX IT, FIX IT

There is no guarantee that the U.S.-led order will survive Trump, who is taking a sledgehammer to almost all its core pillars and comprehensively destroying the institutions, principles, and the trust in the United States on which it depends. Trump reflects American attitudes as much as he drives them, and after seeing him elected twice, no one can claim that Trumpism is a passing phenomenon. As Mara Karlin and I wrote in *Foreign Affairs* earlier this year, Washington's allies would be irresponsible not to start urgently preparing for a world in which responsible U.S. leadership never

returns, and Americans who believe in such global leadership are in no position to promise it ever will.

But Americans do not have to take that future as a given. Instead of fatalistically accepting the premise that the U.S.-led order is dead and cannot be revived, the next president should remind Americans of its value, acknowledge its shortcomings, and offer a new vision for American leadership. The United States after Trump should seek to reform the U.S.-led world order, not retreat from the responsibilities of maintaining it.

The first step in this process would be to propose a new bargain with allies. To address legitimate concerns that the old alliance system placed unfair burdens on the United States, a new arrangement will have to include greater contributions from allies, both to deal with growing threats and to make alliances politically sustainable in Washington. Fortunately, the process of greater burden sharing is already underway and likely to continue. Even if the next U.S. administration believes strongly in the value of the United States' partnerships, American allies will know that a potential return to a Trumpist foreign policy is just one election away. That, after all, is what American officials warned their allies for years as they pressed for greater burden sharing. Now, these countries have all too much reason to believe it.

A renewed U.S. alliance system will also have to be updated to reflect the most likely global challenges of the second quarter of the twenty-first century. These include great-power competition with China and Russia, growing cooperation among those powers and other adversaries such as Iran and North Korea, the emergence of artificial general intelligence, the need to create more resilience in supply chains and the U.S. defense industrial base, and the impacts of climate change. To do that, and to increase linkages between U.S. allies in different regions, the G-7 could be expanded to include partners such as Australia and South Korea and given a mandate to include national

security–related export controls, outbound investment restrictions, and collective responses to economic coercion. A new American president who recommits the United States to the ironclad security guarantees that have helped deter aggression for decades, and who once again treats allies with trust and respect, would likely be welcomed enthusiastically as the leader of this modernized alliance.

Forgoing the capability to defend the international order is a recipe for disaster.

The next U.S. president will also have to demonstrate respect for the rules, norms, and institutions that Trump is destroying. The notion that previous American leaders abided by such rules may well have been partially false, but no previous president came anywhere close to the degree of domestic or international lawlessness Trump is displaying. All great powers will be inclined to use the international system to their advantage, and no multilateral system will ever be robust enough to ensure comprehensive respect for all international rules and laws. But comprehensively eschewing institutions, rules, international law, and norms altogether in a world of "might makes right" is a recipe for injustice and renewed conflict among great powers.

A renewed U.S.-led world order will have to address the global economic imbalances and inequities that contributed so much to the fading support for the old one. It will not be possible to go back to a world where globalization and free trade agreements were touted as the path to prosperity for all without recognition of their downsides—such as trade imbalances with China and the decline in American manufacturing jobs in certain communities. But it will also be necessary to pull back from the overcorrection that has taken place over the past decade—and especially during the second Trump term—in which the very word "trade" became a sort of taboo and huge increases in U.S. tariffs interfered with trade flows, raised prices for

consumers, failed to restore manufacturing jobs, reduced farmers' incomes, and created enormous economic uncertainty while leaving the country's overall trade deficit virtually unchanged. The next president will have to be honest with the American people, explaining that tariffs are a mostly regressive tax on Americans; productivity gains and technology advances are far more responsible than trade for the decades-long decline in the U.S. manufacturing sector; the greatest beneficiaries of lower-cost imports are lower-income families; reducing barriers to trade and opening up new markets can create good, high-paying jobs for Americans; and protectionism and tit-for-tat tariff wars are more likely to be a path to 1930s-style economic stagnation than to the massive expansion of U.S. and global prosperity seen during the post–World War II era.

To the extent that reform of the World Trade Organization and other institutions proves impossible, the next president should look to develop new, flexible, and overlapping partnerships among like-minded states. Such groupings could agree to use their collective leverage (the current G-7 countries alone represent some 750 million people and $55 trillion in GDP) to deal with issues such as global supply chain vulnerabilities, China's predatory trade practices, and economic coercion in general. Such an approach would make a lot more sense than putting up trade barriers within such groupings and allowing China to play their members off one another. The United States should also be prepared to explore bilateral and regional trade agreements that would not only lower trade and investment barriers but also include enforceable standards on labor rights, state subsidies, and environmental protection. By boosting exports and making imports cheaper, such agreements would both contribute to an overall rise in U.S. living standards and generate revenues that could be used for worker transition assistance, training and "upskilling," and investments in local communities negatively affected by trade. Indeed, formally linking commitments to make such investments to the trade

deals themselves would boost domestic political support for these types of agreements.

The next administration must also recognize the American public's frustration with the burdens of global leadership and forever wars by exercising greater humility and discretion in the wielding of American military power—and allowing Congress to play its constitutional role. Most of the problems with the past order were not about global military engagement or presence but excess and overreach. The United States does need to deter China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia; it did not need to spend $4 trillion over 20 years and sacrifice countless lives to try to turn Afghanistan and Iraq into pro-American democracies. The United States did need to build and maintain a global coalition to help save Ukraine from occupation and reinforce the principle of nonaggression; it did not need to launch a unilateral war of choice to try to accomplish regime change in Iran when diplomatic alternatives were available. Of course, no administration can always exercise appropriate wisdom in the face of hard foreign policy challenges, but forgoing the capability to defend the international order is a recipe for disaster that Americans would come to regret.

STILL AT THE READY

Americans who are worried about the domestic political consequences of defending U.S. global leadership might admit that U.S. leadership makes sense substantively but is not politically viable because they are tired of the burdens it requires of them and the perceived lack of results. This is what Trump's second election was widely understood to suggest. Less than two years into his term, however, the results of his unilateral, transactional, and values-free policies are backfiring. He is the least popular president ever at this point in his tenure, and polls now show American support for alliances and international engagement at an all-time high. According to a Gallup poll conducted in early February 2026, 64 percent of Americans think the United States should play a major or leading role in solving international

problems, and the same percentage believes it's important for the United States to be the world's leading military superpower. An NPR/Ipsos poll from January 2026 found that 61 percent of Americans believe the United States should be the moral leader of the world (though only 39 percent believe it actually is). And a July 2025 Chicago Council on Global Affairs survey found that eight in ten Americans believe that international trade benefits the United States and free trade agreements effectively advance U.S. foreign policy goals. By the time Trump's presidency ends, in 2029, the case for supporting an updated vision of an American-led world order may be more compelling than it has been in years.

Critics might argue that too much damage will have been done for the United States's allies—having been "fooled twice"—to believe any new American commitments to global engagement, deterrence, institutions, or rules. In fact, even after all that has transpired since January 2025, or perhaps because of it, allies around the world would likely embrace a new form of U.S. leadership with open arms. It is Washington's adversaries who would not.

After World War II, American leaders also faced doubts about the country's role in the world, and the system they created in that war's aftermath was not preordained. After the Vietnam War and the 1970s Watergate scandal, many observers concluded that the United States no longer had the strength, will, or moral authority to play a healthy role on the world stage. In both cases, however, U.S. leaders understood that global peace, prosperity, and security required a powerful and active United States, committed to institutions, rules, and norms, and persuaded their compatriots to support it, with historically unprecedented results. As Americans consider their future role in the world, even as they focus on the need for change, they should keep that record in mind.