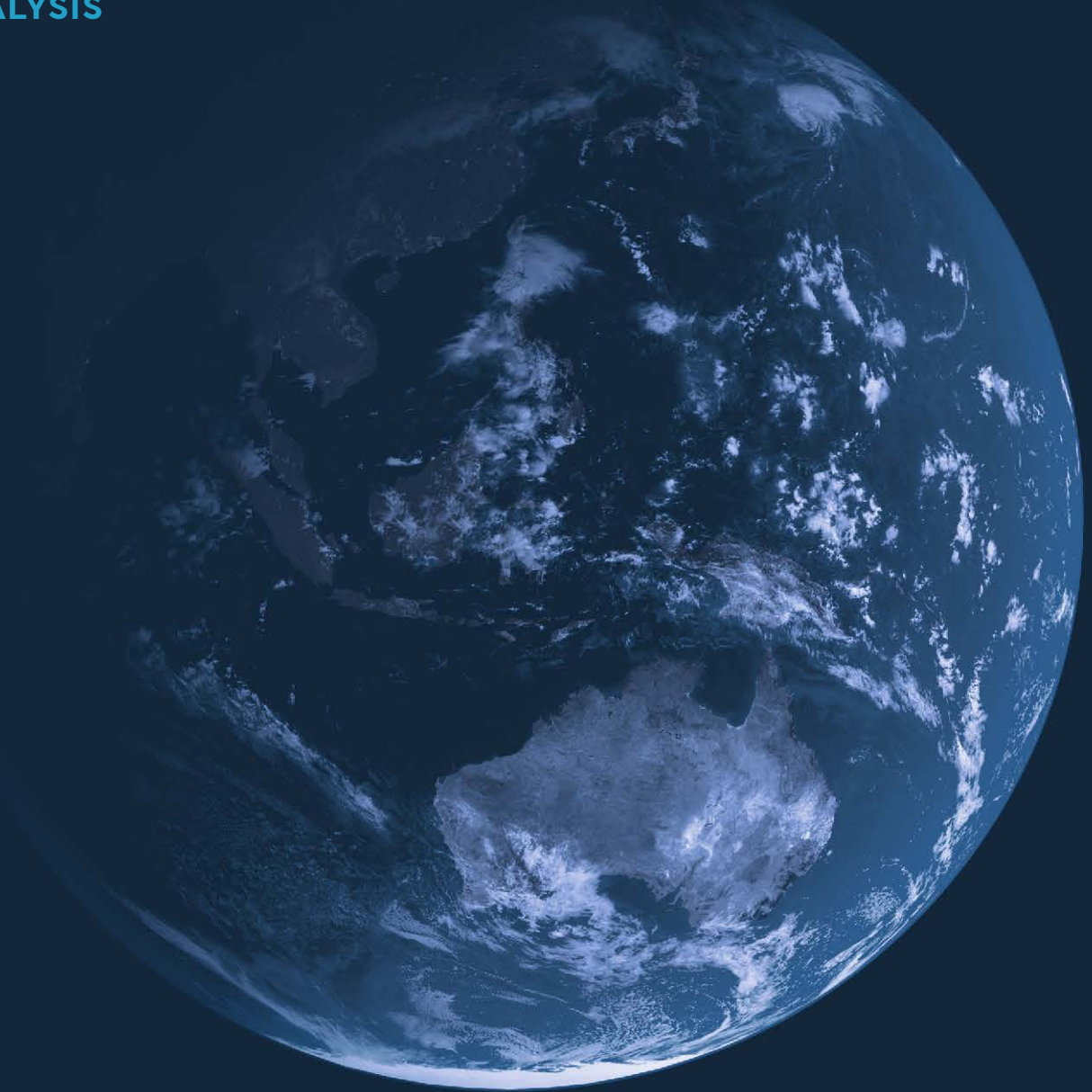


LOWY
INSTITUTE
ANALYSIS



Global Order in the Shadow of the Coronavirus: China, Russia, and the West

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JULY 2020

GLOBAL ORDER IN THE SHADOW OF THE CORONAVIRUS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The coronavirus pandemic has thrown a harsh spotlight on the state of global governance. Faced with the greatest emergency since the Second World War, nations have regressed into narrow self-interest. The concept of a rules-based international order has been stripped of meaning, while liberalism faces its greatest crisis in decades.

Western leaders blame today's global disorder on an increasingly assertive China and disruptive Russia. Yet the principal threat lies closer to home. Western governments have failed to live up to the values underpinning a liberal international order — a failure compounded by inept policymaking and internal divisions. The actions of Donald Trump, in particular, have undermined transatlantic unity, damaged the moral authority of the West, and weakened global governance.

It is tempting to accept the inevitability of great power confrontation and the demise of international society. But an alternative future is still possible. This lies in a more inclusive order, driven by a common imperative in meeting twenty-first century challenges such as climate change, pandemic disease, and global poverty. These threats transcend national boundaries and strategic rivalries — and so must our responses.



G20 2019, Osaka. Photo: Brendan Smialowski/AFP via Getty Images

INTRODUCTION

Two broad narratives of international relations have emerged in recent years. The first is that the liberal, rules-based order is on its knees. Post-Cold War illusions of positive-sum cooperation have been shattered. The nation state is back. Geopolitics is king. And great power rivalry once again defines world affairs.¹

The second narrative asserts that a rising China and a resurgent Russia are the main culprits in the destabilisation of global order. They act in flagrant defiance of its norms: threatening their neighbours, exporting authoritarianism, subverting democratic processes, and undermining multilateral institutions.² Moreover, they are not just individually malign; their burgeoning partnership has a multiplier effect, compounding the threat to the liberal order and the global primacy of the United States.³

These related narratives shape much of Western policymaking today. They are central to the Trump Administration's openly combative approach towards Beijing, to the growing European pushback against China, the heightening of tensions in the Asia-Pacific region, and the continuing alienation between Russia and the West. A new age of realism is upon us, and its truths are inescapable — or so we are led to believe.

Against this backdrop, the coronavirus pandemic has burst upon the world — the first truly universal event since the end of the Second World War and the dawn of the atomic age. Governments and societies, almost without exception, are facing a perfect storm of public health, economic, security, strategic, and psychological challenges.



*White House press briefing
21 July 2020. Image:
Flickr/White House*

But if that much is clear, the implications for global order are not. In the first months of the pandemic, there was a view that coronavirus represented a potential world-changer — an opportunity to re-examine

our assumptions about global governance and the way we lead our lives.⁴ But as countries have become accustomed to the presence of COVID-19, a counter-narrative has taken hold, with the virus acting not as a circuit breaker, but as an accelerant to existing trends.⁵ Confronted with transnational challenges, states large and small are reverting to old habits rather than re-inventing themselves.

Recent events support a pessimistic prognosis. US–China relations are toxic. The transatlantic consensus is on life support. Multilateral institutions, from the World Health Organization (WHO) to the European Union (EU), are struggling to prove their worth. Environmental safeguards are being sacrificed in misconceived efforts to revive the global economy. The rules-based international order as we know it is no longer fit for purpose.

The landscape appears unremittingly grim, and it is tempting to accept the inevitability of great power confrontation, deglobalisation (or decoupling), and the fracturing of the world along ideological and normative fault-lines. But in this Lowy Institute Analysis I want to challenge the descent into fatalism. The international situation, while critical, is also dynamic. The challenges are huge, but not insuperable. In focusing on all too evident problems, we overlook or underestimate opportunities to develop a new, more inclusive world order.

Contrary to the naysayers,⁶ there is a future for liberalism in the twenty-first century. But to achieve this, we need to recognise a number of realities.

First, the values, norms and institutions of liberalism are in crisis. Many Western policymakers and thinkers remain in denial. They appear to believe that with some adjustments — a change of US president, more transatlantic unity, getting tough on China, and perhaps an accommodation with Russia — ‘normal’ service can be restored. Yet the problems of the liberal order run far deeper than these hopeful prognoses suggest.

Second, despite vociferous claims to the contrary, Beijing and Moscow are not engaged in a multi-dimensional plot to undermine the global order. Such scapegoating diverts attention, often purposely, from repeated Western failures of commission and omission. Chinese and Russian actions have at times been disruptive and destabilising. But they scarcely amount to a conscious or coordinated strategy to build a new, authoritarian world.

Third, the crisis of the liberal rules-based order has been largely self-inflicted, an exercise in ‘suicidal statecraft’⁷ sustained over the best part of two decades, and culminating in the spectacular excesses of US President Donald Trump. To blame external forces for these troubles is to confuse cause and effect. The real issue is a collective Western failure to live up to the principles of liberalism, a failure exacerbated by gross policy misjudgments and fraying transatlantic and European unity.

Finally, a fundamental rethinking of global governance is well overdue. The future does not lie in the return to dominant US leadership, great power competition or accommodation, or the post-Cold War utopia of a geopolitics-free world. For these are all false gods. The way forward lies in a more inclusive and flexible order, driven by a common imperative in meeting universal challenges, such as climate change, pandemic disease, and global poverty. Such an enterprise will be contentious and chaotic. But there is no alternative if we are to build a future that benefits the mass of humanity.

THE NEW WORLD DISORDER

The liberal order faces its greatest crisis since the end of the Cold War. Liberalism is in retreat around the world.⁸ The United States is led by a president whose ‘America First’ realpolitik contradicts the very idea of rules-based governance. Europe has seen the rise of ‘illiberal democracy’ in EU member states, such as Hungary and Poland. Authoritarian regimes have not only become more numerous, but also more repressive; China under Xi Jinping and Russia under Vladimir Putin are just the most conspicuous examples of a larger trend. The system of international agreements is under enormous pressure as countries abuse or withdraw from them. And multilateralism has rarely seemed in poorer repute.⁹

The concept of a ‘rules-based international order’ has become increasingly devoid of substance. It is no longer clear what the rules are, who sets them, what moral authority underpins them, and, most important, who follows them. It is questionable whether a single rules-based order exists, or even that it is liberal.¹⁰ For large parts of the planet, this was always a Western conceit, contingent on the realities of power. In the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, China and Russia were in no position to challenge the authority of the United States as the sole superpower and guarantor of this order. But many in the West mistook acquiescence for conversion. Subsequently, the illusion of consensus was revealed by the relative decline of American power, the extraordinary rise of China, and the return of Russia as a significant international actor.¹¹

But if the liberal order is in crisis, there is little sign of a new world order emerging in its place. The non-Western powers have not demonstrated a capacity to develop post-Western norms and effective institutions.¹² ‘Multipolarity’ is largely a slogan, one that signifies very different things depending on whether you sit in Beijing, Moscow, New Delhi, Brussels, or Canberra. The international environment is more fluid than at any time since the end of the Cold War. We are moving into a post-American era, but no one knows what this will look like. We are lost in transition.

The result is a growing strategic, political, and normative void — a new world disorder.¹³ This is characterised primarily by a lack of clarity (or agreement) about the rules of the international system. We are witnessing the steady de-universalisation of norms, as great powers and small states alike interpret laudable principles in self-serving ways. Meanwhile, those same great powers have rarely been less able to bend

others to their will. For all the talk about models, either democratic or authoritarian, few countries are willing to be bound by them.¹⁴

We are in the midst of the worst crisis of international leadership since the 1930s. The issue is not simply President Trump, but a collective failure that cuts across continents and systems of governance. The very notion of moral authority is imperilled. Truth has become almost entirely subjective, giving way to ‘narratives’. The old Cold War confrontation between capitalism and communism may have gone, but in its place are new ideological conflicts, both internationally and within nations.

The response to coronavirus has revealed that, more than ever, nations operate according to narrow self-interest, not international norms or shared values. The impact of globalisation is felt in the interconnectedness of problems, not of solutions. The limitations of the great powers have been brutally exposed. Despite its immense strength, the United States is the country worst affected by COVID-19, a direct result of Trump’s abject leadership — a combination of myopia, complacency, and evasions. Not that others have much to boast about. The Chinese government’s initial suppression of news about the virus aggravated its consequences for the rest of the world, while in the early stages of the crisis President Xi disappeared from public view. Subsequently, Beijing has used the distraction of the emergency to expand operations in the South China Sea and against Taiwan, and pursued a crude, and counter-productive, international propaganda campaign.

Amidst the panic and confusion, the reaction in some Western capitals — notably Washington — has been to double down on the stereotypes of great power rivalry. We have seen the proliferation of narratives and counter-narratives, as China and the United States have sought to shift responsibility for their policy failures by blaming each other. Unhelpfully, this quarrel has become highly ideological. In other respects, too, the pandemic is emblematic of the new world disorder. Many governments have been blindsided by the sheer scale of the humanitarian and economic disaster, and been unable to respond adequately. Coronavirus has become a metaphor for the collapse of governance.

CHINA, RUSSIA, AND GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

Chinese and Russian attitudes towards global order are central to the debate over the nature and direction of international politics. Are Beijing and Moscow prepared to operate within a rules-based system, and, if so, under what conditions? Or are their agendas essentially destructive, and incompatible with Western interests and values? What impact will coronavirus have on their approaches to governance?

China and the Global Order

The default setting in Washington is that China is committed to overturning the liberal order and supplanting the United States as global leader. The latest iterations of the US National Security Strategy (2017) and National Defense Strategy (2018) depict a Manichaeian struggle between the free world led by America, and an authoritarian axis represented by China and Russia. Some of the language is reminiscent of the height of the Cold War; the United States reaffirming its commitment to be a “beacon of liberty and opportunity around the world”¹⁵ in opposition to “repressive visions of world order”.¹⁶

Yet the reality is more complex, as reflected in a European Commission report from 2019. This described China as “simultaneously ... a cooperation partner with whom the EU has closely aligned objectives, a negotiating partner with whom the EU needs to find a balance of interests, an economic competitor in the pursuit of technological leadership, and a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance.”¹⁷ The combination of cooperation and competition characterises not just China’s relations with the EU, but its foreign policy more generally. It is also at the core of Beijing’s ambiguous attitude to world order — as a framework that needs to be maintained but also ‘reformed’ in line with China’s growing influence.

No country has benefited more than China from the post-Cold War order. Over the past three decades, China has grown from being a regional backwater into the world’s second power. Its GDP has multiplied more than thirty-fold. The standard of living for its citizens has improved beyond recognition. None of this would have occurred without the globalisation of the Chinese economy, which has benefited immensely from the influx of Western investment and technology, and open access to the international trading system. China’s entry into the

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World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 marked a seminal moment in its emergence as a global force.



Shi Guangshen, Minister of Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation of China, signing China's Protocol on the Accession to the WTO at the 4th Ministerial Conference in Doha in November 2001. Photo courtesy WTO, Accessions, China.

Crucially, Beijing continues to see value in a stable order and economic globalisation. Reliable access to international public goods, natural resources, and export markets is critical to national growth, and to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), whose legitimacy depends on its ability to deliver measurable benefits to the population. Coronavirus has underscored these realities. More than any other country, China requires a secure external environment in order to flourish. That includes preserving the fabric of international institutions — not only the United Nations Security Council, where it has the right of veto, but also Western-dominated organisations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the WTO.

At the same time, China thinks and acts like a traditional great power. Its commitment to global order is entirely self-interested, pronouncements about ‘win-win’ outcomes notwithstanding. Its engagement is also conditional on maintaining privileged conditions. The ideal order is one that supports the legitimacy of Party rule, facilitates China’s continued economic growth (through global free trade), and helps the Party to keep out ‘harmful’ foreign influences, such as liberal ideas of democracy, rule of law, and human rights.¹⁸

For much of the last three decades, the international system provided a permissive environment that favoured China’s continued and largely

untroubled rise. Over this period, China steadily strengthened its position in international institutions and decision-making. It also expanded its strategic footprint in the Asia-Pacific and Eurasia, and deployed its comparative strengths — above all, economic power — to promote itself as a good international citizen on its own terms. Beijing did not find it too onerous, also, to accept US primacy. A stable global order depended on an engaged and predictable America. And China was nowhere near ready to assume the burden of leadership.

Ordinarily, Beijing might have been content to work or ‘play’ the international system for the foreseeable future. But in recent years, three game-changing events have altered this incrementalist calculus: the advent of Xi Jinping as China’s paramount leader in 2012; Donald Trump’s victory in the 2016 US presidential election; and the coronavirus pandemic.

The Xi Factor:

Xi has transformed Chinese foreign policy, although not in the way that is usually understood in the West. Despite the frequent comparisons with Mao Zedong, he is no revolutionary seeking to overturn the global order and impose in its place a Chinese Brave New World. He is a revisionist in that he seeks to maximise China’s influence and status. But, like his predecessors Hu Jintao, Jiang Zemin, and Deng Xiaoping, he aims to do so *within* the existing international system.

In this connection, Xi’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is not the harbinger of an alternative world order. Its connectivity agenda is more prosaic: to improve China’s access to natural resources; open up new markets for its manufactured goods and services; extend Beijing’s economic influence across Eurasia; and ensure a friendly and secure neighbourhood. Even in these more limited aims, the BRI has under-achieved.¹⁹ Similarly, Chinese actions in the Western Pacific are not about promoting a sinocentric hegemony, but reflect longstanding goals: power projection; acquiring control over resources; having a decisive say in regional security; reducing or containing American influence; and asserting authority over Taiwan. Such an approach is hardly comforting, but it is neither new nor radical.²⁰



*Putin speech at Belt and Road International Forum, 14 May 2017.
Photo courtesy Presidential Executive Office, President of Russia.*

The real difference Xi has made is in the energy and clarity he has brought to the pursuit of these goals. Whereas previous leaders emphasised China's limitations and its aspirations to become a 'moderately developed country', there is no such strategic cringe or dissimulation today. Beijing no longer cares to defer to the United States or to indulge Western sensitivities.²¹ It is much bolder in promoting China's 'core interests' in the South China Sea and reunification of Taiwan with the mainland. Xi speaks openly of a Chinese model of development and a 'shared future for humanity' in which China plays a leading role. Meanwhile, internal repression has increased markedly, as Beijing angrily rejects Western criticisms of its treatment of Uighurs in Xinjiang and of the new national security law for Hong Kong.

The overall message is that China is rising and the world had better get used to it. This attitudinal shift has come as a shock to Western leaders accustomed to the Deng Xiaoping course of hiding one's capacities, maintaining a low profile, and never claiming leadership.²² The cloak of humility that long masked Chinese foreign policy goals has given way to in-your-face 'wolf-warrior' diplomacy. The sharpening of Chinese rhetoric has been backed up by a significant expansion of military, economic, technological, and soft power capabilities, as well as a greater willingness to deploy them. Xi's assertive approach signals that China is not content to be a mere rule-taker, but demands a major part in framing and implementing the twenty-first century global order.

That said, realpolitik, not messianism or iconoclasm, remains the basis of Chinese foreign policy. Beijing is a long way from demonstrating the will, much less the capacity, to build an international system in its own image. It is one thing for Xi to speak about a 'community of common destiny' and a global leadership role.²³ It is quite another to translate

such abstractions into hard commitments.²⁴ Contrary to Western fears, Beijing is not looking to populate the world with Mini-Me versions of a Leninist party-state. What matters to it is that other countries — democratic or authoritarian — support Chinese interests and policy positions.²⁵ Converting them to ‘Chinese values’ is neither achievable nor necessary.

The Trump Factor:

In several respects, Trump’s presidency has been ‘good’ for China. His aversion to liberal internationalism, indifference to democratisation and human rights, belief in great power diplomacy, and preference for personal deal-making between leaders, chimes with Xi’s own approach. Trump’s actions, and personal venality, have undermined transatlantic unity and the moral authority of the West, and weakened the capacity of Western governments to counter Chinese actions in various policy areas, including human rights, trade, intellectual property, and regional security.



*Presidents Trump and Xi meet in China before 2017 APEC leaders meeting
November 8, 2017. Photo: Flickr/White House*

Yet in other respects, Trump has been a difficult proposition. He has shattered the strategic certainties — and comfort — that China had come to take for granted.²⁶ He is prepared to sacrifice good relations for personal benefit. He shows no compunction in breaking agreements. He is temperamentally unstable. And he appears to have few constraints in escalating tensions to the point of confrontation. In short, he presents a set of policy challenges that no Chinese (or any other) leader has ever had to face from Washington.

Xi’s response to the Trump conundrum has been a mixture of the opportunistic and the visceral. He has exploited the distractions of the

Trump Administration and divisions of the West to assert Chinese interests more aggressively in the South China Sea and on Taiwan. He has highlighted the failings of US global leadership — not so that China can supplant the United States, but to claim the moral high ground in legitimising its own actions. This is especially important in relation to the BRI, where Beijing compares a selfless ('win-win') China with a selfish and reckless America.

On the other hand, the dramatic worsening of US–China relations during the Trump presidency has exacerbated insecurities in the CCP leadership. The historical suspicion of the West — that it has always sought to 'keep China down' — has become more virulent. In a febrile atmosphere where conciliation and compromise are seen as unrewarding, Beijing is more tempted than ever to engage in pre-emptive actions in order to demonstrate strength and resolve. This 'fight or flight' mindset is fortified by the belief that China will be treated as the prime enemy regardless of what it does, simply by virtue of being the world's number two power.²⁷

Coronavirus:

The pandemic has raised the stakes. Far from China and the United States joining forces to meet this common threat, there has been a desperate scramble for legitimacy. Beijing has sought to evade responsibility for the original outbreak and its early lack of transparency by highlighting its subsequent success in bringing the pandemic under control, contrasting this to the mismanagement and record death toll in the United States. Conversely, the Trump Administration has attacked Beijing for causing the pandemic and then covering it up.

The intensity of the blame game reflects the insecurity felt by both leaders. Although Xi was never in any danger of losing control, the legitimacy of his highly personalised rule is tied to his ability to solve national problems. For Trump, the challenge is existential. Coronavirus has plunged a hitherto buoyant US economy into the worst depression since the Great Crash of 1929, and resulted in the largest public health emergency since the flu pandemic of 1918. His chances of being re-elected for a second term in November 2020 are minimal unless he can change the story. That means one thing above all: hitting China hard and often, and ensuring that Beijing is held responsible for the suffering of the American people.

To sum up, Beijing's calculus in relation to the global order has shifted in recent years. But it is unclear how much. Chinese foreign policy has

previously been described as a combination of ‘self-confidence’ and ‘self-inferiority’,²⁸ and this is still largely true. Xi and the CCP believe that China, as a great power and civilisation, is entitled to play a leading role in the world. Yet they also recognise that its long-term prosperity depends on a benign international environment.²⁹ Looking ahead, the great challenge facing Beijing will be to balance growing ambition with an abiding desire for security.

Russia and the Global Order

If China has been the biggest beneficiary of the post-Cold War order, then Russia regards itself as its chief victim. For the past 15 years, Moscow’s narrative has been that Western governments, led by the United States, took cynical advantage of the collapse of the Soviet Union. They treated Russia as a defeated power, riding roughshod over its geopolitical interests by expanding the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to Russia’s borders. They wrecked its economy by forcing through ill-motivated prescriptions. And they interfered in its domestic politics, undermining its sovereignty at every turn.

The Putin elite view the rules-based international order as a self-serving enterprise, whose cant about universal norms and values applies a thin moral veneer to the pursuit of Western interests. Unlike Beijing, Moscow believes this order is irredeemable. Not only is liberalism obsolete,³⁰ but the notion of a unitary West has disintegrated. In these circumstances, the logical course is to expedite the demise of the liberal order and replace it with a multipolar or ‘polycentric’ system that reflects twenty-first century realities. This means a diminished role for a once hegemonic United States, and a much enhanced influence for other leading powers, principally China and Russia.

Putin’s promotion of a global Russia is consistent with a strategic culture dating back three centuries. Since Peter the Great (1682–1725), the evolution of the Russian state — and empire — has predisposed it to acting as one of the leading powers in the world. Catherine the Great was a dominant force in Europe in the second half of the eighteenth century. Alexander I accepted the surrender of Paris in 1814. The Soviet Army captured Berlin at the end of the Second World War. And during the Cold War the USSR was one of two nuclear superpowers. The West may see Russia as opportunistic and little more than a spoiler, but most Russians view their country as a great power by historical destiny.³¹

In reality, Putin is less interested in a new world order than in reviving traditional great power arrangements. One format is a revamped version of the Concert of Europe after the Napoleonic Wars. Although

the membership would be different, the underlying principles would be the same: the great powers co-manage the world; they respect each other's spheres of influence and vital interests; and they do not interfere in each other's domestic affairs. There would be no room for supranational constructs such as universal values. State actors, and especially the great powers, would rule.

An even more exclusive arrangement would be a 'Yalta 2.0' — an idea Putin has hinted at from time to time. This reflects the common view in Moscow that there are only three independent centres of global power today: the United States, China, and Russia. Putin cites the 1945 Yalta agreement between Franklin D Roosevelt, Joseph Stalin, and Winston Churchill as the exemplar of great power cooperation.³² A Yalta 2.0 would be more compact than a 'Concert', and be shaped by personal deal-making between leaders. It would play to Putin's strengths, since he has good relations with both Xi and Trump. And it could in some circumstances position Russia as the balancing or swing power between the United States and China.³³

The Kremlin understands, though, that such a scenario is unlikely as long as Russia's (and China's) relations with the United States remain fraught. Trump may be the most Kremlin-friendly president in American history, but that has hardly improved the overall US–Russia dynamic. So the Kremlin has put its faith in the Sino–Russian partnership. The intention here is not to build a political–military alliance against the United States, since that would limit Moscow's options and in any case find little favour in Beijing. Rather, it is to strengthen Russia's international position; partnership with China is seen as a force multiplier.

Nevertheless, the Kremlin remains wary about Russia becoming over-dependent on China, especially in light of the increasing ambition of Beijing's foreign policy and the inequality of the Sino–Russian relationship. Consequently, it is reaching out to other major players, such as France and Germany, while diversifying Russia's ties across Asia, and preserving some level of stable interaction with the United States. If Russia can develop good or at least functional relations with both sides in the West–China divide, it would exercise an international influence greater than at any time since the fall of the Soviet Union.

The coronavirus pandemic has ruled nothing out. Putin's mishandling of the public health emergency in Russia has resulted in his lowest ratings in 20 years. And the combination of lockdown and the collapse of global oil prices has severely damaged the economy.³⁴ But coronavirus has had little discernible effect on Russian foreign policy,

except to reinforce its fundamentals. As before, strategic flexibility is key. The partnership with China remains the cornerstone of Russia's international relations, but Putin has kept his options open. He has flagged his interest in improved engagement with Washington, for example by moving on arms control talks with a view to extending START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty).³⁵

With the world's attention fixed on the pandemic and on US–China confrontation, Russia has benefited from a lower profile. There has been no change in its opposition to a rules-based international order. But in the current climate, some Western leaders — notably Trump and French President Emmanuel Macron — view Putin as a pragmatic player worth courting.³⁶ Calls for an accommodation to draw Russia away from China suggest that it is becoming sanitised to some extent. If this turns out to be a longer-term trend, it will increase Putin's room for manoeuvre across many areas of foreign policy activity — Ukraine, the Middle East, relations with the United States and Europe, and the partnership with China.

Convergence and Divergence

Beijing and Moscow have different attitudes and approaches to the global order. Yet these contradictions have not damaged their relationship. The Sino–Russian partnership has gone from strength to strength, leading some observers to conclude that it is an alliance in all but name.³⁷ This assessment, while plausible, is mistaken.

China and Russia are strategically autonomous actors. They cooperate not because they are fellow members of an Authoritarian International, but because they judge that it best serves their respective political, economic, and strategic interests. This is a partnership largely free of ideological and emotional baggage — in marked contrast to the Sino–Soviet 'unbreakable friendship' of the 1950s. It helps, too, that it is not an alliance.³⁸ Both sides retain the flexibility to develop other relationships, and to hold divergent positions with limited consequences for their partnership.

Beijing and Moscow agree on much. They seek to constrain the exercise of American power. They aim to suppress or exclude liberal influences at home. They subscribe to the realist tenet that great powers have certain natural rights, including regional spheres of influence and non-interference by others in their internal affairs. On more specific issues, too, their views often coincide. They believe in a 'sovereign' internet. They oppose the deployment of US missile defence systems in Eastern

Europe and Northeast Asia. And they regard the Trump Administration's policies towards North Korea and Iran as destabilising.

Despite these convergences, the principal rationale of the Sino–Russian partnership is not to challenge the global primacy of the United States.³⁹ Beijing and Moscow do not coordinate grand strategy, and there is no conspiracy to bring down the liberal order — hardly surprising given their different views of it. Rather, both parties aim to facilitate an international environment that supports the legitimacy and stability of their regimes. To this purpose, they look to each other for political and psychological support. This mutualism is the single most important driver of their cooperation today, and has been accentuated by the perception of an unrestrained and hostile United States.

Such mutualism, however, has its limits. It does not lead China and Russia to undertake actions they would otherwise not pursue. Beijing's increasingly assertive behaviour in the Western Pacific reflects long-standing Chinese objectives, energised by Xi's personal stamp. It is not a consequence of Sino–Russian cooperation, much less coordination. Conversely, while Moscow's criticisms of US freedom of navigation operations in the Western Pacific, missile defence deployment in South Korea, and policy towards North Korea may be regarded in the West as unhelpful, they are a function of its relations with Washington, not Beijing. Russia seeks to advance its own interests in the region, not those of some fictitious conjoined entity.



Putin signs documentation at a meeting of Eurasian Economic Council regarding agreement between Silk Road Economic Belt and Eurasian Economic Union, 8 May 2015. Photo courtesy Presidential Executive Office, President of Russia.

Moscow has played little part in the expansion of the BRI across Eurasia. Indeed, here the Chinese regard Russia mainly as a potential obstacle to be skilfully negotiated. The May 2015 agreement between the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and Putin's Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) was designed to allay Russian fears of strategic displacement.⁴⁰ Since then, Beijing has played along with the Kremlin construct of a Greater Eurasia because it is important to keep Moscow onside. It is a similar story in the Arctic, where Beijing has had to tread carefully given Russian sensitivities over sovereignty. In the end, Chinese energy (and shipping) companies gained access through fortuitous circumstances. Russia needed essential investment and technology to fill the hole left by the withdrawal of Western companies after the imposition of post-Crimea sanctions in 2014 – and China was the only country willing and able to deliver.

Chinese moral support had no bearing on Putin's decisions to invade Ukraine, intervene in Syria, or interfere in the US presidential election. In fact, the Chinese have been privately critical of Russian actions.⁴¹ Beijing and Moscow stay well clear of each other's most controversial issues. The Chinese have adhered to a neutral position on Ukraine, while seizing the opportunity to become the largest external investor in the country after the EU. And Russia has done the same on South China Sea territoriality, not least because it is committed to developing energy cooperation with Vietnam in waters disputed by Beijing.⁴² Moscow is especially anxious to avoid collateral damage arising from an escalation of US–China tensions.⁴³

True, Sino–Russian defence cooperation has grown significantly since 2014. Moscow's former reluctance to sell high-end military items to Beijing has given way to major deals for the Su-35 multipurpose fighter and S-400 anti-aircraft missile system. Military exercises are more frequent and substantial, exemplified by People's Liberation Army (PLA) participation in Vostok-2018 (Russia's largest ever post-Cold War exercise), annual naval manoeuvres, and a controversial joint air patrol over the Dokdo/Takeshima Islands in July 2019.⁴⁴ Russia is also helping the PLA to upgrade its missile early warning systems. High-level defence exchanges have become routine, and a new framework agreement on defence cooperation is expected later this year.

But some perspective is needed. While the two militaries have close working relations, interoperability remains minimal.⁴⁵ Chinese participation in Russian exercises is limited and peripheral.⁴⁶ The 2019 joint air patrol appears to have been a somewhat baroque attempt at political signalling, rather than a qualitative shift in cooperation. (Thus far, it has not been repeated.) Russia sells more top-end weaponry to

India than to China, and has expanded arms exports across Asia from Turkey to Vietnam.⁴⁷ And improved missile early warning systems in China, far from threatening regional security, should bring greater predictability and contribute to strategic stability in East Asia.⁴⁸

A Coronavirus Twist?

The main impact of coronavirus on the Sino–Russian partnership may be on its internal dynamics. Over the years, Beijing has gained the upper hand in the relationship. Moscow’s annexation of Crimea, in particular, proved a watershed moment. The resulting near-breakdown between Russia and the West led to greater dependence on China, tilting the bilateral partnership towards Beijing’s policy preferences.

Coronavirus may have led to a partial reversal of fortunes. Although it has reinforced Russia’s economic dependence on China,⁴⁹ politically it is a different story. China, rather than Russia, is being widely condemned and is in need of friends. It is Putin, not Xi, who is being pursued by the White House and the Élysée Palace. Globally, China remains much more influential than Russia. But it is no longer so evident that Russia needs China more than the other way around. This gives Putin some latitude, at least tactically, and suggests Xi will continue to massage Kremlin sensitivities.

THE CULPABILITY OF THE WEST

There is much to deplore about recent Chinese and Russian policies: the mass incarceration of Uighurs in Xinjiang province; Beijing's influence operations overseas; the PLA's illicit building of military infrastructure in the South China Sea; Moscow's annexation of Crimea, its invasion of Donbass, and the shooting down of flight MH17; its role in aggravating the Syrian Civil War, including enabling the use of chemical weapons; and Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election. Xi's increasingly authoritarian rule and Putin's apparent determination to be president-for-life⁵⁰ are further indicators of a negative direction of travel in both countries.

But the point is not whether Beijing and Moscow have behaved badly, or whether some of their actions have harmed Western interests. Both are true. The real question concerns the principal causes of the crisis of post-Cold War order. Here, the record of the West reveals a litany of failings that have done more than anything else to discredit liberal norms and institutions, and weaken global governance. They include, most notably, the widening gulf between rules-based principles and arbitrary behaviour; calamitous policy-making over a period of nearly two decades; and the erosion of transatlantic unity and of the idea of the West.

(Not) Practising What You Preach

The most striking failure of Western democracies is their inability — or unwillingness — to live up to the principles underpinning a liberal order. This problem is not new. A rules-based system does not exist in a vacuum, but reflects the realities of power. For much of the post-Cold War period, America as the sole superpower was the ultimate arbiter of what rules applied, when, and to whom. US exceptionalism reached new heights under President George W Bush.⁵¹ The 2003 invasion of Iraq was only the most notorious instance of Washington deciding that it would not be bound by supranational rules, but would act in what it judged to be America's national interests.⁵²

Today, however, the disjunction between principle and practice is unprecedented. The Trump White House has laid waste to international rules, conventions, and values. Washington has routinely dismissed the United Nations, and withdrawn (or signalled its intention to withdraw) from major international accords, such as the Paris Climate Agreement. It has trashed agreements that the United States itself initiated, or in which it played a leading role, such as the original Trans-Pacific

Partnership (TPP), the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF). Trump has never bothered to hide his disdain for NATO, or that he views the EU more as a rival than a partner. His approach to the US alliance network in Northeast Asia is overtly transactional. Most recently, he has announced America's withdrawal from the WHO at the peak of the coronavirus pandemic.

We are not talking about the occasional breach of rules-based governance, but of a new normal – an American exceptionalism with few (if any) moral and political constraints. Washington's behaviour is not only objectionable in itself. It has also given Beijing and Moscow all the justification they need to indulge their own considerable sense of self-entitlement. Exceptionalism for one great power means exceptionalism for all. As a result, the notion of a rules-based order has become hollowed out.

The Ineptitude of Western Policymaking

The contradictions between the rhetoric and practice of the rules-based order have been compounded by catastrophic policymaking. The Iraq invasion, the never-ending war in Afghanistan, and the 2011 NATO intervention in Libya are failures, even judged in practical terms.⁵³ They have revealed a damning level of ineptitude, encouraging China, Russia, and other non-Western countries not only to feel self-righteous, but also empowered. The West has never appeared so ineffectual or limited in its capacity to shape global governance.



*Chancellor Merkel, President Trump and former Italian Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni during the first working session of the 2017 G7 Summit, 26 May 2017.
Photo courtesy Flickr/Palazzo Chigi.*

The deficit of credibility is not just in individual policies, but is also structural. The 2008 global financial crisis exposed the vulnerability of

the leading Western nations and the Western-led international economic system. Simultaneously, it revealed the resilience of China, which survived the crisis in much better shape. The West was shown to have feet of clay, with obsolescent policies and institutions. From here, it was a natural step for the non-Western powers to argue for a greater say within international institutions like the IMF and the World Bank, and to promote mechanisms of their own, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the BRI, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).

The slowness of the post-crisis economic recovery in Europe further damaged the reputation of Western policymaking. A decade of austerity widened divisions not only across the EU, but also within individual member states. Growing inequality, the erosion of social welfare, and popular alienation from governing elites created the conditions for the growth of far-right extremism, fuelled further by a collective failure to manage the largest movement of refugees since the end of the Second World War. The shortcomings of European governments were broadcast to the world. The nexus between liberal democracy and good governance was severed. The liberal West was no longer a model to emulate.

Western governments have reminded us of their failings with their responses to coronavirus. Besides the United States, which has achieved world-worst results, four European countries – the United Kingdom, Italy, France, and Spain – have registered some of the highest death tolls in the world.⁵⁴ These are all well-established Western democracies, poster boys for liberal governance. And yet they have been found badly wanting on the most critical national and international challenge in decades. It scarcely matters whether there are mitigating factors or that others are also at fault. What the rest of the world (and their own populations) sees is incapacity and weakness.

The Fragmentation of the West

This raises the question of whether a unitary ‘West’ still exists. Despite talk of shared values, it is unclear what those values are and to what extent they are shared. Are the commonalities between the Trump Administration and, say, the coalition government of German Chancellor Angela Merkel greater than the differences between them? German President (and former Foreign Minister) Frank-Walter Steinmeier thinks not.⁵⁵ What is one to make of Hungary and Poland, where the separation of powers barely survives? Meanwhile, leaders such as Trump and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán appear to

have more in common with authoritarian rulers than with their counterparts in NATO.⁵⁶

Transatlantic relations are at their lowest point since the Suez Crisis in 1956. But we are witnessing a crisis of Europe no less severe. This is evident not just in the conflict between authoritarian and liberal tendencies, but also in the alienation between different parts of Europe. The Eurozone crisis reinforced a north–south divide between fiscally conservative EU member states led by Germany, and allegedly feckless countries, such as Greece and Italy. The Brexit debate became polarised in large part because of popular resentment in the United Kingdom against migrant workers from Eastern Europe.

Coronavirus has highlighted the flimsiness of EU solidarity. There has been bitter debate over debt-sharing and the size and terms of the economic relief package to the worst affected member states.⁵⁷ More broadly, the shift in influence from EU institutions to national governments — already visible pre-coronavirus — has accelerated, and threatens to widen political, economic, and cultural fissures across Europe.⁵⁸

The breakdown of transatlantic consensus and growing European divisions highlight a more fundamental problem. The principles that have hitherto distinguished and sustained the modern West — the rule of law, transparency, accountability, the separation of powers — are now in question. The issue is no longer just policy disagreements or conflicting interests. At stake are the very identity, values, and purpose of the West.

SALVAGING LIBERALISM

The plight of liberalism has weakened our capacity to meet a formidable array of challenges: climate change and environmental catastrophe; growing poverty and inequality; the erosion of the international trading system in the face of rising protectionism; and the spread of ultra-nationalism and xenophobic sentiment across the world. To revive a functioning international order is more than ever a vital priority. Neither bromides ('rules-based order', 'win-win') nor mutual recriminations will do. Equally, there is no silver bullet for the present crisis of global governance. Addressing it will involve a range of approaches, and sometimes counter-intuitive ways of thinking and acting.

Get Real, Not Realist

Realists feel vindicated by the return of geopolitics. The illusions of post-Cold War internationalism have been dispelled. The West has sobered up, remembering belatedly that all politics is competitive and often confrontational. In the realist worldview, the choice is binary: great power rivalry amounting in time to conflict; or strategic accommodation, negotiated from a position of strength. Coronavirus has reinforced these beliefs, with US–China disagreements metastasising into a great power animus deeper than any since the Cold War.

It is all very well, though, to chastise the liberal internationalists of the 1990s and 2000s for their apparent belief that we were entering a post-geopolitics age. But the judgement that they were wrong in everything is no less misconceived. Thomas Hobbes' 'state of nature' is not humanity's timeless fate. What was true of the exceptionally bloody seventeenth century is in most respects not applicable to our present era, which despite its sea of troubles is one of the most peaceful in history.⁵⁹

Contrary to the realist narrative, the great powers do not hold sway. The limitations of their influence have been repeatedly exposed. The United States, the only true superpower, is losing a 20-year war in Afghanistan, one of the most backward countries in the world. Washington has been humiliated in another protracted conflict in Iraq. It has made no progress in securing the denuclearisation of North Korea, with the latter instead achieving a quantum leap in nuclear weapons capabilities. The United States cannot even manage regime change in its own backyard, as Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela continues to defy all

attempts to unseat him. And the Trump Administration's hopeless response to coronavirus has made the United States more an anti-model than model for many countries.⁶⁰

Nor are other leading powers doing much better. Russia may have annexed Crimea, but it has lost its hold on Ukraine, and become uncomfortably reliant on China. Major European powers such as Germany and France have been unable to advance their visions for Europe, while the United Kingdom has marginalised itself.⁶¹ India remains a limited power, notwithstanding its developing relations with the United States and the fluffing-up of the 'Indo-Pacific' as a twenty-first century construct. China would appear to be the exception to the general decline of the great powers. But it, too, is suffering major blowback, exacerbated by its clumsy handling of the politics of coronavirus.⁶² Today, its ability to influence others has rarely seemed more uncertain. As the dissident Chinese intellectual Xu Zhangrun has observed, "now the whole world is on guard" against it.⁶³

It is time, then, that we jettisoned the tired notion that international politics revolves around the great powers. For the truth is that they have seldom been more impotent. To base an entire foreign policy on the premise of great power confrontation, as the United States has done through its National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy, is to miss the point. Such an oversight is also unaffordable as the world faces a number of threats that are far more pressing and significant.

Focus on Twenty-First Century Problems

The most obvious priority is managing the coronavirus pandemic. Its destructiveness has grabbed the attention of policymakers around the world in a way not seen since the Second World War. Almost overnight, governments have had to deal with multiple clear and present dangers. In addition to the global health emergency, coronavirus has led to the worst depression since the 1930s, intensified culture wars in the United States and Europe, further undermined transatlantic and European unity, and severely aggravated international tensions. It has also thrown an unforgiving spotlight on the bankruptcy of global governance in its current, disorderly form.

If coronavirus is the most immediate peril facing humanity, then the threat of climate change is even larger and more devastating in its consequences, both now and in the longer term. Yet most governments (not least Australia) have ignored, denied, or minimised its importance; made half-hearted and wholly inadequate commitments to cut carbon

emissions; played for time they do not have; and shifted responsibility onto others. Next to the existential menace posed by accelerating climate change, geopolitical constructs such as the balance of power and spheres of influence come across as relics of bygone ages, when great powers trod the earth.

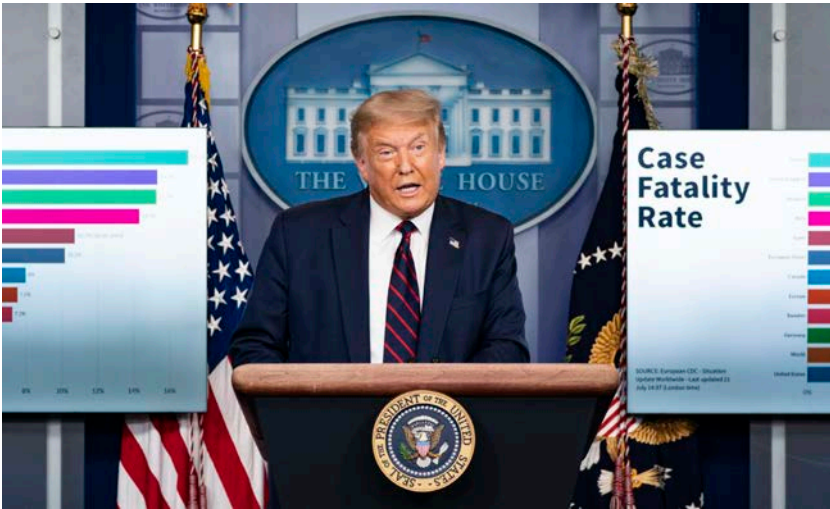
Unfortunately, the economic ramifications of coronavirus have led to misguided moves to drop or weaken carbon emission and other environmental standards.⁶⁴ Nothing could be more short-sighted. Clinging to old habits of economic development, including the obsession with limitless GDP growth, is increasingly unsustainable. As the International Energy Agency (IEA) points out, any global economic recovery will need to be based on clean energy transitions.⁶⁵

Global poverty and widening socioeconomic inequality are twenty-first century problems of similar magnitude to climate change and pandemic disease. For millennia, their consequences were relatively self-contained. No longer. A globalised world means not only the globalisation of benefits, but also of costs and risks. Poverty in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East stokes misery, conflict, and refugee flows.⁶⁶ It has destabilised European governments and the liberal order far more than any Russian or Chinese threat. In the West itself, the integrity of democratic institutions and processes is imperiled because governments have failed to address growing inequality and unfairness within societies.

Take Responsibility

Much of the Western response to the crisis of the liberal order has been to avoid responsibility. Blaming Beijing and Moscow is a lot easier than developing effective policies of one's own. But if the West is to demonstrate to the world and its own publics that liberalism is the way forward, then its decision-makers will have to do better than simply point the finger at others.

The coronavirus emergency illustrates this well. Western governments are right to counter Chinese (and Russian) disinformation over the origins of the pandemic, and to highlight the damage caused by Beijing's lack of transparency in the early stages. But 'winning' the battle of narratives counts for little when the response of many Western governments, most obviously the United States, to the worst public health crisis in a century has been so woeful.



*Trump White House press briefing 21 July 2020.
Photo courtesy Flickr/White House*

In general, Western policymakers must do more to bridge the gap between liberal principles and illiberal practice. There can be no rules-based order under an American president who is openly contemptuous of its norms. Or when European leaders flirt with an increasingly autocratic Putin because a misguided strategic calculus — the naïve hope they can draw him away from Beijing⁶⁷ — outweighs their commitment to liberal values. The separation of powers is in serious jeopardy, not only in Poland and Hungary, but also in flagship democracies, such as the United States and the United Kingdom.⁶⁸ Western governments complain about dirty Chinese and Russian money, yet facilitate such financial flows through the City of London and offshore tax havens.⁶⁹ If we are unable or unwilling to restore the integrity of liberal principles, we cannot expect others to respect, let alone follow, them.

Compete Better

Western democracies have to show that liberalism works, that it can deliver public benefits as great as, or greater than, those available under authoritarian regimes. The West triumphed in the Cold War not because it beat the Soviet Union militarily, but because it proved that liberal democracy, despite its flaws, was vastly more effective in this respect than the command-administrative system of the USSR. The legitimacy of Western democracies rests ultimately on performance: ensuring personal and public security, decent living standards, and a healthy, safe environment for all.

This entails a dual-track approach. First, it means taking pride in liberal values, institutions, and achievements. This is no time for cultural cringe

or undue modesty. As Steven Pinker notes, “globally, the resilience of democracy depends in part on its prestige in the community of nations”.⁷⁰ So when there is a good story to tell, it must be told. The blithe assumption in much of the West that liberal democracy is *self-evidently* superior to other forms of governance is unwarranted and self-defeating.

Conversely, when non-democratic regimes perform better, or claim to do so, Western democracies must learn to compete. This applies across the board — to the management of public health crises; the dissemination of news and information; the upgrading of military, artificial intelligence (AI), and cyber capabilities; mobile communications; the development of green technologies; and boosting research and education.

For example, with Huawei and the roll-out of 5G technology in Europe, it is not enough to ban the company’s participation from mobile communication networks on security grounds. A Western alternative has to be developed that is competitive in terms of technology, price, and accessibility.⁷¹ Likewise, in the area of digital surveillance, the onus is on democracies to develop a model of governance that others will want to emulate.⁷² And in relation to the BRI and infrastructural development in Eurasia, it is up to the West to make an “affirmative pitch to countries about ... high-quality, high-standard investments that will best serve progress.”⁷³

All this will require greater policy and financial commitments than ever before. It also demands an altogether different mindset — one that aims to be better at what we do, rather than just negating what others are doing. The frequent suggestion that Western companies only lose out to Chinese firms because the latter cheat is not just untrue, it is pathetic. As the prominent Asia specialist Evan Feigenbaum has observed, “whining isn’t competing”.⁷⁴

The irony of the present situation is that Western polities and societies are better equipped than China to meet twenty-first century challenges. They are wealthier; their scientific research and technological capacities are generally more advanced; they still dominate the international economic and financial system; and their collective soft power is far superior. While China is narrowing the gap in some areas, this is due as much to Western complacency and neglect as it is to Chinese dynamism. It is high time, then, that the West stopped assigning mythical characteristics to its competitors, and upped its own game instead.

Work with Others

For decades, the West enjoyed one great advantage over China and Russia/the Soviet Union. It represented a community of states, joined together by shared interests and, for the most part, common values. Although this cohesiveness has since become badly frayed, the West nevertheless retains considerable pulling power, both within and outside its ranks. By comparison, Beijing has few friends, notwithstanding its outreach through the BRI, while most countries view Russia as an opportunistic partner at best.

However, this comparative advantage is at grave risk. The United States under Trump is alienating many of its allies. The slogan ‘Make America Great Again’ should come with a codicil: at the expense of everyone else.⁷⁵ Washington’s response to the coronavirus has reinforced the image of an intensely self-absorbed leadership that sees allies not as genuine partners, but as foot soldiers for its interests — that is, when it cares about them at all. Nor should the Europeans be exempt from criticism. For years they have paid the barest of lip service to burden-sharing within NATO, growing economically fat while relying on the United States to provide for their defence. Most recently, coronavirus has underlined the fragility of a European unity already strained by the Eurozone and refugee crises.

If a liberal order is to survive in any form, these negative trends will need to be reversed. Denial, in the form of repeated claims about the resilience of the transatlantic consensus or European unity, is hardly viable.⁷⁶ Without a properly collective vision and a real commitment to make it work, organisations such as NATO and the EU will have no future.⁷⁷ And the idea of the West itself will become extinct — and sooner than many people think.⁷⁸



Photo courtesy Flickr: Official White House Photo by Shealah Craighead

RETHINKING GLOBAL ORDER

Realist hopes that the great powers are capable of dealing with the enormous challenges facing us are deluded. No equivalent of the nineteenth century post-Napoleonic Concert or the Yalta Conference will bring about a new and stable world order. Equally, putting our faith in the innate superiority of liberalism would be a 'triumph' of hope over experience.

We need to think more flexibly about the building blocks of a functioning international system. This means, in the first instance, recognising that US global leadership in its post-Cold War form is over. The United States will remain the leading power in the world for at least the next decade, possibly longer. But already pre-coronavirus, the belief that it could dominate as before had become untenable. America can, and indeed must, be an agenda-setter. But it will need to work much more closely with its allies and a diverse range of partners, many of whom will have different perspectives and priorities.

The evolution of global governance will bring greater input from middle-level powers (such as Australia) and smaller states. It will involve non-state actors to an unprecedented degree. Business, civil society organisations, and private individuals will be crucial to our collective capacity to manage problems such as climate change, pandemics, energy security, and sustainable growth. Multilateral organisations will become more, not less, important, as international society looks to bridge the deficit of global governance left by the relative decline of the United States and the inadequacies of the other great powers.

International decision-making will become even more complicated than it is today. We live in a globalised but fragmented world. The challenges facing us are immense. The number of players has ballooned. The self-entitlement of the great powers is enduring, and the level of distrust between them daunting. The odds are heavily against success. How, then, might a new global order work in practice?

Paradoxically, coronavirus shows us the way forward. The scale and universality of the dangers facing humanity may concentrate minds and unite efforts. Although the pandemic has exposed the limitations of institutions such as the WHO, it has highlighted the critical importance of multilateral approaches to problem-solving. Talk of reverting to national solutions to global challenges is fantasy, as is the hope that globalisation can be reversed. Our interests and problems transcend national boundaries, and therefore so must our responses.

To this purpose, governments should be more receptive to new regional and global mechanisms, from the AIB to the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (which could be usefully expanded). This does not mean jettisoning established organisations, such as NATO, but building on them and even redefining their mission. The coexistence of new and old could lead eventually to a network of interlocking structures that helps us tackle key priorities, be it climate change, security in the Asia–Pacific and Europe, or addressing the infrastructure deficit in Eurasia and Africa. It is also important to build capacity in existing multilateral institutions, starting with the chronically under-resourced WHO.⁷⁹

The response to coronavirus foreshadows another trend, which is that foreign policy will increasingly be shaped by societies rather than elites only. Although much has been said about the return of state actors in international relations, the really big change is that publics are becoming more engaged — the intense debate over Brexit being but one example. As threats such as climate change increasingly impact our lives and our perceptions, governments will be under mounting popular pressure to respond. This will require an all-of-society approach, involving the devolution of powers to regional and local government, as well as to non-state actors.

International cooperation will revolve more around discrete issues than value systems. Coronavirus has not discriminated between democratic and authoritarian regimes, and the point-scoring between Washington on one side, and Beijing (and Moscow) on the other, has been irrelevant to the task at hand. Similarly, global climate change has no ‘favourites’, striking at countries regardless of their models of governance. While ideological and normative fissures will continue to matter in international relations, this need not preclude convergence and cooperation in areas of vital common interest.⁸⁰ There will be many issues where the usual alignments will not work and where flexible coalition-building will be needed instead.

If there is to be a new global order, it will need to be more inclusive and eclectic — less prescriptive and faux-moralistic, and more tolerant of normative, cultural, and strategic differences. Lecturing others about their faults while behaving badly oneself has done nothing to advance the cause of liberalism around the world. On the contrary, it has debased and discredited the very idea of an international order founded on liberal principles. To reverse this decline, we need to focus more on improving our own performance, starting with good governance at home. The most compelling argument for liberalism, and a liberal order, is to prove that it is more effective and more humane than any of the alternatives.

NOTES

- 1 See, for example, Graham Allison, “The New Spheres of Influence”, *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2020, 30–40, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-02-10/new-spheres-influence>; and “The Myth of the Liberal Order”, *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2018, 124–33, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2018-06-14/myth-liberal-order>.
- 2 Thomas Wright, “The Return to Great-Power Rivalry was Inevitable”, *The Atlantic*, 12 September 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/the-return-to-great-power-rivalry-was-inevitable/>.
- 3 Paul Dibb, “How the Geopolitical Partnership between China and Russia Threatens the West”, Australian Strategic Policy Institute Special Report, November 2019, <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/how-geopolitical-partnership-between-china-and-russia-threatens-west>.
- 4 See, for example, Timothy Garton Ash, “A Better World Can Emerge after Coronavirus. Or a Much Worse One”, *The Guardian*, 6 May 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/commentisfree/2020/may/06/better-world-coronavirus-young-europeans-democracy-universal-basic-income>; also Mark Beeson, “We’re All Socialists Now”, *The Interpreter*, 9 April 2020, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/we-re-all-socialists-now>.
- 5 “COVIDcast: Hugh White on Coronavirus and Asia’s Power Balance”, Lowy Institute podcast with Sam Roggeveen, 26 June 2020, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/covidcast-hugh-white-coronavirus-and-asia-s-power-balance>.
- 6 “...the liberal idea has become obsolete. It has come into conflict with the interests of the overwhelming majority of the population” — Vladimir Putin interview with the *Financial Times*, 27 June 2019, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/60836>.
- 7 The term ‘suicidal statecraft’ originated with the British historian Arnold Toynbee, who identified it as the main cause of imperial collapse. Several decades later, Zbigniew Brzezinski applied the term to describe US foreign policy post-9/11 — “George W. Bush’s Suicidal Statecraft”, *New York Times*, 13 October 2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/13/opinion/george-w-bushs-suicidal-statecraft.html>.
- 8 According to Freedom House, 2019 was the fourteenth successive year of decline in global freedom. See Sarah Repucci, “Freedom in The World 2020: A Leaderless Struggle for Democracy”, 1, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2020/leaderless-struggle-democracy>.
- 9 It is one of the tragedies of multilateralism that its successes, such as the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the work of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) are taken for granted.
- 10 Malcolm Chalmers of the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) identifies four pillars in the contemporary international system: a Universal Security System (USS) based on the principles of self-determination, non-aggression, and the inviolability of international borders; a Western System of liberal democracies and shared political, economic, and security interests; a Universal Economic System (UES) of agreements and institutions that provides the framework for international trade; and Major Power Relations

and Bargains. As Chalmers notes, there are multiple contradictions between the USS, the Western System, the UES, and Great Power Relations. Together, they scarcely amount to a coherent, functioning 'order', but reveal sharply clashing interests and agendas. See Malcolm Chalmers, "Which Rules? Why There is No Single 'Rules-Based International System'", RUSI Occasional Paper, April 2019, 2–4, https://rusi.org/sites/default/files/201905_op_which_rules_why_there_is_n_o_single_rules_based_international_system_web.pdf.

- 11 Fareed Zakaria reminds us that "the liberal international order was never as liberal, as international, or as orderly as it is now nostalgically described" — in "The New China Scare: Why America Shouldn't Panic about its Latest Challenger", *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2020, 63, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2019-12-06/new-china-scare>.
- 12 The BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) framework is more presentational than practical. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has grown institutionally, but has achieved little. Putin's Eurasian Economic Union has struggled to gain traction. Even the relatively successful Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) is just one of several bodies funding development projects in Eurasia.
- 13 For a more detailed discussion of these themes, see Bobo Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder* (Chatham House and Brookings, 2015), 53–66.
- 14 The difficulties the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has encountered in countries from Eastern Europe to Southeast Asia testify to the limitations of the so-called 'China model', itself a malleable and highly artificial construct. Developing countries have taken Beijing's money, and exploited its involvement to counterbalance pressure from Western governments. But with few exceptions, they have jealously guarded their political sovereignty and freedom of action.
- 15 *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 2017, 41, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.
- 16 *Ibid*, 45.
- 17 *EU-China — A Strategic Outlook*, European Commission and HR/VP contribution to the European Council, 12 March 2019, 1, <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-eu-china-a-strategic-outlook.pdf>.
- 18 "From Beijing's point of view, everything that the Chinese leadership has done, both domestically and internationally, has been completely justified, as it serves the long-term goal of preserving the Communist Party's rule, which in turn serves the interest of the whole Chinese nation" — Wang Jisi, "Assessing the Radical Transformation of US Policy toward China", *China International Strategy Review*, No 1, December 2019, 201.
- 19 The BRI encompasses many pre-existing projects that have subsequently been re-labelled. There is also a gulf between the amounts of money talked about, and actual funds disbursed. And the extent to which individual projects form part of a coherent whole has been exaggerated. In 2019 Beijing sought to reset the BRI, conscious that the mishandling of projects and public diplomacy was creating an increasingly negative image of China. See Richard Boucher, "China's Belt and Road: A Reality Check", *The Diplomat*, 29 March 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/03/chinas-belt-and-road-a-reality-check/>.

- ²⁰ Daniel Tobin points out that “national rejuvenation ... represents the common denominator aspiration of Chinese elites since the country’s humiliation in the mid-nineteenth century Opium Wars” — “How Xi Jinping’s ‘New Era’ Should Have Ended U.S. Debate on Beijing’s Ambitions”, Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), 8 May 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/how-xi-jinpings-new-era-should-have-ended-us-debate-beijings-ambitions>.
- ²¹ Wang, ‘Assessing the Radical Transformation of US Policy toward China’, 201.
- ²² Deng’s original ‘24-character strategy’ called on the Party to “observe calmly; secure our position; cope with affairs calmly; hide our capacities and bide our time; be good at maintaining a low profile; and never claim leadership.”
- ²³ Yan Xuetong notes that “Beijing has no clear plan for filling this leadership vacuum [left by Washington’s retreat] and shaping new international norms from the ground up” — in “The Age of Uneasy Peace”, *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2019, 40, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-12-11/age-uneasy-peace>.
- ²⁴ Xi’s much-publicised speech at Davos in February 2017 was notably lacking in detail — “Xi Jinping’s Keynote Speech at the World Economic Forum”, *Xinhua*, 6 April 2017, http://www.china.org.cn/node_7247529/content_40569136.htm.
- ²⁵ Jessica Chen Weiss, “A World Safe for Autocracy?”, *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2019, 93, 99, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2019-06-11/world-safe-autocracy>.
- ²⁶ As Richard McGregor observes, “[i]n the post-Mao era ... the United States has by and large been, at least until Donald Trump’s election, the indispensable enabler of China’s rise” — *Xi Jinping: The Backlash*, Lowy Institute Paper (Penguin Random House Australia, 2019), 16.
- ²⁷ Wang, “Assessing the Radical Transformation of US Policy toward China”, 200. See also “Internal Chinese Report Warns Beijing Faces Tiananmen-like Global Backlash over Virus”, Reuters, 4 May 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-china-sentiment-ex/exclusive-internal-chinese-report-warns-beijing-faces-tiananmen-like-global-backlash-over-virus-idUSKBN22G19C>.
- ²⁸ Jing Men, “China’s Peaceful Rise?”, *Studia Diplomatica*, Vol 56, No 6, 2003 — cited in Linda Jakobson, *China’s Foreign Policy Dilemma*, Lowy Institute Analysis (Sydney: Lowy Institute for International Policy, February 2013), 4, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/chinas-foreign-policy-dilemma>.
- ²⁹ Xi’s ‘China dream’ — China becoming a ‘fully developed nation’ by 2049, the centenary of the founding of the People’s Republic — is clearly contingent on a favourable international context.
- ³⁰ See Putin interview with the *Financial Times*, 27 June 2019, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/60836>.
- ³¹ Dmitri Trenin, “The World through Moscow’s Eyes: A Classic Russian Perspective”, *The Foreign Service Journal*, 3 March 2020, <https://carnegie.ru/2020/03/03/world-through-moscow-s-eyes-classic-russian-perspective-pub-81203>.
- ³² “I want to remind you that the Congress of Vienna in 1815 and the agreements made at Yalta in 1945, taken with Russia’s very active

participation, secured a lasting peace” — Putin address to the Valdai International Discussion Club, 19 September 2013, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19243>. Two years later, he pointed to the 1648 Peace of Westphalia (which concluded the Thirty Years’ War), the Congress of Vienna, and Yalta, as proving that peace depended on “securing and maintaining the existing balance of forces” — address to the Valdai International Discussion Club, 22 October 2015, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50548>.

- ³³ Sergei Karaganov, “The Future of The Big Triangle”, *Russia in Global Affairs*, 29 June 2020, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/future-big-triangle/>.
- ³⁴ Andrei Kolesnikov, “Why Putin’s Rating is at a Record Low”, Carnegie Moscow Center, 11 June 2020, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/82053>.
- ³⁵ Discussing arms control is one thing, achieving agreement to extend START quite another. Washington is not interested in a bilateral accommodation with Moscow, but only one that would bind Beijing as well.
- ³⁶ In June 2020, Trump floated the idea of expanding the G7 into a G11, including Russia, India, South Korea, and Australia — see Julian Borger, “Donald Trump Offers to Invite Vladimir Putin to Expanded G7 Summit”, *The Guardian*, 2 June 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/01/donald-trump-vladimir-putin-g7-call>.
- ³⁷ See, for example, Vasily Kashin, “Tacit Alliance: Russia and China Take Military Partnership to New Level”, Carnegie Moscow Center, 22 October 2019, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/80136>.
- ³⁸ As Andrey Kortunov notes, in many respects Beijing and Moscow enjoy a smoother and more productive interaction than many allied relationships — “Who Will Build the New World Order?”, Russian International Affairs Council, 6 June 2019, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/who-will-build-the-new-world-order/>.
- ³⁹ Many American commentators tend to view China–Russia relations almost exclusively through the prism of American interests. Thus, Michael Kofman claims that “their alignment is principally a balancing one against US efforts to retain primacy in international politics” — in Michael Kofman, “Towards a Sino–Russian Entente?”, *Riddle*, 29 November 2019, <https://www.ridl.io/en/towards-a-sino-russian-entente/>.
- ⁴⁰ See Alexander Gabuev, “Eurasian Silk Road Union: Towards a Russia–China Consensus?”, *The Diplomat*, 5 June 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/06/eurasian-silk-road-union-towards-a-russia-china-consensus/>.
- ⁴¹ Author’s private conversations with Chinese interlocutors.
- ⁴² Bennett Murray, “Vietnam’s Strange Ally in Its Fight with China”, *Foreign Policy*, 1 August 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/08/01/vietnams-strange-ally-in-its-fight-with-china/#>.
- ⁴³ See Yaroslav Trofimov and Thomas Grove, “Weary Russia Tries to Avoid Entanglement in U.S.–China Spat”, *Wall Street Journal*, 22 June 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/weary-russia-tries-to-avoid-entanglement-in-u-s-china-spat-11592654401>; also Dmitri Trenin, “How Russia Can Maintain Equilibrium in the Post-Pandemic Bipolar World”, Carnegie Moscow Center, 1 May 2020, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/81702>.
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- ⁴⁶ Vostok 2018 involved an estimated 300 000 Russian troops, but only 3200 Chinese troops. There was a Chinese contingent in the Tsentr-2019 exercise, along with forces from India, Pakistan, and the former Soviet Central Asian republics.
- ⁴⁷ Russia has sold the S-400 system to India and Turkey, as well as China. Southeast Asia is the biggest growth market for Russian arms, accounting for more than 60 per cent of total exports. See Alexander Kruglov, “Business Booming for Russia’s Arms Traders”, *Asia Times*, 22 April 2019, <https://asiatimes.com/2019/04/business-booming-for-russias-arms-traders/>; also Meaghan Tobin, “From Russia with Guns: Why is Southeast Asia Buying Arms From Moscow, Not Washington?”, *This Week in Asia*, 12 October 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3032608/russia-guns-why-southeast-asia-buying-arms-moscow-not-washington>.
- ⁴⁸ Dmitri Trenin, “How Cozy is Russia and China’s Military Relationship?”, Carnegie Moscow Center, 19 November 2019, <https://carnegie.ru/2019/11/19/how-cozy-is-russia-and-china-s-military-relationship-pub-80363>.
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- ⁵⁰ On 1 July 2020, a constitutional referendum granted Putin the option of serving two more presidential terms until 2036 (when he would be 84).
- ⁵¹ According to Fareed Zakaria, “[i]n its first two years, the George W. Bush administration walked away from more international agreements than any previous administration had” — “The Self-Destruction of American Power”, *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2019, 13, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2019-06-11/self-destruction-american-power>.
- ⁵² Examples of the Bush Administration breaking major international agreements include its abrogation of the 1972 ABM (anti-ballistic missile) Treaty and withdrawal from the 1997 Kyoto Protocol on climate change.
- ⁵³ Chalmers remarks that “[t]he strongest retrospective argument against recent Western interventions in Iraq, Libya and Syria is arguably not their illegality but their clear failure to achieve strategic success.” See Chalmers, “Which Rules?”, 12.
- ⁵⁴ “Coronavirus: COVID-19 Infections and Deaths — Latest Data”, <https://www.euronews.com/2020/07/15/covid-19-coronavirus-breakdown-of-deaths-and-infections-worldwide>.
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- ⁶⁰ Anne Applebaum, "Trump is Turning America into the 'Shithole Country' He Fears", *The Atlantic*, 3 July 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/07/when-trumps-understanding-of-the-world-is-flipped-on-its-head/613840/>.
- ⁶¹ The former Permanent Under-Secretary for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Simon Fraser, delivered a damning indictment of Britain's lost influence in a speech at Chatham House — "In Search of a Role: Rethinking British Foreign Policy", 7 November 2017, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/event/search-role-rethinking-british-foreign-policy>.
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- ⁶³ Xu Zhangrun, "A Letter Written in Gratitude and a Suggestion", 19 July 2020, <http://chinaheritage.net/journal/responding-to-a-gesture-of-support-xu-zhangrun/>. The biggest change in attitudes towards China has been in Europe, where positive sentiments in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis have given way to growing discomfort, resentment, and suspicion. See Andrew Small, "The Meaning of Systemic Rivalry: Europe and China beyond the Pandemic", European Council on Foreign Relations Policy Brief, 13 May 2020, https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/the_meaning_of_systemic_rivalry_europe_and_china_beyond_the_pandemic.
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- ⁶⁵ International Energy Agency, *Sustainable Recovery*, World Energy Outlook Special Report, June 2020, <https://www.iea.org/reports/sustainable-recovery>. See also Andrew Bailey, Mark Carney, François Villeroy de Galhau, and Frank Elderson,

- “The World Must Seize this Opportunity to Meet the Climate Challenge”, *The Guardian*, 5 June 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jun/05/world-climate-breakdown-pandemic>.
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- ⁶⁷ President Macron has become the chief advocate of rapprochement with Russia as a means of counterbalancing China’s rise. See his address to the French Ambassadors’ Conference, Paris, 27 August 2019, <https://lv.ambafrance.org/Ambassadors-conference-Speech-by-M-Emmanuel-Macron-President-of-the-Republic>.
- ⁶⁸ In addition to pushing through two new Supreme Court judges, President Trump also confirmed 150 federal judges in fewer than three years. See Jennifer Bendery, “Trump Has Confirmed 150 Lifetime Federal Judges. That’s A Lot”, *Huffington Post*, 18 September 2019, https://www.huffingtonpost.com.au/entry/trump-judges-courts-senate-rules-mcconnell-republicans_n_5d81397ee4b05f8fb6eee2e1?ri18n=true. In the United Kingdom, the Conservative government of Boris Johnson reacted furiously after the Supreme Court ruled that his prorogation of parliament was unlawful. There were suggestions that the powers of the Court could be diluted following a review of the constitutional relationship between the government and the judiciary. See Jane Croft and James Blitz, “Lawyers Fear Tories are Planning ‘Revenge’ Against Supreme Court”, *Financial Times*, 10 December 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/60f97382-1b4e-11ea-97df-cc63de1d73f4>.
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- ⁷⁷ “If the United States is to strengthen deterrence, establish a fairer and more reciprocal trading system, defend universal values, and solve global challenges, it simply cannot go it alone ... to be effective, any strategy of the United States must start with its allies” — Campbell and Sullivan, “Competition Without Catastrophe”, 110.
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