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A Superpower, Like It or Not

Why Americans Must Accept Their Global Role

By Robert Kagan

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All great powers have a deeply ingrained self-perception shaped by historical experience, geography, culture, beliefs, and myths. Many Chinese today yearn to recover the greatness of a time when they ruled unchallenged at the pinnacle of their civilization, before "the century of humiliation." Russians are nostalgic for Soviet days, when they were the other superpower and ruled from Poland to Vladivostok. Henry Kissinger once observed that Iranian leaders had to choose whether they wanted to be "a nation or a cause," but great powers and aspiring great powers often see themselves as both. Their self-perception shapes their definition of the national interest, of what constitutes genuine security and the actions and resources necessary to achieve it. Often, it is these self-perceptions that drive nations, empires, and city-states forward. And sometimes to their ruin. Much of the drama of the past century resulted from great powers whose aspirations exceeded their capacity.

Americans have the opposite problem. Their capacity for global power exceeds their perception of their proper place and role in the world. Even as they have met the challenges of Nazism and Japanese imperialism, Soviet communism, and radical Islamist terrorism, they have never regarded this global activism as normal. Even in the era of the Internet, long-range missiles, and an interdependent global economy, many Americans retain the psychology of a people living apart on a vast continent, untouched by the world's turmoil. Americans have never been isolationists. In times of emergency, they can be persuaded to support extraordinary exertions in far-off places. But they regard these as exceptional responses to exceptional circumstances. They do not see themselves as the primary defender of a certain kind of world order; they have never embraced that "indispensable" role.

As a result, Americans have often played it poorly. Their continental view of the world has produced a century of wild oscillations—indifference followed by panic, mobilization and intervention followed by retreat and retrenchment. That Americans refer to the relatively low-cost military involvements in Afghanistan and Iraq as "forever wars" is just the latest example of their intolerance for the messy and unending business of preserving a general peace and acting to forestall threats. In both cases, Americans had one foot out the door the moment they entered, which hampered their ability to gain

control of difficult situations.

This on-again, off-again approach has confused and misled allies and adversaries, often to the point of spurring conflicts that could have been avoided by a clear and steady application of American power and influence in the service of a peaceful, stable, and liberal world order. The twentieth century was littered with the carcasses of foreign leaders and governments that misjudged the United States, from Germany (twice) and Japan to the Soviet Union to Serbia to Iraq. If the twenty-first century is not to follow the same pattern—most dangerously, in the competition with China—then Americans will need to stop looking for the exits and accept the role that fate and their own power have thrust upon them. Perhaps after four years of President Donald Trump, Americans are ready for some straight talk.

OF TWO MINDS

Americans' preference for a limited international role is a product of their history and experience and of the myths they tell themselves. Other great powers aspire to recapture past glories. Americans have always yearned to recapture what they imagine as the innocence and limited ambition of their nation's youth. For the first decades of the new republic's existence, Americans struggled merely to survive as a weak republic in a world of superpower monarchies. They spent the nineteenth century in selfishness and self-absorption, conquering the continent and struggling over slavery. By the early twentieth century, the United States had become the richest and potentially most powerful country in the world, but one without commitments or responsibilities. It rose under the canopy of a benevolent world order it had no part in upholding. "Safe from attack, safe even from menace," the British historian James Bryce wrote of the United States in 1888, "she hears from afar the warring cries of European races and faiths, as the gods of Epicurus listened to the murmurs of the unhappy earth spread out beneath their golden dwellings." For the moment, Bryce wrote, "she sails upon a summer sea."

But then the world shifted, and Americans suddenly found themselves at the center of it. The old order upheld by the United Kingdom and made possible by a tenuous peace in Europe collapsed with the arrival of new powers. The rise of Germany destroyed the precarious equilibrium in Europe, and the Europeans proved unable to restore it. The concurrent rise of Japan and the United States put an end to more than a century of British naval hegemony. A global geopolitics replaced what had been a European-dominated order, and in this very different configuration of power, the United States was thrust into a new position. Only it could be both a Pacific and an Atlantic power. Only it, with weak neighbors to the north and south and vast oceans to the east and west, could send the bulk of its forces to fight in distant theaters for prolonged periods while its homeland remained unthreatened. Only it could afford to finance not only its own war efforts but also those of its allies, mustering the industrial capacity to produce ships, planes, tanks, and other materiel to arm itself while also serving as the arsenal for everyone else. Only it could do all of this without bankrupting itself but instead growing richer and more dominant with each major war. The United States, the British statesman Arthur Balfour observed, had become the "pivot" on which the rest of the

world turned or, in President Theodore Roosevelt's words, "the balance of power of the whole world."

The world had never known such a power—there was not the language to describe it or a theory to explain it. It was sui generis. The emergence of this unusual great power led to confusion and misjudgment. Nations that had spent centuries calculating the power relationships in their own regions were slow to appreciate the impact of this distant deus ex machina, which, after long periods of indifference and aloofness, could suddenly swoop in and transform the balance of power. Americans, too, had a hard time adjusting. The wealth and relative invulnerability that made them uniquely capable of fighting major wars and enforcing peace in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East simultaneously also made them question the necessity, desirability, and even morality of doing so. With the United States fundamentally secure and self-sufficient, why did it need to get involved in conflicts thousands of miles from its shores? And what right did it have?

The case for a policy aimed at creating and preserving a liberal world order was first made by Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson during World War I. With the United Kingdom and the other European powers no longer able to preserve order, they argued, and as the war demonstrated, it had fallen to the United States to create and defend a new liberal world order. This was the purpose of the "World League for the Peace of Righteousness," proposed by Roosevelt at the beginning of the war, and of the League of Nations, which Wilson eventually championed after it: to create a new peaceful order with American power at its center. Wilson believed it was the only feasible alternative to a resumption of the conflict and chaos that had devastated Europe. If Americans instead turned back to their "narrow, selfish, provincial purposes," he warned, the peace would collapse, Europe would again divide into "hostile camps," the world would again descend into "utter blackness," and the United States would again be dragged into war. The United States had an interest in a peaceful and predominantly liberal Europe, a peaceful Asia, and open and safe oceans on which Americans and their goods could travel safely. But such a world could not be built except around American power. Thus the United States had an interest in world order.

Such arguments met powerful opposition. The Republican senator Henry Cabot Lodge and other critics condemned Wilson's league as both unnecessary and a betrayal of the founders' vision. For the United States to concern itself with world order was to violate the basic principles that made it an exceptional, peace-loving nation in a world at war. Two decades later, as Americans debated whether to enter another world war, another Republican senator, Robert Taft, ridiculed the idea that the United States, which was perfectly safe from attack, should "range over the world, like a knight-errant, protecting democracy and ideals of good faith, and tilting, like Don Quixote, against the windmills of Fascism." President Franklin Roosevelt argued that even if the United States was not directly threatened by Nazi Germany or imperial Japan, a world in which those powerful dictatorships dominated their regions would be a "shabby and dangerous place to live in." It was only a matter of time before the dictatorships would gather themselves for a final assault on the remaining citadel of democracy, Roosevelt believed, but even before that moment came, the United States might become "a lone island" of democracy in a

world of dictators, and democracy itself might simply perish. But the opponents of American intervention in World War II worried as much about the consequences of winning as about the costs of intervening. They did not want their country to subordinate itself to the interests of European empires, but neither did they want it to replace those empires as the dominant world power. Citing Secretary of State John Quincy Adams, they warned that in becoming the "dictatress of the world," the United States would lose its soul.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor cut short the debate but left it unsettled. Roosevelt fought the war with his eye on the postwar order he hoped to create, but most Americans saw the war as an act of self-defense, perfectly consistent with a continental perspective. When it was over, they expected to come home.

When the United States did end up dominating the world after World War II, therefore, Americans suffered from a kind of cognitive dissonance. During the Cold War, they took on unheard-of global responsibilities, deploying troops in distant theaters by the hundreds of thousands and fighting two wars, in Korea and in Vietnam, that were 15 times as costly in terms of combat deaths as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq would be. They promoted an international free-trade regime that sometimes enriched others more than themselves. They intervened economically, politically, diplomatically, and militarily in every corner of the world. And whether or not they were conscious of it, they did create a liberal world order, a relatively peaceful international environment that in turn made possible an explosion of global prosperity and a historically unprecedented spread of democratic government.

That was the conscious aim of Roosevelt during World War II and of his successors in the Truman administration. They believed that a world order based on liberal political and economic principles was the only antidote to the anarchy of the 1930s. For such an order to exist, the United States could not "sit in the parlor with a shotgun, waiting," argued Dean Acheson, President Harry Truman's secretary of state. It had to be out in the world actively shaping it, deterring some powers and bolstering others. It had to create "situations of strength" at critical nodes, spreading stability, prosperity, and democracy, especially in the world's core industrial regions of Europe and Asia. The United States had to be "the locomotive at the head of mankind," Acheson said, pulling the world along with it.

AMERICA ADRIFT

Yet even as they created this order, few Americans ever understood world order as the goal. For most, it was the threat of communism that justified these extraordinary exertions, that justified the establishment of NATO and the defense of Japan, Korea, and, ultimately, Vietnam. Resisting communism became synonymous with the national interest, for communism was perceived as a threat to the American way of life. When Americans balked at supporting Greece and Turkey in 1947, the Republican senator Arthur Vandenberg told Truman administration officials to "scare hell out of the American people," and Acheson saw the expediency of making things, as he admitted in

his memoirs, “clearer than truth.” With communism as the sole enemy, everything mattered. Every act was as an act of defense.

When the Cold War ended, therefore, the disjunction between Americans’ actual role and Americans’ self-perception became untenable. Without the global threat of communism, Americans wondered what the purpose of their foreign policy should be. What was the point of having a globe-girdling security system, a hegemonic navy, far-flung alliances with dozens of nations, and an international free-trade regime?

The rebellion began immediately. When the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990, President George H. W. Bush initially made the case for driving him out on world-order grounds. “A world in which brutality and lawlessness are allowed to go unchecked isn’t the kind of world we’re going to want to live in,” Bush said in a televised address from the Oval Office, quoting the general who was commanding the U.S. marines fighting Saddam’s forces. But when realists and conservatives criticized Bush’s vision of a “new world order” as overly ambitious and idealistic, the administration fell back on the kind of narrow, continental rationale Americans could supposedly better understand—“jobs, jobs, jobs,” was how Secretary of State James Baker explained what the Gulf War was about. When President Bill Clinton intervened twice in the Balkans and then expanded NATO, it was in defense of world order, both to stamp out ethnic cleansing in Europe and to prove the United States’ continuing commitment to what Bush had called “a Europe whole and free.” Clinton, too, was attacked by realists—for engaging in “international social work.”

Then came President George W. Bush. The second war with Iraq was also aimed primarily at preserving world order—to rid the Middle East and the Persian Gulf of a serial aggressor who fancied himself the new Saladin. But the 9/11 attacks had caused world-order objectives to again become confused with continental defense, even for the war’s advocates. When the intelligence on Saddam’s weapons programs proved mistaken, many Americans felt that they had been lied to about the direct threat Iraq posed to the United States. President Barack Obama rode to power in part on the angry disillusionment that still shapes American attitudes today. Ironically, in accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, Obama observed that American willingness to “underwrite global security” had brought stability to the postwar world and that this was in the United States’ “enlightened self-interest.” Yet it quickly became clear that Americans were more interested in nation building at home. In the end, Obama’s realism, like Taft’s, consisted of accepting “the world as it is,” not as advocates of world order might wish it to be.

In 1990, the former U.S. ambassador to the UN Jeane Kirkpatrick argued that the United States should return to being a “normal” nation with normal interests, give up the “dubious benefits of superpower status,” end the “unnatural focus” on foreign policy, and pursue its national interests as “conventionally conceived.” That meant protecting its citizens, its territory, its wealth, and its access to “necessary” goods. It did not mean preserving the balance of power in Europe or Asia, promoting democracy, or taking responsibility for problems in the world that did not touch Americans directly. This is the continental perspective that still reigns today. It does not deny that the United States

has interests, but it proposes that they are merely the interests that all nations have.

The problem is that the United States has not been a normal nation for over a century, nor has it had normal interests. Its unique power gives it a unique role. Bangladeshis and Bolivians also have an interest in global stability, after all, and they might suffer if another Germany came to dominate Europe or if another Japan came to dominate Asia. But no one would suggest that it was in their national interest to prevent that from happening, because they lack the capacity to do so, just as the United States lacked the capacity in 1798, when it was most threatened by the prospect of a European hegemon. World order became the United States' concern when the old world order collapsed in the early twentieth century and the country became the only power capable of establishing a new one in which its interests could be protected.

That is still the case today, and yet, even more than in Kirkpatrick's time, continentalism remains the dominant perspective. It informs the language Americans use to talk about foreign policy and the theoretical paradigms by which they understand such concepts as national interest and security. It also remains suffused with moralism. Calls for "restraint" still recite the founders' wisdom and declaim its betrayal as acts of hubris, messianism, and imperialism. Many internationalists still believe that what they regard as the unwarranted exercise of American power is the greatest obstacle to a better and more just world. The mixed results of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are not merely errors of judgment and execution but black marks on the American soul.

Americans still yearn to escape to a more innocent and simpler past. To a degree they probably don't recognize, they yearn to have less power. Realists have long understood that as long as the United States is so powerful, it will be hard to avoid what the political scientists Robert Tucker and David Hendrickson once called "the imperial temptation." That is one reason why realists have always insisted that American power is in decline or simply not up to the task. The columnist Walter Lippmann and the diplomat George Kennan made that argument in the late 1940s, as did Kissinger in the late 1960s and the historian Paul Kennedy in the 1980s, and many realists still make it today. Realists treat every unsuccessful war, from Vietnam to Iraq, as if it were the equivalent of the Sicilian expedition, the final act of folly that led to Athens's defeat in the war against Sparta in the fifth century BC. An entire generation of Americans has grown up believing that the lack of clear-cut victories in Afghanistan and Iraq proves that their country can no longer accomplish anything with power. The rise of China, the United States' declining share of the global economy, the advance of new military technologies, and a general diffusion of power around the world—all have signaled the twilight, once again, of the American order.

Yet if the United States were as weak as so many people claim, it wouldn't have to practice restraint. It is precisely because the country is still capable of pursuing a world-order strategy that critics need to explain why it should not. The fact is that the basic configuration of international power has not changed as much as many imagine. The earth is still round; the United States still sits on its vast, isolated continent, surrounded by oceans and weaker powers; the other great powers still live in regions crowded with

other great powers; and when one power in those regions grows too strong for the others to balance against, the would-be victims still look to the distant United States for help.

Although Russia possesses a huge nuclear arsenal, it is even more an "Upper Volta with rockets" today than when that wisecrack was coined, in the early Cold War. The Soviets at least controlled half of Europe. China has taken the place of Japan, stronger in terms of wealth and population but with unproven military capabilities and a much less favorable strategic position. When imperial Japan expanded in the 1930s, it faced no formidable regional competitors, and the Western powers were preoccupied with the German threat. Today, Asia is crowded with other great powers, including three whose militaries are among the top ten in the world—India, Japan, and South Korea—all of which are either allies or partners of the United States. Should Beijing, believing in Washington's weakness, use its own growing power to try to alter the East Asian strategic situation, it might have to cope not only with the United States but also with a global coalition of advanced industrial nations, much as the Soviets discovered.

The Trump years were a stress test for the American world order, and the order, remarkably, passed. Confronted by the nightmare of a rogue superpower tearing up trade and other agreements, U.S. allies appeased and cajoled, bringing offerings to the angry volcano and waiting hopefully for better times. Adversaries also trod carefully. When Trump ordered the killing of the Iranian commander Qasem Soleimani, it was reasonable to expect Iran to retaliate, and it may still, but not with Trump as president. The Chinese suffered through a long tariff war that hurt them more than it hurt the United States, but they tried to avoid a complete breakdown of the economic relationship on which they depend. Obama worried that providing offensive weapons to Ukraine could lead to war with Russia, but when the Trump administration went ahead with the weapons deliveries, Moscow acquiesced with barely a murmur. Many of Trump's policies were erratic and ill conceived, but they did show how much excess, unused power the United States has, if a president chooses to deploy it. In the Obama years, officials measured 50 times before deciding not to cut, ever fearful that other powers would escalate a confrontation. In the Trump years, it was other countries that worried about where a confrontation with the United States might lead.

GREAT POWER, GREAT RESPONSIBILITY

The United States is "lazily playing with a fraction of her immeasurable strength"—so the British historian Arnold Toynbee commented somewhat ruefully in the early 1930s. At the time, U.S. defense spending was between two and three percent of GDP. Today, it is a little over three percent. In the 1950s, during the Eisenhower administration—often seen as a time of admirable restraint in U.S. foreign policy—the United States had almost one million troops deployed overseas, out of a total American population of 170 million. Today, in an era when the United States is said to be dangerously overextended, there are roughly 200,000 U.S. troops deployed overseas, out of a population of 330 million. Setting aside whether this constitutes "lazily playing with a fraction" of American strength, it is important to recognize that the United States is now in peace mode. Were Americans to shift to a war footing, or even a Cold War–type footing, in

response to some Chinese action—for instance, an attack on Taiwan—the United States would look like a very different animal.

At the height of the late Cold War, under President Ronald Reagan, the United States spent six percent of GDP on defense, and its arms industry produced weapons in such quantity and of such quality that the Soviets simply could not keep up. The Chinese could find themselves in a similar predicament. They might "run wild for the first six months or a year," as Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, the commander of the Japanese fleet during World War II, predicted about his own forces. But in the long run, as he also warned, against a provoked America and its allies, they might well meet the same fate as other U.S. rivals.

The question is not whether the United States is still capable of prevailing in a global confrontation, either hot or cold, with China or any other revisionist power. It is. The real question is whether the worst kinds of hostilities can be avoided, whether China and other powers can be encouraged to pursue their aims peacefully, to confine the global competition to the economic and political realms and thus spare themselves and the world from the horrors of the next great war or even the still frightening confrontations of another cold war.

The United States cannot avoid such crises by continuing to adhere to a nineteenth-century view of its national interest. Doing that would produce what it produced in the past: periods of indifference and retrenchment followed by panic, fear, and sudden mobilization. Already, Americans are torn between these two impulses. On the one hand, China now occupies that place in the American mind that Germany and the Soviet Union once held: an ideological opponent that has the ability to strike at American society directly and that has power and ambitions that threaten the United States' position in a key region and perhaps everywhere else, too. On the other hand, many Americans believe that the United States is in decline and that China will inevitably come to dominate Asia. Indeed, the self-perceptions of the Americans and the Chinese are perfectly symmetrical. The Chinese think that the United States' role in their region for the past 75 years has been unnatural and is therefore transient, and so do the Americans. The Chinese believe that the United States is in decline, and so do many Americans. The danger is that as Beijing ramps up efforts to fulfill what it has taken to calling "the Chinese dream," Americans will start to panic. It is in times like this that miscalculations are made.

Perhaps the Chinese, careful students of history that they are, will not make the mistake that others have made in misjudging the United States. Whether Americans have learned the lessons of their own history, however, remains to be seen. A century-long pattern of oscillation will be difficult to change. It will be especially so when foreign policy experts of all stripes regard support for a liberal world order as impossible and immoral. Among other problems, their prescriptions suffer from an unwarranted optimism about the likely alternatives to a U.S.-led order. Realists, liberal internationalists, conservative nationalists, and progressives all seem to imagine that without Washington playing the role it has played these past 75 years, the world will be

just fine, and U.S. interests will be just as well protected. But neither recent history nor present circumstances justify such idealism. The alternative to the American world order is not a Swedish world order. It will not be a world of law and international institutions or the triumph of Enlightenment ideals or the end of history. It will be a world of power vacuums, chaos, conflict, and miscalculation—a shabby place indeed.

The messy truth is that in the real world, the only hope for preserving liberalism at home and abroad is the maintenance of a world order conducive to liberalism, and the only power capable of upholding such an order is the United States. This is not an expression of hubris but a reality rooted in international circumstances. And it is certainly a mixed blessing. In trying to preserve this order, the United States has wielded and will wield power, sometimes unwisely and ineffectively, with unpredictable costs and morally ambiguous consequences. That is what wielding power means. Americans have naturally sought to escape this burden. They have sought to divest themselves of responsibility, hiding sometimes behind dreamy internationalism, sometimes behind a determined resignation to accept the world "as it is," and always with the view that absent a clear and present danger, they can hang back in their imaginary fortress.

The time has come to tell Americans that there is no escape from global responsibility, that they have to think beyond the protection of the homeland. They need to understand that the purpose of NATO and other alliances is to defend not against direct threats to U.S. interests but against a breakdown of the order that best serves those interests. They need to be told honestly that the task of maintaining a world order is unending and fraught with costs but preferable to the alternative. A failure to be square with the American people has led the country to its current predicament, with a confused and angry public convinced that its leaders are betraying American interests for their own nefarious, "globalist" purposes. The antidote to this is not scaring the hell out of them about China and other threats but trying to explain, again, why the world order they created still matters. This is a job for Joe Biden and his new administration.

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