

Grand Strategy as Liberal Order Building

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In the 21st century, America confronts a complex array of security challenges – diffuse, shifting and uncertain.¹ But it does not face the sort of singular geopolitical threat that it did with the fascist and communist powers of the last century. Indeed, compared to the dark days of the 1930s or the Cold War, America lives in an extraordinarily benign security environment, and it possesses an extraordinary opportunity to shape its security environment for the long-term. It is the dominant global power, unchecked by a coalition of balancing states or a superpower wielding a rival universalistic ideology. Most of the great powers are democracies and tied to the United States through formal alliances and informal partnerships. State power is ultimately based on sustained economic growth – and no major state today can modernize without integrating into the globalized capitalist system, i.e. if you want to be a world power, you will need to join the WTO. What made the fascist and communist threats of the 20th century so profound was not only the danger of territorial aggression but that these great power challengers embodied rival political-economic systems that could generate growth, attract global allies, and create counter-balancing geopolitical blocs. America has no such global challengers today.

The most serious threat to American national security today is not a specific enemy but the erosion of the institutional foundations of the global order that the United States has commanded for half a century and through which it has pursued its interests and national security. America's leadership position and authority within the global system is in serious crisis – and this puts American national security at risk. The grand strategy America needs to pursue in the years ahead is not one aimed at a particular threat but rather at restoring its role as the recognized and legitimate leader of the system – and rebuilding the institutions and partnerships upon which this leadership position is based. America's global position is in crisis, but it is a crisis that is largely of its own making, and one that can be overcome in a way that leaves the United States in a stronger position to meet the diffuse, shifting, and uncertain threats of the 21st century.

¹ Paper prepared for conference on “After the Bush Doctrine: National Security Strategy for a New Administration,” University of Virginia, 7-8 June 2007.

The grand strategy I am proposing can be called “liberal order building.” It is essentially a 21st century version of the strategy that the United States pursued after World War II in the shadow of the Cold War – a strategy which produced the liberal hegemonic order that has provided the framework for the Western and global system ever since. This is a strategy in which the United States leads the way in the creation and operation of a loose rule-based international order. The United States provides public goods and solves global collection action problems. American “rule” is established through the provisioning of international rules and institutions and its willingness to operate within them. American power is put in the service of an agreed upon system of Western-oriented global governance. American power is made acceptable to the world because it is embedded in these agreed upon rules and institutions. The system itself leverages resources and fosters cooperation that makes the actual functioning of the order one that solves problems, creates stability, and allows democracy and capitalism to flourish. Liberal order building is America’s distinctive contribution to world politics – and it is a grand strategy that it should return to in the post-Bush era.

The Bush administration did not embrace the logic of liberal hegemonic rule or support the rules and institutions on which it is based – and America is now paying the price in an extraordinary decline in its authority, credibility, prestige, and the ready support of other states. Along the way, the Bush administration has made America less rather than more secure and its ruinous foreign policy is fast becoming an icon of grand strategic failure.

If America is smart and plays its foreign policy “cards” right, it is not fanciful to think that the United States can still be in twenty years at the center of a “one world” system defined in terms of open markets, democratic community, cooperative security, and rule-based order. This is a future that can be contrasted with less desirable alternatives that echo through the past – great power balancing orders, regional blocs, or bipolar rivalries. The United States should seek to consolidate a global order where other countries bandwagon rather than balance against it – and where it remains at the center of a prosperous and secure democratic-capitalist order which in turn provides the architecture and axis points around which the wider global system turns. But to reestablish this desired world order, the United States is going to need to make a radical break with Bush foreign policy and invest in re-creating the basic governance institutions of the system – investing in alliances, partnerships, multilateral institutions, special relationships, great power concerts, cooperative security pacts, and democratic security communities.

It is useful to distinguish between two types of grand strategies – positional and milieu-oriented. A “positional” grand strategy is where a great power seeks to counter, undercut, contain, and limit the power and threats of a specific challenger state or group of states. Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, the Soviet bloc, and perhaps – in the future – Greater China. A “milieu” grand strategy is where a great power does not target a specific state but seeks to structure its general international environment in ways that are congenial with its long-term security. This might entail building the infrastructure of international cooperation, promoting trade and democracy in various regions of the world, establishing partnerships that might be useful for various contingencies. The point I want to make is that under conditions of unipolarity, in a world of diffuse threats, and with pervasive uncertainty over what the specific security challenges will be in the future – this milieu-basic approach to grand strategy is needed.

This paper makes five arguments. I start with an argument about the character of America's security environment in the decades to come. The United States does not confront a first-order security threat as it has in the past. It faces a variety of decentralized, complex, and deeply rooted threats. It does not face a singular threat – a great power or violent global movement – that deserves primacy in the organization of national security. The temptation is to prioritize the marshaling of American resources against a threat such as jihadist terrorism or rogue states, but this is both an intellectual and political mistake. If the world of the 21st century were a town, the security threats faced by its leading citizens would not be organized crime or a violent assault by a radical mob on city hall. It would be a breakdown of law enforcement and social services in the face of constantly changing and ultimately uncertain vagaries of criminality, nature, and circumstance.

Second, these more diffuse, shifting, and uncertain threats require a different sort of grand strategy than those aimed at countering a specific enemy such as a rival great power or a radical terrorist group. Rather, the United States needs to lead in the recreation of the global architecture of governance, rebuilding its leadership position and the institutional frameworks through which it pursues its interests and cooperates with others to provide security. Above all, it needs to create resources and capacities for the collective confrontation of a wide array of dangers and challenges. That is, America needs a grand strategy of “multitasking” – creating shared capacities to respond to a wide variety of contingencies. In the 21st century threat environment, a premium will be placed on mechanisms for collective action and sustained commitments to problem solving.

Third, America does have a legacy of liberal order building – it knows how to do it and doing it in the past has made America strong and secure. It needs to rediscover and renew this strategy of liberal order building. During the decades after World War II, the United States did not just fight the Cold War, it created a liberal international order of multilayered pacts and partnerships that served to open markets, bind democracies together, and create a trans-regional security community. The United States provided security, championed mutually agreed upon rules and institutions, and led in the management of an open world economy. In return other states affiliated with and supported the United States as it led the larger order. It was an American-led hegemonic order with liberal characteristics. There is still no alternative model of international order that is better suited to American interests or stable global governance.

Fourth, American foreign policy in the last six years has severely eroded America's global position – and endangered its ability to lead and facilitate collective action. This “crisis” of American authority is perhaps the most serious threat to the ability of the United States to secure itself in the decades ahead. The proximate cause of this crisis is the Bush administration's failure to operate within America's own postwar liberal hegemonic order. But there are deep shifts in the global system that make it harder for the United States to act as it did in the past – as a global provider of goods and a liberal hegemon willing to both restrain and commit itself. Unipolarity and the erosion of norms of state sovereignty – among other long-term shifts – make the American pursuit of a liberal order building strategy both more difficult and more essential.

Fifth, the new agenda for liberal order building involves an array of efforts to strengthen and rebuild global architecture. These initiatives include: building a “protective infrastructure” for preventing and responding to socioeconomic catastrophe, renewal of the Cold War-era alliances, reform the United Nations, and the creation of new multilateral mechanisms for cooperation in East Asia and among democracies. In the background, the United States will need to renegotiate and renew its grand bargains with Europe and East Asia. In these bargains, the United States will need to signal a new willingness of restrain and commit its power, accommodate rising states, and operate within reconfigured and agreed upon global rules and institutions.

My point is that America needs to develop a post-post-911 grand strategy. It is not enough to simply fight the “global war on terror” (or GWOT). Instead we need to return to basics – to a focus on the logic and organization of global order and governance. The United States does not need to fight an enemy so much as construct a political order that can function to protect the United States from lots of enemies and solve collective action problems necessary to prevent the rise of new enemies. We do not need a GWOT 2.0. What we need is a PATC 2.0. PATC stands for Present at the Creation, which is the title of Dean Acheson’s famous memoirs in which he describes how he and his colleagues built the postwar American-led system. My point is that we need to think about international order building today with the same ambition and imagination as Acheson and other postwar architects did with PATC 1.0.

Threats, Challenges and Opportunities

Grand strategy is, as Barry Posen argues, “a state’s theory about how it can best cause security for itself.”² As such, it is an exercise in public worrying about the future – and doing something about it. Looking into the future, what should America be most worried about? Grand strategy is a set of coordinated and sustained policies designed to address these prioritized national worries.

Some observers argue that American grand strategy should be organized around the confrontation with a specific enemy – as it was during the Cold War. Jihadist terrorism, in particular, is offered as this premier global threat around which all else should be subordinated and directed. The Bush administration, of course, has made this the centerpiece of its grand strategy – describing a “long war” against terrorism, a generational struggle akin to the Cold War. In the most evocative versions of this thesis, the United States is engaged in a war against “jihadist terrorism,” “militant Islam” or “Islamofascists” who are the heir of the fascist and communist threats of the past century – wielding a totalitarian political ideology and seeking our violent destruction. We face the prospect of a twilight war with an evil foe while Western civilization hangs in the balance.

But it is not altogether clear that fighting Islamic terrorism is the preeminent security challenge of the coming decades. Various are the threats that America faces. Global warming,

² Barry Posen, Sources of Military Doctrine (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 13.

health pandemics, nuclear proliferation, jihadist terrorism, energy scarcity – these and other dangers loom on the horizon. Any of these threats could endanger American lives and way of life either directly or indirectly by destabilizing the global system upon which American security and prosperity depends. Pandemics and global warming are not threats wielded by human hands, but their consequences could be equally devastating. Highly infectious disease has the potential to kill millions of people. Global warming threatens to trigger waves of environmental migration, food shortages, and further destabilize weak and poor states around the world. The world is also on the cusp of a new round of nuclear proliferation, putting mankind’s deadliest weapons in the hands of unstable and hostile states. Terrorist networks offer a new specter of non-state transnational violence. The point is that none of these threats is, in itself, so singularly preeminent that it deserves to be the centerpiece of American grand strategy in the way that anti-fascism and anti-communism did in an earlier era.³

What is more, these various threats are interconnected and it is the possibility of their interactive effects that multiplies the dangers. This point is stressed by Thomas Homer-Dixon: “It’s the convergence of stresses that’s especially treacherous and makes synchronous failure a possibility as never before. In coming years, our societies won’t face one or two major challenges at once, as usually happened in the past. Instead, they’ll face an alarming variety of problems – likely including oil shortages, climate change, economic instability, and mega-terrorism – all at the same time.” The danger is that several of these threats will materialize at the same time and interact to generate greater violence and instability. “What happens, for example, if together or in quick succession the world has to deal with a sudden shift in climate that sharply cuts food production in Europe and Asia, a severe oil price increase that sends economies tumbling around the world, and a string of major terrorist attacks on several Western capital cities?”⁴ The global order itself would be put at risk as well as the foundations of American national security.

We can add to these worries the rise of China – and more generally the rise of Asia. It is worth recalling that China was the preoccupation of the American national security community in the years before the September 11 terrorist attacks. China’s rapid economic growth and assertive regional diplomacy are already transforming East Asia – and Beijing’s geopolitical influence is growing. The United States has no experience managing a relationship with a country that is potentially its principal economic and security rival. It is unclear, and probably unknowable, how China’s intentions and ambitions will evolve as it becomes more powerful. We do know, however, that the rise and decline of great powers – and the problem of “power transitions” – can trigger conflict, security competition, and war. The point here is that, in the long run, the way

³ This is our judgment in the Final Report of the Princeton Project on National Security. See G. John Ikenberry and Anne-Marie Slaughter, Forging a World of Liberty Under Law (Princeton: Woodrow Wilson School, 2006).

⁴ Thomas Homer-Dixon, The Upside of Down: Catastrophe, Creativity, and the Renewal of Civilization (Washington: Island Press, 2006), pp. 16-17.

that China rises up in the world could have a more profound impact on American national security than incremental shifts up or down in the fortunes of international terrorist groups.⁵

The larger point is – and it is a critical assumption here – that today the United States confronts an unusually diverse and diffuse array of threats and challenges. When we try to imagine what the premier threat to the United States will be in 2015 or 2020, it is not easy to say with any confidence that it will be X, or Y, or Z. Moreover, even if we could identify X, or Y, or Z as the premier threat around which all others turn, it is very likely it will be complex and interlinked with lots of other international moving parts. Global pandemics are connected to failed states, homeland security, international public health capacities, etc. Terrorism is related to the Middle East peace process, economic and political development, non-proliferation, intelligence cooperation, European social and immigration policy, etc. The rise of China is related to alliance cooperation, energy security, democracy promotion, the WTO, management of the world economy, etc. So again, we are back to renewing and rebuilding the architecture of global governance and frameworks of cooperation to allow the United States to marshal resources and tackle problems along a wide and shifting spectrum of possibilities.

In a world of multiple threats and uncertainty about their relative significance in the decades to come, it is useful to think of grand strategy as an “investment” problem. Where do you invest your resources, build capacities, and take actions so as to maximize your ability to be positioned to confront tomorrow’s unknown unknowns? Grand strategy is about setting priorities but it is also about diversifying risks and avoiding surprises.

This is where the pursuit of a milieu-based grand strategy is attractive. The objective is to shape the international environment to maximize your capacities to protect the nation from uncertain, diffuse, and shifting threats. You engage in liberal order building. This means investment in international cooperative frameworks – that is, rules, institutions, partnerships, networks, standby capacities, social knowledge, etc. – in which the United States operates. To build international order is to increase the global stock of “social capital” – which is the term Pierre Bourdieu, Robert Putnam, and others have used to define the actual and potential resources and capacities within a political community, manifest in and through its networks of social relations, that are available for solving collective problems. Taken together, liberal order building involves the investment in the enhancement of global social capital so as to create capacities to solve problems that left unattended will threaten national security.

America and Liberal Order Building

To pursue a milieu strategy of liberal order building is to return to the type of grand strategy that America pursued in the 1940s and onward with great success. It is useful to recall the logic and accomplishments of this quintessentially American grand strategy. In fact, in the postwar era the United States did not just fight a global war against Soviet communism. It also

⁵ This argument is advanced in Francis Fukuyama and G. John Ikenberry, “Report of the Grand Strategic Choices Working Group,” (Princeton Project on National Security, Princeton University, 2005).

built a liberal international order. This order was not just the by-product of the pursuit of containment. It sprang from ideas and a logic of order that is deeply rooted in the American experience. It is an international order that generated power, wealth, stability, and security – all of which allowed the West to prevail in the Cold War.

This post-war liberal order was built around a set of ideas, institutions, bargains, democratic community, and American hegemonic power. It is upon this foundation that a renewed strategy of liberal order building must be based.

In comparison to the doctrine of containment, the ideas and policies of American postwar liberal order building were more diffuse and wide-ranging. It was less obvious that the liberal order building agenda was a “grand strategy” designed to advance American security interests. But in other respects it was the more enduring American project, one that was aimed at creating international order that would be open, stable, and friendly – and that solved the problems of the 1930s – the economic breakdown and competing geopolitical blocs that paved the way for world war. The challenge was not merely to deter or contain the power of the Soviet Union but to lay the foundation for an international order that would allow the United States to thrive. This impulse – to build a stable and open international system that advantaged America – existed before, during, and after the Cold War. Even at the moment when the Cold War gathered force, the grand strategic interest in building such an order was appreciated. Indeed, one recalls that NSC-68 laid out a doctrine of containment – but it also articulated a rationale for building a positive international order. The United States needs, it said, to “build a healthy international community,” which “we would probably do even if there were no international threat.” The United States needs a “world environment in which the American system can survive and flourish.”⁶

The vision of an American-led liberal international order was expressed in a sequence of declarations and agreements. The first was the Atlantic Charter of 1941 which spelled out a view of what the Atlantic and wider world order would look like if the allies won the war. This agreement was followed by the Bretton Woods agreements of 1944, the Marshall Plan in 1947 and the Atlantic pact in 1949. Together these agreements provided a framework for a radical reorganization of relations among the Atlantic democracies. The emerging Cold War gave this Western-oriented agenda some urgency and the American congress was more willing to provide resources and approve international agreements because of the threats of communist expansion lurking on the horizon. But the vision of a new order among the Western democracies pre-dated the Cold War and even if the Soviet Union had slipped into history, some sort of Western order – open, institutionalized, American-led – would have been built.

Between 1944 and 1951, American leaders engaged in the most intensive institution building the world had ever seen – global, regional, security, economic, and political. The UN, Bretton Woods, GATT, NATO, and the U.S.-Japan alliance were all launched. The United States undertook costly obligations to aid Greece and Turkey and reconstruct Western Europe. It helped

⁶ NSC-68 as published in Ernest May, ed., American Cold War Strategy: Interpreting NSC-68 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), p. 40.

rebuild the economies of Germany and Japan. It fought the Korean War, putting paid to America's hegemonic presence in East Asia. With the Atlantic Charter, the UN Charter, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it articulated a new vision of a progressive international community. In all these ways, the United States took the lead in fashioning a world of multilateral rules, institutions, open markets, democratic community, and regional partnerships – and it put itself at the center of it all.⁷

This was an extraordinary and unprecedented undertaking for a major state. It marked the triumph of American internationalism after earlier post-1919 and inter-war failures. It signaled the creation of a new type of international order - fusing together new forms of liberalism, internationalism, and national security. It heralded the beginning of the “long peace” – the longest period of modern history without war between the great powers. It laid the foundation for the greatest world economic boom in history. This liberal international order is in crisis today – and it needs to be reimagined and rebuilt. But in almost all important respects, we still live in the world created during these hyperactive postwar years of liberal international order building.

The core idea of this liberal international order was that the United States would need to actively shape its security environment, creating a stable, open, and friendly geopolitical space across Europe and Asia.⁸ This required making commitments, building institutions, forging partnerships, acquiring clients, and providing liberal hegemonic leadership. In doing this, several ideas informed the substantive character of the emerging order. One idea was a basic commitment to economic openness among the regions. That is, capitalism would be organized internationally and not along national, regional, or imperial lines. In many ways, this is what World War II was fought over. Germany and Japan each built their states around the military domination of their respective regions, Soviet Russia was a imperial continental power, and Great Britain had the imperial preference system. American interests were deeply committed to an open world economy – and an open world economy would tie together friends and allies.

A second idea behind liberal international order was that the new arrangements would need to be managed through international institutions and agreements. This was certainly the view of the economic officials who gathered in Bretton Woods in 1944. Governments would need to play a more direct supervisory role in stabilizing and managing economic order. New forms of intergovernmental cooperation would need to be invented. The democratic countries would enmesh themselves in a dense array of intergovernmental networks and loose rule-based institutional relationships. In doing so, the United States committed itself to exercising power through these regional and global institutions. This was a great innovation in international order – the United States and its partners would create permanent governance institutions – ones that they themselves would dominate – to provide ongoing streams of cooperation needed to managing growing realms of complex interdependence.

⁷ I sketch this logic of liberal hegemony in Ikenberry, [After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major War](#) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

⁸ See Melvyn P. Leffler, [A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War](#) (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), Chapter Two.

A third idea was a progressive social bargain. If the United States and its partners were to uphold a global system of open markets, they would need to make commitments to economic growth, development, and social protections. This was the social bargain. There are losers in a system of open markets, but winners win more – so some of those winning must be used for social protection and adjustment. Likewise, if the United States wants other countries to buy into this open order, it will need to help and support those states establish the sorts of Western social support structures that will allow for stable-emerging democracy to co-exist with open trade and investment.

Finally, there is the idea of cooperation security or “security co-binding.” In this liberal vision of international order, the United States will remain connected in close alliance with other democratic countries. NATO and the U.S.-Japan alliance are at the core of this alliance system – and these security pacts will be expanded and strengthened. This was a very important departure from past security arrangements – the U.S. would be connected to the other major democracies to create a single security system. Such a system would ensure that the democratic great powers would not go back to the dangerous game of strategy rivalry and power politics. It helped, of course, to have an emerging Cold War to generate this cooperative security arrangement. But a security relationship between the United States and its allies was implicit in other elements of liberal order. A cooperative security order – embodied in formal alliance institutions – ensured that the power of the United States would be rendered more predictable. Power would be caged in institutions thereby making American power more reliable and connected to Europe and East Asia.

With the end of the Cold War, the American alliance system has seemed less vital to some people. What is forgotten, however, is that the postwar security pacts have always been about more than simply deterrence and containment of Soviet communism. The alliances have also performed the function of providing “political architecture” for the policy community that bridges Europe, North America, and East Asia. The alliances provide mechanisms for each side to send signals of restraint and commitment. They provide institutional channels to “do business” across the advanced industrial world. They keep the United States engaged in Europe and East Asia – and they allow leaders in Europe and East Asia to be engaged and connected to Washington.

In the background, this American-led order is built on two historic bargains that the United States has made with its European and East Asia partners. One is a realist bargain – and grows out of Cold War grand strategy. The United States provides its European partners with security protection and access to American markets, technology, and supplies within an open world economy. In return, these countries agree to be reliable partners who provide diplomatic, economic and logistical support for the United States as it leads the wider Western postwar order. The result has been to tie America and its partners together -- to make peace “indivisible” across the Atlantic and Pacific. Binding security ties also provide channels for consultation and joint decision making.

The other is a liberal bargain that addresses the uncertainties of American preeminent power. East Asian and European states agree to work with the United States and operate within

an agreed upon political-economic system. In return, the United States opens itself up and binds itself to its partners. In effect, the United States builds an institutionalized coalition of partners and reinforces the stability of these long-term mutually beneficial relations by making itself more “user friendly” – that is, by playing by the rules and creating ongoing political processes with these other states that facilitate consultation and joint decision making. The United States makes its power safe for the world and in return Europe and East Asia -- and the wider world -- agrees to live within this liberal international system. The institutional structure of the order provided mechanisms for conveying reassurance and signals of restraint and commitment on the part of the United States, embedding American hegemonic power inside of a community of democracies.

Out of these ideas, institutions, and bargains is a liberal hegemonic order that has been at the center of world politics for over half a century. It is an order that is not simply organized around the decentralized cooperation of like-minded democracies – although it is premised on a convergence of interests and values among the democratic capitalist great powers. It is an engineered political order that reconciles power and hierarchy with cooperation and legitimacy.

The resulting order is liberal hegemony – not empire. It is a political order in which the United States is first among equals – but it is not an imperial system. The United States dominates the order but that domination is made relatively acceptable to other states by the liberal features of this order: the United States supports and operates within an agreed upon array of rules and institutions; the United States legitimates its leadership through the provision of public goods; and other states in the order have access to and “voice opportunities” within it – that is, there are reciprocal processes of communication and influence.

The Crisis of American Liberal Hegemony

This postwar system of global governance – organized around a set of ideas, institutions, bargains, democratic community, and American hegemonic power – is now in trouble. So too is America’s position within it. This is a problem because in a world of shifting, diffuse, and uncertain threats, the United States needs to lead and operate within a strengthened – rather than weakened – liberal order.

This liberal hegemonic order is in crisis in several ways. It is a crisis, most immediately, of America’s global position as manifest in Bush administration foreign policy. The credibility, respect, and authority of the United States as the leader of the global system has been radically diminished in recent years.⁹ America has a legitimacy problem. There is a basic disconnection between the way the Bush administration wants the world to be run and the way other states and

⁹ Recent opinion polls from around the world reveal this changed reality. In a summary of these results, the report indicates: “A multinational poll finds that publics around the world reject the idea that the United States should play the role of preeminent world leader. Most publics say the United States plays the role of world policeman more than it should, fails to take their country’s interests into account and cannot be trusted to act responsibly.” The Chicago Council on Global Affairs and WorldPublicOpinion.org, “World Publics Reject US Role as the World Leader,” 18 April 2007.

peoples want the world to be run. This is the most visible aspect of the crisis. Moreover, the postwar institutions – through which America has traditionally operated – are in crisis, or at least they have become severely weakened in recent years. The UN, NATO, IMF, World Bank, and even the WTO are all searching for missions and authority. The rise of new powers – particularly in Asia – are also putting pressure of these old postwar institutions to reform their membership and governance arrangements.¹⁰ The institutional mechanisms of the system are not functioning very effectively or responding to emerging new demands. Finally, the deeper foundations of liberal international order have also been called into question. These are questions about how to reconcile rule-based order with a variety of new world historical developments – the rise of unipolarity, eroded state sovereignty, democratic legitimacy, and new sorts of security threats.

The immediate source of crisis is the Bush administration itself which signaled from the beginning that it did not want to operate within the old postwar liberal order. This was signaled early in the administration by its resistance to a wide array of multilateral agreements, including the Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change, the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), the Germ Weapons Convention, and the Programme of Action on Illicit Trade in Small and Light Arms. It also unilaterally withdrew from the 1970 ABM treaty, which many experts regard as the cornerstone of modern arms control agreements. Unilateralism, of course, is not a new feature of American foreign policy. In every historical era, the United States has shown a willingness to reject treaties, violate rules, ignore allies, and use military force on its own. But many observers see today's unilateralism as practiced by the Bush administration as something much more sweeping – not an occasional ad hoc policy decision but a new strategic orientation, or what one pundit calls the “new unilateralism.”¹¹

The most systematic rejection of the old logic of liberal order came with the 2002 National Security Doctrine and the Iraq war, articulating a vision of America as a unipolar state positioned above and beyond the rules and institutions to the global system, providing security and enforcing order. It was a strategy of global rule in which the United States would remain a military power in a class by itself, thereby “making destabilizing arms races pointless and limiting rivalry to trade and other pursuit.” American preeminent power would, in effect, put an end to five centuries of great power rivalry. In doing so, it would take the lead in identifying and attacking threats – preemptively if necessary. America was providing the ultimate global public good. In return, the United States would ask to be less encumbered by rules and institutions of the old order. It would not sign the land mine treaty because American troops were uniquely at risk in war zones around the world. It would not sign the ICC treaty because Americans would be uniquely at risk of political prosecutions. In effect, America would step forward and solve the problem of Hobbes – it would be the world's Leviathan.

But in the hands of the Bush administration, America was to become a conservative Leviathan. That is, the Bush architects of grand strategy brought a conservative discourse about

¹⁰ See G. John Ikenberry, “A Weakened World,” Prospect (UK), November 2005, pp. 30-33.

¹¹ Charles Krauthammer, “The New Unilateralism,” The Washington Post, 8 June 2001, p. A29.

order to the unipolar moment – rather than the traditional liberal discourse. This is crucial. At the earlier moments of American order building – after 1919, 1945, and 1989 – American officials by and large invoked liberal ideas about order. These liberal ideas included, first, that the exercise of American power was consistent – and indeed advanced – by strengthening the rule-based fabric of international community; second, that institutions and rules were integral tools of American power; and, third, that international legitimacy mattered in the conduct of American foreign policy. As noted earlier, these ideas reinforced an American conviction that a loose multilateral order was the best vehicle for the advancement of American interests. What the Bush administration did was introduce a conservative discourse on international order. These ideas included, first, that there really was no international community that the United States had to build or adjust to; second, that rules and institutions were constraints on the United States; and that legitimacy begins and ends at home – there is no “global test” for American foreign policy.¹²

The leading edge of this new conception of America’s role and rule in the world concerned the use of force. The Bush administration’s security doctrine was new and sweeping. The United States announced a right to use force anywhere in the world against “terrorists with global reach.” It would do so largely outside the traditional alliance system through coalitions of the willing. The United States would take “anticipatory action” when it itself determined the use of force was necessary. Because these actions would be taken to oppose terrorists or overthrow despotic regimes, they would be self-legitimizing. Countries were either “with us or against us” – or as Bush announced, “no nation can be neutral in this conflict.” Moreover, this new global security situation was essentially permanent – it was not just a temporary emergency. There could be no final victory or peace settlement in this new war, so there would be no return to normalcy.¹³

The point is that the Bush administration was, in effect, announcing unilaterally the new rules of the global security order. It was not seeking a new global consensus on the terms of international order and change, and it was not renegotiating old bargains. The United States was imposing the rules of the new global order, rules that would be ratified not by the support of others but by the lurking presence of American power. This grand strategic move was a more profound shift than is generally appreciated. The Bush administration was not simply acting “a little bit more unilateral” than previous administrations. In rhetoric, doctrine, and ultimately in the Iraq war, the United States was articulating a new logic of global order. The old liberal hegemonic rules, institutions, and bargains were now quaint artifacts of a earlier and less threatening era.

In the background, longer-term shifts in the global system provided the permissive circumstances for the Bush administration’s big doctrinal move. The shift from Cold War bipolarity to American unipolarity has triggered a geopolitical adjustment process that runs

¹² See G. John Ikenberry, “Why Bush Foreign Policy Fails,” unpublished paper, 2005.

¹³ These features of the Bush doctrine are discussed in Ian Shapiro, Containment: Rebuilding a Strategy Against Global Terror (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

through the 1990s and continues today. Unipolarity has given the United States more discretionary resources – and without a peer competitor or a great power balancing coalition arrayed around it, the external constraints on American action are reduced. But with the end of the Cold War, other states are not dependent on the United States for protection as much and a unifying common threat has been eliminated. So old bargains, alliance partnerships, and shared strategic visions are thrown into question. At the very least, the shift in power advantages in favor of the United States would help explain why it might want to renegotiate older rules and institutions.

But more profoundly, unipolarity may be creating conditions that reduce the willingness of the United States to support and operate within a loosely rule-based order. If America is less dependent on other states for its own security, it has reduced incentives to tie itself to other states through restraints entailed in alliances and multilateral agreements. Incentives also increase for other states to free ride on a unipolar America. Under these circumstances, the United States may indeed act unilaterally in ways it did not in the past – or, in the absence of willing partners – its own willingness to provide hegemonic leadership may decline.¹⁴

The erosion of international norms of state sovereignty are also putting pressure on the old liberal hegemonic order. This is the quiet revolution in world politics: the rise of rights within the international community to intervene within states to protect individuals against the abuses of their own governments. The contingent character of sovereignty was pushed further after September 11 in the intervention in Afghanistan – where outside military force, used to topple a regime that actively protected terrorist attackers, was seen as acceptable act of self-defense. But the erosion of state sovereignty has not been accompanied by the rise of new norms about how sovereignty transgressing interventions should proceed. The “international community” has the right to act inside troubled and threatening states – but who precisely is the international community? The problem is made worse by the rise of unipolarity. Only the United States really has the military power to systematically engage in large-scale uses of force around the world. The United Nations has no troops or military capacity of its own. The problem of establishing legitimate international authority grows.

The shift in the “security problem” away from great power war to transnational dangers such as terrorism, disease, and insecurity generated within weak states also compounds the problem of legitimate authority inherent in the rise of unipolarity. If intervention into the affairs of weak and hostile states in troubled regions of the world is the new security frontier, the problems of who speaks for the international community and the establishment of legitimate rules on the use of force multiply. America’s unipolar military capabilities are both in demand and deeply controversial.

So the rise of unipolarity brought with it a shift in the underlying logic of order and rule in world politics. In a bipolar or multipolar system, powerful states “rule” in the process of

¹⁴ See Robert Jervis, “The Remaking of a Unipolar World,” *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (2006), pp. 7-19; and G. John Ikenberry, “Global Security Trap,” *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (September 2006).

leading a coalition of states in balancing against other states. When the system shifts to unipolarity, this logic of rule disappears. Power is no longer based on balancing and equilibrium but on the predominance of one state. This is new and different – and potentially threatening to weaker and secondary states. As a result, the power of the leading state is thrown into the full light of day. Unipolar power itself becomes a “problem” in world politics. As John Gaddis argues, American power during the Cold War was accepted by other states because there was “something worse” over the horizon.¹⁵ With the rise of unipolarity, that “something worse” disappears.

Taken together, American power and a functioning global governance system have become disconnected. In the past, the United States provided global “services” – such as security protection and support for open markets – which made other states willing to work with rather than resist American power. The public goods provision tended to make it worth while for these states to endure the day-to-day irritations of American foreign policy. But the trade-off seems to have shifted. Today, the United States appears to be providing fewer public goods while at the same time the irritations associated with American dominance appear to be growing.

The New Agenda of Liberal Order Building

If American grand strategy is to be organized around liberal order building, what are the specific objectives and what is the policy agenda?

As we have seen, there are several objectives that such a strategy might seek to accomplish. The first is to build a stronger “protective infrastructure” of international capacities to confront an array of shifting, diffuse, and uncertain threats and catastrophes – this is, in effect, creating an infrastructure of global social services. The second is the rebuilding of a system of cooperative security, reestablishing the primacy of America’s alliances for strategic cooperation and the projection of force. The third is the reform of global institutions that support collective action and multilateral management of globalization – such as the United Nations and multilateral economic institutions – creating greater institutional capacities for international decision making and the provision of public goods. The fourth is to create new institutions and reform old ones so that rising states – particularly China but also India and other emerging powers – can more easily be embedded in the existing global system rather than operate as dissatisfied revisionist states on the outside. Finally, through all these efforts the United States needs to endeavor to reestablish its hegemonic legitimacy – a preeminent objective that must be pursued with policies and doctrine that signal America’s commitment to rule-based order.¹⁶

¹⁵ John Lewis Gaddis, Surprise, Security and the American Experience (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 66-67.

¹⁶ This section builds on Ikenberry and Slaughter, Forging a World of Liberty under Law. The case for global order built around “multi-multilateralism” is made in Francis Fukuyama, America at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power, and the Neoconservative Legacy (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

Given these goals, the agenda of institutional order building would include the following.

First, the United States needs to lead in the building of an enhanced “protective infrastructure” that helps prevent the emergence of threats and limits the damage if they do materialize.¹⁷ Many of the threats mentioned above are manifest as socioeconomic backwardness and failure that generate regional and international instability and conflict. These are the sorts of threats that are likely to arise with the coming of global warming and epidemic disease. What is needed here is institutional cooperation to strengthen the capacity of governments and the international community to prevent epidemics or food shortages or mass migrations that create global upheaval – or mitigate the effects of these upheavals if they in fact occur.

It is useful to think of a strengthened protective infrastructure as investment in global social services – much as cities and states invest in such services. It typically is money well spent. Education, health programs, shelters, social services – these are vital components of stable and well functioning communities. The international system already has a great deal of this infrastructure – institutions and networks that promote cooperation over public health, refugees, and emergency aid. But in the 21st century as the scale and scope of potential problems grow, investments in these preventive and management capacities will also need to grow. Early warning systems, protocols for emergency operations, standby capacities, etc. – these are the stuff of a protective global infrastructure.

Second, the United States should recommit to and rebuild its security alliances. The idea would be to update the old bargains that lie behind these security pacts. In NATO – but also in the East Asia bilateral partnerships – the United States agrees to provide security protection to the other states and bring its partners into the process of decision making over the use of force. In return, these partners agree to work with the United States – providing manpower, logistics and other types of support – in wider theaters of action. The United States gives up some autonomy in strategic decision making – although it is a more informal than legal-binding restraint – and in exchange it gets cooperation and political support. The United States also remains “first among equals” within these organizations, and it retains leadership of the unified military command. The updating of these alliance bargains would involve widening the regional or global missions in which the alliance operates and making new compromises over the distribution of formal rights and responsibilities.¹⁸

There are several reasons why the renewal of security partnerships is critical to liberal order building. One is that security alliances involve relatively well defined, specific, and limited commitments – and this is attractive for both the leading military power and its partners. States know what they are getting into and what the limits are on their obligations and liabilities. Another is that alliances provide institutional mechanisms that allow accommodations for

¹⁷ See Ikenberry and Slaughter, Forging a World of Liberty under Law, p. 10.

¹⁸ The case for renewal of NATO is made in G. John Ikenberry and Anne-Marie Slaughter, Forging a World of Liberty Under Law.

disparities of power among partners within the alliance. Alliances do not embody universal rules and norms that apply equally to all parties. NATO, at least, is a multilateral body with formal and informal rules and norms of operation that both accommodate the most powerful state and provides roles and rights for others as well. Another virtue of renewing the alliances is that they have been institutional bodies that are useful as “political architecture” across the advanced democratic world. The alliances provide channels of communication and joint decision making that spill over into the wider realms of international relations. They are also institutions with grand histories and records of accomplishment. The United States is a unipolar military power, but it still has incentives to share the costs of security protection and find ways to legitimate the use of its power. The postwar alliances – renewed and reorganized – are an attractive tool for these purposes.

Robert Kagan has argued that to regain its lost legitimacy, the United States needs to return to its postwar bargain: giving some European voice over American policy in exchange for their support. The United States, Kagan points out, “should try to fulfill its part of the transatlantic bargain by granting European some influence over the exercise of its power – provided that, in return, Europeans wield that influence wisely.”¹⁹ This is the logic that informed American security cooperation with its European and East Asian partners during the Cold War. It is a logic that can be renewed today to help make unipolarity more acceptable.

Third, reform and create encompassing global institutions that foster and legitimate collective action. The first move here should be to reform the United Nations, starting with the expansion of the permanent membership on the Security Council. Several plans have been proposed. All of them entail new members – such as Germany, Japan, India, Brazil, South Africa, and others – and reformed voting procedures. Almost all of the candidates for permanent membership are mature or rising democracies. The goal, of course, is to make them stake holders in the United Nations and thereby strengthen the primacy of the United Nations as a vehicle for global collective action. There really is no substitute for the legitimacy that the United Nations can offer to emergency actions – humanitarian interventions, economic sanctions, uses of force against terrorists, and so forth. Public support in advanced democracies grows rapidly when their governments can stand behind a United Nations-sanctioned action.

The other step is to create a “concert of democracies.” The idea would not be to establish a substitute body for the United Nations – which some advocates of a concert or league suggest – but to simply provide another venue where democracies can discuss common goals and reinforce cooperation. Proposals exist for various types of groupings of democracies, some informal and consultative and others more formal and task oriented.²⁰

¹⁹ Robert Kagan, “America’s Crisis of Legitimacy,” Foreign Affairs, Vol. 83, No. 2 (March 2004), p. 86.

²⁰ For proposals to create a Concert of Democracies, see Ikenberry and Slaughter, Forging a World of Liberty Under Law, Ivo Daalder and James Lindsey, “Democracies of the World Unite,” The American Interest (January-February 2007); and Tod Lindberg, “The Treaty of the Democratic Peace,” The Weekly Standard (12 February 2007).

The experience of the last century suggests that the United States is more likely to make institutional commitments and bind itself to other states if those countries are democracies. This is true for both practical and normative reasons. Because liberal democracies are governed by the rule of law and open to scrutiny, it is easier to establish the credibility of their promises and develop long-term commitments. But the values and identities that democracies share also make it easier for them to affiliate and build cooperative relations. These shared identities were probably more strongly felt during the Cold War when the United States was part of a larger “free world.” Institutionalized cooperation between the United States and its European and East Asian partners is surely driven by shared interests – but it is reinforced by shared values and common principles of government. American leaders find it easier to rally domestic support for costly commitments and agreements abroad when the goal is to help other democracies and strengthen the community of democracies.

Fourth, embedding rising states. The rise of China – and Greater Asia – is perhaps the seminal drama of our time. In the decades to come, America’s unipolar power will give way to a more bipolar, multipolar or decentralized distribution of power. China will most likely be a dominant state and the United States will need to yield to it in various ways. The national security question for America to ask today is: what sorts of investments in global institutional architecture do I want to make now so that the coming power shifts will adversely impact me the least? That is, what sorts of institutional arrangements do I want to have in place to protect my interests when I am less powerful? This is a sort of neo-Rawlsian question that should inform American strategic decision making.

The answer to this neo-Rawlsian question would seem to be two-fold. One is that the United States should try to embed the foundations of the Western-oriented international system so deeply that China has overwhelming incentives to integrate into it rather than to oppose and overturn it. Those American strategists who fear a rising China the most should be ultra-ambitious liberal institution builders. The United States should compose its differences with Europe and renew joint commitments to alliance and multilateral global governance. The more that China faces not just the United States but a united West, the better. The more than China faces not just a united West, but the entire OECD world of capitalist democracies, the better. This is not to argue that China should face a grand counter-balancing alliance against it. Rather, China should face a complex and deeply integrated global system – one that is so encompassing and deeply entrenched that it essentially has no choice but to join it and seek to prosper within it. Indeed, the United States should take advantage of one of the great virtues of liberal hegemony – namely, that it is easy to join and hard to overturn. The layers of institutions and channels of access provide relatively easy entry points for China to join the existing international order.²¹ Now is precisely the wrong historical moment for the United States to be uprooting and disassembling its own liberal hegemonic order.

In a version of this argument, Timothy Gatten Ash has suggested that the United States and Europe have about twenty years more to control the levers of global governance before they

²¹ See G. John Ikenberry, “The Rise of China, Power Transitions, and Western Order,” in Robert Ross, ed., The Rise of China (forthcoming).

will need to cede power to China and other rising states. His point is that the two Western powers need to take the long view, develop a common strategic vision, and redouble commitment to Atlantic cooperation.²²

The second answer to the neo-Rawlsian question is to encourage the building of a regional East Asian security order that will provide a framework for managing the coming power shifts. The idea is not to block China's entry into the regional order but to help shape its terms, looking for opportunities to strike strategic bargains at various moments along the shifting power trajectories and encroaching geopolitical spheres. The big bargain that the United States will want to strike with China is this: to accommodate a rising China by offering it status and position within the regional order in return for Beijing accepting and accommodating Washington's core strategic interests, which include remaining a dominant security provider within East Asia.

In striking this strategic bargain, the United States will also want to try to build multilateral institutional arrangements in East Asia that will tie down and bind China to the wider region. China has already grasp the utility of this strategy in recent years – and it is now actively seeking to reassure and co-opt its neighbors by offering to embed itself in regional institutions such as the ASEAN plus 3 and Asian Summit. This is, of course, precisely what the United States did in the decades after World War II, building and operating within layers of regional and global economic, political, and security institutions – thereby making itself more predictable and approachable, and reducing the incentives that other states would otherwise have to resist or undermine the United States by building countervailing coalitions.

The challenge for the United States is to encourage China to continue along this pathway, allaying worries about its growing power by binding itself to its neighbors and the region itself. But to do this, there will need to be a more formal and articulated regional security organization established into which China can integrate. Such an organization need not have the features of an alliance system – the countries in the region are not ready for this. But what is needed is a security organization that has at its center a treaty of non-aggression and mechanisms for periodic consultation.

Finally, reclaim a liberal internationalist “public philosophy.” When American officials after World War II championed the building a rule-based postwar order, they articulated a distinctive internationalist vision of order that has faded in recent decades. It was a vision that entailed a synthesis of liberal and realist ideas about economic, national security, and the sources of stable and peaceful order. These ideas – drawn from the 1940s experiences with the New Deal and the previous decades of war and depression – led American leaders to associate the national interest with the building of a managed and institutionalized global system. What is needed today is a renewed public philosophy of liberal internationalism that can inform American elites as they make trade offs between sovereignty and institutional cooperation.

²² Timothy Garten Ash, Free World: America, Europe, and the Surprising Future of the West (New York: Random House, 2004).

What American elites need to do today is recover this public philosophy of internationalism. The restraint and the commitment of American power went hand in hand. Global rules and institutions advanced America's national interest rather than threatened it. The alternative public philosophies that circulate today – philosophies that champion American unilateralism and disentanglement from global rules and institutions – are not meeting with great success. So an opening exists for America's postwar vision of internationalism to be updated and rearticulated today.

Conclusion

In his memoir on American diplomacy at the end of the Cold War, former Secretary of State James Baker recalled the thinking of his predecessors from the 1940s: “Men like Truman and Acheson were above all, though we sometimes forget it, institution builders. They created NATO and the other security organizations that eventually won the Cold War. They fostered the economic institutions. . . . that brought unparalleled prosperity. . . . At a time of similar opportunity and risk, I believed we should take a leaf from their book.”²³ In proposing a post-Bush grand strategy of liberal order building, I am urging the return to this same global strategy – updated to the security environment of the 21st century.

The United States needs to plan for a future of sprawling and shifting threats. This means pursuing a milieu-based grand strategy, building international frameworks of cooperation to deal with multiple and evolving contingencies. To build grand strategy around one threat is to miss the importance of the others – as well as miss the dangerous connections between these threats. This is not to belittle the al-Qaida threat. But the point is that it is important for the United States to pull back and invest in the creation of an international environment to handle, well, come what may.

The good news is that the United States is fabulously good at pursuing a milieu-based grand strategy. The Bush administration sought a radical break with the postwar American approach to order but it failed – and failed spectacularly. It sought to construct global order around American unipolar rule, asserting new rights to use force while reducing the country's exposure to multilateral rules and institutions. America's strategic position has weakened as a result and the institutions that have leveraged and legitimated its power have eroded. If America wants to remain at the center of an open world system – one that is friendly and cooperative and capable of generating collective action in pursuit of diverse and shifting security challenges – it will need to return to its tradition of liberal order building.

For the most part, the great powers in the modern era have pursued “positional” grand strategies. They have identified rivals and enemies and organized their foreign policy accordingly. Across the historical eras, the results have been various sorts of balances of power and imperial systems. Once in a while, a state can dare to ask slightly loftier questions about the

²³ James A. Baker, The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War, and Peace, 1989-1992 (New York: Putnam, 1995), pp. 605-06.

organization of the international system. Here the questions are meta-questions about political order itself. These are essentially “constitutional” questions about the first principles and organizational logic of the global system. The great powers collectively did this after 1815 and the United States and its allies did again after the world wars. Today, the United States can once again ask these constitutional-like questions. What sort of global governance order would the United States like to see in operation in, say, 2020 or 2030? If we are uncertain today what precisely will worry us tomorrow, what sort of mechanisms of governance would we like to see established to deal with these unknowns? If all we know is that the security threats of tomorrow will be shifting, diffuse, and uncertain, we should want to create a flexible and capable political system that can meet and defeat a lot of complex threats.

We do know that growing globalization and the diffusion of technologies of violence will make it necessary to develop a complex protective infrastructure that will support global efforts at intelligence, monitoring, inspections, and enforcement. We will need the International Atomic Energy Agency on steroids. We also know that new states will be rising and wanting to share or compete for leadership – so there is an incentive today to get the rules and institutions embedded for the future. Under conditions of intensifying globalization, the opportunity costs of not coordinating national policies grows relative to the costs of lost autonomy associated with making binding agreements. So when we look into the future, we do know that there will be a growing premium attached to institutionalized forms of cooperation. The governance structures that pass for international politics today will need to be rebuilt and made much more complex and encompassing in the decades ahead.

Looking into this brave new world, the United States will find itself needing to share power and rely in part on others to ensure its security. It will not be able to depend on unipolar power or air-tight borders. To operate in this coming world the United States will need – more than anything else – authority and respect as a global leader. It has lost that authority and respect in recent years. In committing itself to a grand strategy of liberal order building, it can begin the process of gaining it back.