

Why American Power Endures The U.S.-Led Order Isn't in Decline

By [G. John Ikenberry](#) - Foreign Affairs [November/December 2022](#)

For over a century, people around the world have lived through an American era: a period dominated by U.S. power, wealth, institutions, ideas, alliances, and partnerships. But many now believe this long epoch is drawing to a close. The U.S.-led world, they insist, is giving way to something new—a post-American, post-Western, postliberal order marked by great-power competition and the economic and geopolitical ascendance of China.

Some greet this prospect with joy, others with sorrow. But the storyline is the same. The United States is slowly losing its commanding position in the global distribution of power. The East now rivals the West in economic might and geopolitical heft, and countries in the global South are growing quickly and taking a larger role on the international stage. As others shine, the United States has lost its luster. Divided and beleaguered, melancholy Americans suspect that the country's best days are behind it. Liberal societies everywhere are struggling. Nationalism and populism undercut the internationalism that once backed the United States' global leadership. Sensing blood in the water, China and Russia have rushed forward to aggressively challenge U.S. hegemony, liberalism, and democracy. In February 2022, Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin issued a joint declaration of principles for a “new era” when the United States does not lead the world: a shot across the bow of a sinking American ship.

But in truth, the United States is not foundering. The stark narrative of decline ignores deeper world-historical influences and circumstances that will continue to make the United States the dominant presence and organizer of world politics in the twenty-first century. To be sure, no one knows the future, and no one owns it. The coming world order will be shaped by complex, shifting, and difficult-to-grasp political forces and by choices made by people living in all parts of the world. Nonetheless, the deep sources of American power and influence in the world persist. Indeed, with the rise of the brazen illiberalism of China and Russia, these distinctive traits and capacities have come more clearly into view.

The mistake made by prophets of American decline is to see the United States and its liberal order as just another empire on the wane. The wheel of history turns, empires come and go—and now, they suggest, it is time for the United States to fade into senescence. Yes, the United States has at times resembled an old-style empire. But its role in the world rests on much more than its past imperial behavior; U.S. power draws not only on brute strength but also on ideas, institutions, and values that are complexly woven into the fabric of modernity. The global order the United States has built since the end of World War II is best seen not as an empire but as a world

system, a sprawling multifaceted political formation, rich in vicissitudes, that creates opportunity for people across the planet.

This world system whirred into action most recently in the global reaction to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The struggle between the United States and its rivals China and Russia is a contest between two alternative logics of world order. The United States defends an international order it has led for three-quarters of a century—one that is open, multilateral, and anchored in security pacts and partnerships with other liberal democracies. China and Russia seek an international order that dethrones Western liberal values—one that is more hospitable to regional blocs, spheres of influence, and autocracy. The United States upholds an international order that protects and advances the interests of liberal democracy. China and Russia, each in its own way, hope to build an international order that protects authoritarian rule from the threatening forces of liberal modernity. The United States offers the world a vision of a postimperial global system. The current leaders of Russia and China increasingly craft foreign policies rooted in imperial nostalgia.

This struggle between liberal and illiberal world orders is an echo of the great contests of the twentieth century. In key earlier moments—after the conclusions of World War I, World War II, and the Cold War—the United States advanced a progressive agenda for world order. Its success rested somewhat on the blunt fact of American power, the country's unrivaled economic, technological, and military capacities. The United States will remain at the center of the world system in part because of these material capabilities and its role as a pivot in the global balance of power. But the United States continues to matter for another reason: the appeal of its ideas, institutions, and capacities for building partnerships and alliances makes it an indispensable force in the years ahead. This has always been, and can remain, the secret of its power and influence.

The United States, despite repeated announcements of its demise as a world leader, has not truly declined. It has built a distinctive type of order in which it plays an integral role. And in the face of threatening illiberal rivals, that order remains widely in demand. The reason the United States does not decline is because large constituencies within the existing order have a stake in the United States remaining active and involved in maintaining that order. Even if U.S. material power diminishes relative to, say, China's growing capabilities, the order the United States has built continues to reinforce its power and leadership. Power can create order, but the order over which Washington presides can also buttress American power.

Like an onion, the United States' liberal internationalist order has several layers. At the outer layer are its liberal internationalist ideas and projects, through which the United States has provided the world a "third way" between the anarchy of states furiously competing with each other and the overweening hierarchy of imperial systems—an arrangement that has delivered more gains for more people than any

prior alternative. Beneath the surface, the United States has benefited from its geography and its unique trajectory of political development. It stands oceans apart from the other great powers, its landmass faces both Asia and Europe, and it accrues influence by playing a unique role as a global power balancer. Adding to this, the United States has had critical opportunities following major conflicts in the twentieth century to build coalitions of like-minded states that shape and entrench global rules and institutions. As the current crisis in Ukraine shows, this ability to mobilize coalitions of democracies remains one of the United States' essential assets. Beneath the realm of government and diplomacy, the United States' domestic civil society—enriched by its multiracial and multicultural immigrant base—connects the country to the world in networks of influence unavailable to China, Russia, and other powers. Finally, at the core, one of the United States' greatest strengths is its capacity to fail; as a liberal society, it can acknowledge its vulnerabilities and errors and seek to improve, a distinct advantage over its illiberal rivals in confronting crises and setbacks.

No other state has enjoyed such a comprehensive set of advantages in dealing with other countries. This is the reason that the United States has had such staying power for so long, despite periodic failures and disappointments. In today's contest over world order, the United States should draw upon these advantages and its long history of building liberal order to again offer the world a global vision of an open and rules-based system in which people can work freely together to advance the human condition.

AMERICA'S THIRD WAY

For over a century, the United States has been the champion of a kind of order distinct from previous international orders. Washington's liberal internationalism represents a "third way" between anarchy (orders premised on the balance of power between competing states) and hierarchy (orders that rest on the dominance of imperial powers). After World War II and again after the end of the Cold War, liberal internationalism came to dominate and define the modern logic of international relations through the construction of institutions such as the United Nations and alliances such as NATO. People across the world have connected to and built on these intergovernmental platforms to advance their interests. If China and Russia seek to usher in a new world order, they will need to offer something better—an onerous task indeed.

The first generation of liberal internationalists in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century were heirs to an Enlightenment vision, a belief that through reason, science, and measured self-interest, societies could build political orders that improved the human condition. They imagined that institutions and political orders could be devised to protect and advance liberal democracy. International order can be a forum not just for waging war and seeking security but also for collective problem

solving. Liberal internationalists believed in peaceful change because they assumed that international society is, as Woodrow Wilson argued, “corrigible.” States could tame factious, belligerent power politics and build stable relations around the pursuit of mutual gains.

The essential goal of liberal order building has not changed: the creation of a cooperative ecosystem in which states, starting with liberal democracies, manage their mutual economic and security relations, balance their often conflicting values, and protect the rights and liberties of their citizens. The idea of building international order around rules and institutions is not unique to the United States, Western liberals, or the modern era. But U.S. order building is unique in putting these ideas at the center of the country’s efforts. What the United States has had to offer is a set of solutions to the most basic problems of international relations—namely, the problems of anarchy, hierarchy, and interdependence.

The prophets of American decline are wrong.

Realist thinkers claim that states exist in a fundamental condition of anarchy that sets limits on the possibilities for cooperation. No political authority exists above the state to enforce order or govern relations, and so states must fend for themselves. Liberal internationalists do not deny that states pursue their own interests, often through competitive means, but they believe that the anarchy of that competition can be limited. States, starting with liberal democracies, can use institutions as building blocks for cooperation and for the pursuit of joint gains. The twentieth century offers dramatic evidence of these sorts of liberal ordering arrangements. After World War II, in the shadow of the Cold War, the United States and its allies and partners established a complex and sprawling system of institutions that persist today, exemplified by the United Nations, the Bretton Woods institutions, and multilateral regimes in diverse areas of trade, development, public health, the environment, and human rights. Grand shifts in the global distribution of power have occurred in the decades since 1945, but cooperation remains a core feature of the global system.

The problems of hierarchy are the mirror opposite of the problems of anarchy. Hierarchy is political order maintained by the dominance of a leading state, and at the extreme, it is manifest as empire. The leading state worries about how it can stay on top, gain the cooperation of others, and exercise legitimate authority in shaping world politics. Weaker states and societies worry about being dominated, and they want to mitigate their disadvantages and the vulnerabilities of being powerless. In such circumstances, liberal internationalists argue that rules and institutions can simultaneously be protections for the weak and tools for the powerful. In a liberal order, the leading state consents to acting within an agreed-upon set of multilateral rules and institutions and not use its power to coerce other states. Rules and institutions allow it to signal restraint and commitment to weaker states that may fear its power. Weaker states also gain from this institutional bargain because it reduces

the worst abuses of power that the hegemonic state might inflict on them, and it gives them some voice in how the order operates.

Unique in world history, the U.S.-led order that emerged after 1945 followed this logic. It is a hierarchical order with liberal characteristics. The United States has used its commanding position as the world's leading economic and military power to provide the public goods of security protection, market openness, and sponsorship of rules and institutions. It has tied itself to allies and partners through alliances and multilateral organizations. In return, it invites participation and compliance by other states, starting with the subsystem of liberal democracies mostly in East Asia, Europe, and Oceania. The United States has frequently violated this bargain; the Iraq War is a particularly bitter and disastrous example of the United States undermining the very order it has built. The United States has used its privileged perch to bend multilateral rules in its favor and to act unilaterally for parochial economic and political gains. But despite such behavior, the overall logic of the order gives many countries around the world, particularly liberal democracies, incentives to join with rather than balance against the United States.

The problems of interdependence arise from the dangers and vulnerabilities that countries face as they become more entangled with each other. Starting in the nineteenth century, liberal democracies have responded to the opportunities and dangers of economic, security, and environmental interdependence by building an international infrastructure of rules and institutions to facilitate flows and transactions across borders. As global interdependence grows, so, too, does the need for the multilateral coordination of policies. Coordinating policies does entail some restrictions on national autonomy, but the gains from coordination increasingly outweigh these costs as interdependence intensifies. U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt made this case in his appeal to the delegates grappling with postwar financial and monetary issues at the Bretton Woods conference in July 1944. Great gains could be obtained from trade and investment across borders, but domestic economies had to be protected from destabilizing economic actions taken by irresponsible governments. Such logic is in wide application today within the U.S.-led liberal order.

In each of these areas, the United States sits at the center of a liberal system of order that offers institutional solutions to the most basic problems of world politics. The United States has been an imperfect champion of these efforts to shape the operating environment of international relations. Indeed, a great deal of the criticism directed at the United States as a global leader stems from the perception that it has not done enough to move the world in this “third way” direction and that the order it presides over is too hierarchical. But that is precisely the point—if the world is to organize itself to address the problems of the twenty-first century, it will need to build on, not reject, this U.S.-led system. And if the world is to avoid the extremes of anarchy and hierarchy, it will need more, not less, liberal internationalism. China and Russia have

themselves benefited from this system, and their reactionary vision of a post-American order looks more like a step backward than a step forward.

THE ANTI-IMPERIAL EMPIRE

The United States is a world power like no other before it, a peculiarity that owes much to the idiosyncratic nature of its rise. It alone among the great powers was born in the New World. Unlike the United States, the other great powers, including China and Russia, find themselves in crowded geopolitical neighborhoods, struggling for hegemonic space. From the very beginning of its career as a great power, the United States has existed far from its main rivals, and it has repeatedly found itself confronting dangerous and often violent efforts by the other great powers to expand their empires and regional spheres of influence. These circumstances have shaped the United States' institutions, its way of thinking about international order, and its capacities for projecting power and [influence](#).

Distance from other powers has long given the United States space to build a modern republican-style regime. The Founding Fathers were quite conscious of this uniqueness. With the European powers an ocean away, the American experiment in republican government could be safeguarded from foreign encroachments. In *The Federalist Papers*, Alexander Hamilton argued that the United Kingdom owed its relatively liberal institutions to its location. "If Britain had been situated on the continent, and had been compelled . . . to make her military establishments at home co-extensive with the other great powers of Europe, she, like them, would in all probability be at this day a victim to the absolute power of a single man." The United States was similarly lucky. Its European counterparts had to develop the robust state capacities to swiftly mobilize and command soldiers and materiel to wage the continent's endless wars; the United States did not. Instead, it began as a fragile attempt to build a state that was institutionally weak and divided—by design—to prevent the rise of autocracy at home. The United States' isolation gave it the opportunity to succeed.

More prosaically, the vast natural resources of the continent gave the United States the capacity to grow. By the turn of the twentieth century, the United States had joined the world of the great powers, a peer of its European counterparts. But it had become powerful at great remove, unimpeded by the acts of counterbalancing so frequently evident in the relations between rival powers in Europe and East Asia.

The United States' sheltered experiment in republican rule invariably shaped its thinking about international order. One of the oldest worries in the liberal-republican tradition, noted by theorists across the ancient and modern eras, is the pernicious impact that war, power politics, and imperialism have on liberal institutions. Historically, republics have been vulnerable to the illiberal imperatives and impulses generated by war and geopolitical competition. Warfare and imperial expansion can

lead to the militarization and regimentation of a society, opening the door to the “garrison state” and turning a would-be Athens into a Sparta. The cause of protecting national independence curtails liberties. Indeed, the American founders argued for union among the colonies by insisting that if left unbound, the postcolonial states would fear each other and militarize their societies.

This concern, of course, did not stop the United States from joining the world of great powers or from ultimately becoming the world’s largest military power. Nonetheless, this republican worry kept alive the liberal internationalist notion, dating back to Immanuel Kant and other Enlightenment thinkers, that societies can protect their way of life best by working together and creating zones of peace that push tyrannical and despotic states to the periphery.

Such an orientation helped shape the United States’ response to the geopolitical circumstances it faced as a rising great power in the early twentieth century in a world dominated by empires. The United States, for a time, was itself engaged in empire building in the Caribbean and the Pacific, in part to compete with its peers. Indeed, every one of the United States’ great-power peers during this era was pursuing empire in one way or another. This global system of empire reached its zenith in the late 1930s when Nazi Germany and imperial Japan embarked on wars of territorial aggression. Add to that the Soviet Union and the far-flung British Empire, and the future appeared as one in which the world would be permanently divided into blocs, spheres, and imperial zones.

In this bleak mid-twentieth-century setting, the United States was forced to contemplate what kind of order it wanted to bring into existence. The question that U.S. strategists grappled with, particularly during World War II, was whether the United States could operate as a great power in a world carved up by empires. If vast stretches of Eurasia were dominated by imperial blocs, could the United States be a great power while operating only within the Western Hemisphere? No, policymakers and analysts agreed, it could not. To be a global power, the United States would need to have access to markets and resources in all corners of the world. Economic and security imperatives, as much as lofty principles, drove this judgment. U.S. interests and ambitions pointed not to a world where the United States would simply join the other great powers in running an empire but to one where empires would be swept away and all regions would be opened up to multilateral access.

In this way, the United States was unique among its peers in using its power and position to undermine the imperial world system. It made alliances and bargains with imperial states at various moments and launched a short-lived career of empire at the turn of the twentieth century in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War. But the dominant impulse of U.S. strategy across these decades was to seek a postimperial system of great power relations, to build an international order that would be open, friendly, and stable: open in the sense that trade and exchange were possible across

regions; friendly in the sense that none of these regions would be dominated by a rival illiberal great power that sought to close off its sphere of influence to the outside world; and stable in the sense that this postimperial order would be anchored in a set of multilateral rules and institutions that would give it some broad legitimacy, the capacity to adapt to change, and the staying power to persist well into the future.

The United States' geographic position and rise to power in a world of empires provided the setting for a distinctive strategy of order building. Its comparative advantage was its offshore location and its capacity for forging alliances and partnerships to undercut bids for dominance by autocratic, fascist, and authoritarian great powers in East Asia and Europe. Many countries in those regions now worry more about being abandoned by the United States than being dominated by it. As a result, alliances with fixed assets, such as military bases and forward troop deployments, provide partners with not just security but also greater certainty about U.S. commitment. This confluence of geographic circumstances and liberal political traits gives the United States a unique ability to work with other states. The United States has over 60 security partnerships in all regions of the world, while China has only a scattering of security relationships with Djibouti, North Korea, and a few other countries.

Collective power

The merits of the U.S.-led order don't just lie in what Washington made but in how it brought this order into being. The United States did not become a great power through conquest. Rather, it stepped opportunistically into geopolitical vacuums created at the ends of major wars to shape the peace. These moments occurred after the two world wars and the Cold War, when upheavals in great power relations left the global system and the old world of empires in tatters. At these junctures, the United States demonstrated the ability to build coalitions of states to hammer out the new terms of world order. During the twentieth century, this settlement-oriented, coalitional approach to order building overwhelmed the aggressive efforts of rival illiberal great powers to shape the future. The United States worked with other democracies to produce favorable geopolitical outcomes. This method of leadership continues to give the United States an edge in shaping the terms of world order today.

At three pivotal moments during the last century—after the end of World War I, again in the wake of World War II, and after the collapse of the Soviet Union—the United States found itself on the winning side of major conflicts. The old order was in ruins, and something new had to be built. In each case, Washington aimed to do more than merely restore the balance of power. The United States saw itself in a struggle with illiberal great-power aggressors, contesting world order principles and defending the liberal democratic way of life. In each case, the mobilization for war and great-power competition was framed as a contest of ideas and visions. U.S. leaders sent a message to their citizens: if you pay the price and bear the burdens of

this struggle, we will endeavor to build a better United States—and a more hospitable world order. The United States sought to better organize the world when the world itself was turned upside down.

The world cannot afford the end of the American era.

The United States chose to exercise its power in these crucial moments by working with other democracies. In 1919, 1945, and 1989, the United States was the leading member of a coalition of states (the Allies, the United Nations, the “free world,” respectively) that won the war and negotiated the terms of the subsequent peace. The United States provided leadership and material power that turned the tide in each war. U.S. officials emphasized the importance of building and strengthening the coalition of liberal democracies. A slew of U.S. presidents, including Wilson, Roosevelt, Harry Truman, and George H. W. Bush, argued that the country’s survival and well-being had to be premised on building and maintaining a critical mass of similarly disposed partners and allies.

In a world of despotic, hostile, and powerful rivals, the United States and other liberal democracies have repeatedly concluded that they are safer working as a group than alone. As Roosevelt put it in January 1944, “We have joined with like-minded people in order to defend ourselves in a world that has been gravely threatened by gangster rule.” Of course, liberal states have always been willing to ally with nondemocracies within larger coalitions. During the Cold War and again today, the United States has allied itself and partnered with authoritarian client states around the world. Nonetheless, in these eras, the core impulse has been to build U.S. grand strategy around a dynamic core of liberal states in East Asia, Europe, North America, and Oceania.

Democratic solidarity also creates a setting for generating progressive ideas and attracting global support. Collective security (defined by Wilson in his Fourteen Points speech as “mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike”), the Four Freedoms (Roosevelt’s goals for postwar order: freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear), and the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights, for instance, are all grand ideas forged out of great-power contests. The world order contest underway between the United States and its autocratic rivals China and Russia offers a new opportunity to advance liberal democratic principles around the world.

AT HOME IN THE WORLD

The [United States](#) is not just a unique great power, it is also a unique kind of society. Unlike its great-power rivals, the United States is a country of immigrants, multicultural and multiracial, or what the historian Frank Ninkovich has called a “global republic.” The world has come to the United States, and as a result, the

United States is profoundly connected to all regions of the world through family, ethnic, and cultural ties. These complex and far-reaching ties, operating outside the realm of government and diplomacy, make the United States relevant and engaged across the world. The United States is more knowledgeable about the outside world, and the outside world has a greater stake in what happens in the United States.

The immigrant tradition in the United States has also paid dividends in building the country's human capital base. Without this immigrant culture, the United States would be less affluent and distinguished in the leading fields of knowledge, including medicine, science, technology, commerce, and the arts. Of the 104 Americans who have been awarded Nobel Prizes in chemistry, medicine, and physics since 2000, 40 have been immigrants. Chinese students want to come to the United States for their university education; foreign students do not flock to Chinese universities at similar rates.

Just as the diversity of its population links it to the world, so, too, does the United States' welter of civil society groups build an influential globe-spanning network. In the past century, U.S. civil society has increasingly become part of an expansive global civil society. This sprawling transnational civil society is an often overlooked source of American influence, fostering cooperation and solidarity across the liberal democratic world. China and Russia have their own political networks and diaspora communities, but global civil society tends to reinforce liberal principles, amplifying the United States' centrality in global confrontations over world order.

Civil society comes in many guises, including nongovernmental organizations, universities, think tanks, professional associations, media organizations, philanthropies, and social and religious groups. In recent decades, civil society groups have proliferated and spread across the world. The most salient of these groups engage in transnational advocacy, focused on causes such as the environment, human rights, humanitarian assistance, the protection of minorities, citizenship education, and so forth. In fact, these activist groups are at least partially creatures of the postwar liberal international order. Operating in and around the United Nations and other global institutions, civil society groups have seized on the idealistic principles and norms espoused by liberal states—and endeavor to hold those states to account.

Global civic activism often targets Western governments, but with its focus on human rights and civic freedoms, autocratic and authoritarian governments find themselves most under pressure. By definition, civil society groups seek to function outside the reach of the state. Not surprisingly, both China and Russia have cracked down on the activities of international civil society groups within their borders. Under Putin, Russia has sought to extend state control over civil society, discrediting foreign-funded groups and using government tools to [weaken](#) civic actors and promote pro-government organizations. China has also acted aggressively to restrict the activities

of civic groups and to crack down on democracy activists in Hong Kong. At the UN, China has used its membership on the Human Rights Council to block and weaken the role of NGO advocacy groups. Global civil society tends to stimulate reform within liberal democracies while threatening autocratic and authoritarian regimes.

A multicultural immigrant society is more complex and potentially unstable than more homogeneous societies such as China. But China is home to a number of ethnic and religious minorities, and despite the country's putative communist commitment to egalitarianism and equality, such minorities suffer intense discrimination and repression. Even though the United States must work harder than China to be a stable and integrated society, the upside of its diversity is enormous in terms of creativity, collaboration, knowledge creation, and the attraction of the world's talent. It is hard to imagine China, with a shrunken civil society that is closed to the world, as a future center of global order.

WORK IN PROGRESS

Given the country's recent domestic convulsions, these exhortations for the centrality of the United States in the coming century might seem odd. Today, the United States looks more beset with problems than at any time since the 1930s. Amid the polarization and dysfunction that plague American [society](#), it is easy to offer a narrative of U.S. decline. But what keeps the United States afloat, despite its travails, is its progressive impulses. It is the idea of the United States more than the country itself that has stirred the world over the last century. The country's liberal ideals have inspired leaders of liberation movements elsewhere, from Mahatma Gandhi in India to Vaclav Havel in Czechoslovakia and Nelson Mandela in South Africa. Young people in Hong Kong protesting against the Chinese government have routinely waved U.S. flags. No other state aspiring to world power, including China, has advanced a more appealing vision of a society in which free individuals consent to their political institutions than has the United States.

The story that the United States presents to the world is one of an ongoing enterprise to confront and overcome painful impediments to a "more perfect union," starting with its original sin of slavery. The United States is a constant work in progress. People around the world held their breath when Americans voted in the 2020 presidential election and again during the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol by supporters of President Donald Trump. The global stakes of these moments were profound.

The United States is uniquely a global republic.

By contrast, in 2018, when [Xi](#) overturned the Chinese Communist Party's long-standing rules and laid the groundwork to make him, in effect, dictator for life, the world simply shrugged. People across many parts of the world seem to expect more

of the United States than they do of China, invariably measuring U.S. actions against the standard of avowed American principles and ideals. As the political scientist Samuel Huntington once observed: “America is not a lie, it is a disappointment. But it can be a disappointment only because it is also a hope.”

What will keep the United States at the center of world politics is its capacity to do better. The country has never fully lived up to its liberal ideals, and when it commends these ideals to others, it looks painfully hypocritical. But hypocrisy is a feature, not a bug, of liberal order, and need not be an impediment to making the liberal order better. The order over which the United States has presided since World War II has moved the world forward, and if people around the globe want a better world order that supports greater cooperation and social and economic advancement, they will want to improve on this U.S.-led system, not dispense with it.

The crises over Taiwan and Ukraine underline this fact. In both cases, China and Russia are seeking to draw unwilling open societies into their orbit. The people of Taiwan look at the plight of Hong Kong and, not surprisingly, are horrified at the prospect of being incorporated into a country ruled by a Chinese dictatorship. The people of an embattled democratic Ukraine see a brighter future in greater integration into the European Union and the West. That China is ramping up pressure on [Taiwan](#) and that Russia sought to yoke Ukraine to its sphere of influence does not suggest American decline or the collapse of liberal order. On the contrary, the crises exist because Taiwanese and Ukrainian societies want to be part of a global liberal system. Putin famously grouched that the liberal idea is becoming obsolete. In reality, the liberal idea still has a long life ahead of it.

EMPIRE BY INVITATION

The United States enters today’s struggle to shape the twenty-first century with profound advantages. It still possesses the vast bulk of the material capabilities it had in earlier decades. It remains uniquely positioned geographically to play a great-power role in both East Asia and Europe. Its ability to work with other liberal democracies to shape global rules and institutions is already manifest in its response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and will stand it in good stead in any future collective response to Chinese aggression in East Asia. Although China and Russia seek to move the world in the direction of regional blocs and spheres of influence, the United States has offered a vision of world order based on a set of principles rather than competition over territory. Liberal international order is a way of organizing an interdependent world. It is, as the Norwegian historian Geir Lundestad called it, an “empire by invitation.” Its success depends on its legitimacy and appeal and not on the capacity of its patrons to force obedience. If the United States remains at the center of world politics in the decades to come, it will be because this type of order generates more supporters and fellow travelers around the world than that offered by China and Russia.

The U.S. confrontation with China and Russia in 2022 is an echo of the great-power upheavals of 1919, 1945, and 1989. As at these earlier moments, the United States finds itself working with other democracies in resisting the aggressive moves of illiberal great powers. The Russian war in Ukraine is about more than the future of Ukraine; it is also about the basic rules and norms of international relations. Putin's gambit has placed the United States and democracies in Europe and elsewhere on the defensive. But it has also given the United States an opportunity to rethink and reargue its case for an open, multilateral system of world order. If the past is any guide, the United States should not try to simply consolidate the old order but to reimagine it. U.S. leaders should seek to broaden the democratic coalition, reaffirm basic values and interests, and offer a vision of a reformed international order that draws states and peoples together in new forms of cooperation, such as to solve problems of climate change, global public health, and sustainable development. No other great power is better placed to build the necessary partnerships and lead the way in tackling the major problems of the twenty-first century. Other powers may be rising, but the world cannot afford the end of the American era.

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