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American Dominance of the International Order

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A hegemon is the state that sets and enforces the rules of the international order. In 1945, with the rest of the world in tatters, the United States had a dominant position, could have imposed its will on any other state. In characteristic American fashion, we had a raucous domestic debate—not about how to dominate the world but about whether to remain engaged in the world at all. Fortunately for our freedom and prosperity, American governments of both political parties chose, instead of isolation, to build an international order of rules, alliances, and institutions that invited and rewarded participation by other states on our terms. No other state victorious in war had ever attempted to share so widely the spoils of conquest. No other state had ever bought so cheaply such a long expanse of peace between great powers and economic growth shared so widely among states.

This achievement alone would mark the United States as unique in the history of the state system. We are a superpower that used the time of our dominance to create a system that was not reliant solely on our

power to perpetuate itself. Historically, when a state becomes powerful, other states organize to confront it, to balance its power. Because the United States legitimated its power for other countries by participating in institutions and allowing itself to be constrained by the same rules that bound others, it has not engendered the same magnitude of opposition. As a result, the American order has been much less costly to maintain. We mostly don't have to enforce the rules.

Of course, it matters that we *can* enforce the rules. Our military strength and political willingness to fight wars about maintaining the order are essential. But because most states benefit from the rules we have established, we seldom have to impose them by force. The behavior that has historically driven the cycle of hegemonic rise and fall is the dominant power overextending itself and then being challenged by potential usurpers. By making American dominance about rules and institutions, our power has been less threatening to other states. Rather than seeking balance by opposing us, most states in the international order—and, crucially, the most powerful and prosperous states—see their interests as being served when they play by the same rules and participate in the same institutions as we do. America's challengers have tended to be states that cannot succeed by the rules we have established.

So the genius of the American order is that it is largely self-reinforcing. And no other state has proposed a model attractive enough to engender voluntary participation. The American system believes it is impossible for a state to have enduring economic prosperity without political liberty. The American system also is built upon the belief that the domestic political behavior of a state is a reliable indicator of its international behavior. Governments that allow themselves to be limited by law and are responsive to the will of their people are less likely to be threats to the American order. So we have fostered the creation and sustainment of other democratic governments, states that have the peaceful means to replace a government they no longer support.

This assortment of beliefs has been a radical departure from the norms of unlimited state sovereignty and policies that benefit the dominant state's power at the expense of others. America in its time of dominance has used its power not only for our own safety and enrichment but also for making possible those same things for others. We offer security that facilitates prosperity. We establish alliances to pool our strength and protect each other. We conclude trade agreements that foster more economic activity among rules-respecting states. We play by the rules and ensure others do as well. As a result, the American order rewards compliance, and the states that do comply become more like us over time and are therefore less likely to violently overthrow the order. The genius of this design has made American dominance enduring, even as other countries grow stronger, richer, and more involved in the international order. America's advantages are amplified in this international order.

Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis is fond of saying that the United States has two powers: the power of intimidation and the power of inspiration. If we look at the net favorability of attitudes toward the United States in various countries in the world, two facts are striking. The first is how large the group is of countries with citizenships that have very positive views of the United States. Notably, 89 percent of Iranians have a positive view. What this tells us is either that American policies are always smart, always positive, always beneficial (which is, of course, not true) or that citizens of certain countries give us credit even when they don't like our policies. It's a very common experience when one is abroad to hear, "Well, I don't like the American government, but I really like Americans," or "I don't like American policy on this, but I really like America." That's soft power at work. Our favorability is partly the result of our policies, but it's more than that. It's actually who we are as a political culture. It's about the truths we hold to be self-evident and how widely appealing they are to the aspirations of other people in the world.

Other countries want the success that the United States enjoys, even if they don't want the social and political consequences and wild cacophony of a system open enough that anybody can run for president and win. Other nations want to figure out how to have research universities like ours, the innovation of Silicon Valley, the financial esprit of Wall Street, and a blockbuster movie industry like Hollywood. Authoritarian countries try to create such outcomes without the messy, tumultuous freedom that makes them possible in the United States.

Nobody's done it yet. In the early 1990s, the political scientist Francis Fukuyama wrote a book called *The End of History and the Last Man,* which is now much derided. Of course, history hasn't ended, but his argument is a serious one, and it actually hasn't been disproven. He argues that freedom and prosperity are inherently linked and that there is no successful alternative to the American model. There may be challengers to it, but nobody has proven that you can actually be prosperous and stable over long periods of time without advocating the American model. Is there a country that is prosperous and lies outside of the American order, that doesn't have the rule of law, that doesn't have free expression? Is there a wealthy, stable society that doesn't play by the rules that we play by?

China is, of course, the most interesting test case. It became a rising power only when it began adopting the economic rules of the American order of free trade and free markets. It has not wholly adopted these rules: the government remains the major player in business, and the rule of law has not been reliably established. Yet enough opportunity was created to lift hundreds of millions of people out of poverty.

But can China keep a country without freedom, without the truths we hold to be self-evident, and still achieve political stability and prosperity? For the past forty years, China's government has instituted a set of policies that academics call authoritarian capitalism. It goes something like this: if the government helps you get rich, you have to accept that you won't have free speech, freedom of association, or freedom of

religion. So far, it's working, but this is a crude measure of power in the international order because, of course, we seldom know that a system has stopped being effective until the government falls. The American model considers prosperity and repression incompatible—especially as a country moves up the economic value chain from extractive industry and manufacturing to a service economy and creative industries.

Whether China's leadership can maintain its repression and still become a genuine competitor of the United States for control of the international order is the central question of war and peace in our time. If it can, other states will migrate toward the Chinese model. Because what ruler wouldn't prefer not to have the annoyances of a free media and accountability to demanding constituents, to reward political allies with the most profitable opportunities?

And China definitely has a different model of international order in mind. The "Chinese dream" outlined by President Xi envisions China powerful and prosperous without the political liberalism that has characterized the American order. He is banking on the Chinese people being willing to accept prosperity without demanding political liberty.

Singapore is an interesting example. It is a minuscule country, unlikely to be scalable in its model, but it's an important outlier, and it will be fascinating to see whether it proves stable once the founding generation of Singapore passes from the scene—that is, whether people who are not associated with the creation of independence in Singapore can actually have the same hold over public attitudes. Will they have the same level of confidence from the public such that they don't need to have the kinds of broader representation in order to keep legitimacy?

If China, Singapore, and other variants on the authoritarian capitalism model prove that countries don't have to play by America's rules in order to get the good outcomes that the United States has, then we will be like Athens or Camelot: a moment of beauty in history that gets crushed by alternatives. Historians will ask why we squandered these enormous advantages that we had at the end of the twentieth

century and the start of the twenty-first. We'll be a curiosity, like the collapsed Mayan civilization. "How did this happen?" they will ask. If the United States fails—that is, if the dominance that we have experienced in all of our lifetimes comes to an end—it will much more likely be the result of our own indiscipline than the assertive action of an adversary. As Abraham Lincoln said in a much more troubling time for our precious country, "If destruction is to be our lot we must ourselves be the authors of it."

Historically, hegemons reshape the order in their image. The strongest power, once it is powerful, starts to think about international relations the way its leaders think about their country's domestic relations. If one were to graph country wealth from 1500 forward, the lines would spike to represent the glory days of the Dutch Golden Age, the British Empire at its height in the nineteenth century, and the United States in the twentieth century. The only peaceful transition in the history of the state system was between Britain's hegemony and that of the United States. Every other such transition involved conquest. Why was this transition peaceful when no others have been peaceful?

There was friction between the United States and Britain in the nineteenth century. Just think about the War of 1812, when we defined our independence in contrast to what the British were. The British considered themselves a liberal government but not a democratic one. That is, they chose policies of open commerce; whereas the United States was, in the view of one British politician, "a country composed of elements so various and liable on all subjects to opinions so conflicting. They are a country of demagogues and non-entities."[1] It was only after a series of crises in the late nineteenth century that America and Britain began to look alike to each other—and to view themselves as a special pairing, distinct from every other country.

What transpired was that Britain had become a democracy, and the United States, because of the conquest of the American West, had come to be an empire. That is, we looked similar to each other and different

from everybody else in the international order. Our power relative to each other mattered less than our cumulative power relative to other states. The British made a judgment that they could share responsibilities with us, trust us to handle the Pacific and let them handle the Mediterranean, because our interests were so much the same. Thucydides would be cheering. Fear, honor, and interests, he said, are what drive conflict. Our interests aligned as British fear and American honor came to be driving forces in our interactions.

Yet the British were wrong, as it turned out after a crucial twenty years, roughly from the late 1870s until the Spanish-American War. Once it had become the strongest power in the international order, the United States started trying to reshape that order in its own image. Rather than sustain an international order organized along British lines, we started chipping away at the legitimacy of the British Empire by arguing, for example, in the Versailles peace treaty after World War I, that all peoples are entitled to self-determination. We started to favor and to try to institute democratic governments, which Britain had not done. We started to try to create the international order in our image, and we have largely succeeded.

As the international order changes, it becomes more American. In the 2016 presidential political cycle, we had a big conversation about really basic questions—about America's role in the world. One issue was the complaint that our allies are not doing their fair share. It's true they are taking advantage of us. It would be nice if we could trade them in for better allies, but there are no better allies to be had. We have the best ones in the international order already.

For all of the burdens we bear for our allies, fewer Americans die in our wars because of them. Playing team sports means sharing the burdens of what we are trying to achieve in the world. Our allies are our regional intelligence networks. They're our diplomatic partners, who feed ideas into our policy making. They offer their markets, their territory, their treasury, and their soldiers to our common causes. And it is

our ability to draw people in on our side that is the genius of the American order. It is what actually makes it possible for us to achieve as much as we do, and it's harder and more expensive without them, as tiresome as they are.

I was the poor taxpayer who had to work coalition politics during the Iraq War, from 2003 to 2005. So I know it's tiresome dealing with recalcitrant allies, but it is actually so much better than the alternatives. Our trade agreements cement our political agreements and build linkages that make us all richer. The institutions that we so often complain about—the United Nations, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the World Trade Organization—are not only American creations. They are burden-sharing devices that make possible everything that we're trying to do. They are the secret to American dominance.

Some ask, can't America leave the world's troubles to someone else to manage? The way to think about the problem of international order without American dominance is by asking: What would this world be like if we were not the people setting the rules? Vacuums get filled. And they get filled very often by states and people whose rules we would not like. We would not like a Chinese tribute system, where prosperity is by sufferance of the government. We would not like a Russian mafia state. We would not like the incapacity of a European-dominated world. We would not like the prosperity-sapping entropy that disorder would bring to our society.

We've suffered in the past from the form of insecurity we're now experiencing about our country's future. In the 1950s we had a strikingly similar conversation about Germany and the *Wirtschaftswunder,* the great advance of German industry. With Japan in the 1980s, we saw that they were good at manufacturing in a way that we just weren't. Now it's China. But perhaps it's Singapore we should be trying to emulate in some (though not all) ways. Theirs is a much more successful and sustainable model than China's.

The kind of manufacturing that has made China prosperous resembles that of America in the nineteenth century. Theirs are probably not jobs we want now. The jobs we want are innovation driven. And the government we want certainly isn't China's. The Chinese government has many executive advantages that ours does not. In a disgraceful *New York Times* column, Thomas Friedman wrote that he wished the American government could be like China's, where it didn't respect the rights of its citizens so it could build railroads that run at high speeds.[2] Some believe China is great and we're inefficient, but very few Americans want to trade away the things that make it difficult to get consensus on high-speed railroads in this country.

It's tempting, though, to think that China is making enormous advances and we can't counter them. Russia, too, is making interesting and important strategic choices that have moved it into the vacuum that we left during the Obama administration.

The Obama doctrine, laid out in the erstwhile president's extraordinary interviews with Jeffrey Goldberg of the *Atlantic,* backslid away from the assertive changing of the international order. He had more faith in institutions without us driving those institutions as we traditionally have. He had more faith in leading from behind than leading from the front. The problem with leading from behind is that it requires allies to follow from the front, and most allies won't do that. Many allies can't.

One example of America leading from behind, and doing it right, occurred during the Clinton administration, right after the debacle in Somalia. East Timor was breaking away from Indonesia. The United States very much wanted this to happen peacefully, but there was no way we could contribute to the United Nations force after Somalia. The Australian government of John Howard was actually willing to, and the US government quietly offered the Australians any help they needed to succeed. We gave them a blank check. They stepped forward and did an

outstanding job, and because they succeeded in that, they gained the confidence to take a much more active international role, as we have seen in Iraq and Afghanistan, and in everything we have tried to do since then.

Contrast that to President Obama's approach in Libya, where we stepped back and expected allies to do most of the work, and yet we still took much of the credit for it. The NATO ambassador and the NATO military commander, both Americans, outlined in the *New York Times* all the ways in which American forces were "critical and irreplaceable," leaving allies disgruntled.[3] That's how you get allies to hang back and not do anything. We need to actually get good at encouraging allies again.

We shouldn't lose hope. Look at the 2016 Freedom House annual survey of freedom in the world. In 1985, the world was roughly split between free states and unfree states, with some partially free. The United States usually tops the league tables of free states. Unfree states are obvious. Partially free states are those, like Singapore, where there is the rule of law but the government is not accountable in the same way that Western governments are. What you see over time is that the number of free states is increasing. The big increase after the end of the Cold War peaked in 2005, and we have since been seeing some erosion in the international order. But we are also seeing a line that, even if it jags like a stock market daily report, is nonetheless going up over the long term.

Today, our biggest challenges, the challenges to our dominance, are all predominantly domestic. To cite Theodore Roosevelt's 1904 annual message to Congress, "The eternal vigilance which is the price of liberty must be exercised sometimes to guard against outside foes, although of course far more often to guard against our own selfish or thoughtless shortcomings."[4] The worst of these selfish and thoughtless shortcomings is the fact that we are spending our children's inheritance at a time when we aren't even facing great and enormous challenges. The debt is the

biggest national security risk the United States is running, and we are doing it voluntarily. We ought to be very worried about that.

We need to defang the fear of change—the economic and social change that people had such strong reactions to in the recent election cycle. People are worried by the pace and magnitude of change. This would all be easier to handle if our economy were growing faster. The rebuilding of consensus about the need to stop spending money we don't have would be the best thing we could do to strengthen America's role in the world.

To return to Jim Mattis's point about the powers of intimidation and inspiration: one reason that we are such an inspiring model to the world is that we have tended to govern ourselves well. But in 2028 our debt will reach the 100 percent mark of GDP. By 2039, based on current projections, it will be nearly double that. The affordability of our debt will be drastically reduced when interest rates start going back up. We need to solve this problem while it is still manageable. We are on an unsustainable path that is absolutely of our own making. The ability of the United States to rejuvenate itself has been a great source of strength and a surprise to adversaries for generations, but this is arithmetic.

Yet for all of the things that we do badly right now, we very often underestimate the things other states would have to do well to overtake the United States. That is so even if we believe that the rules the United States has established—the rule of law, free markets, free trade—are unnecessary and that a rising China can remain authoritarian and still surpass the United States to become the rule setter of the international order. There are a lot of things we do well that we don't actually give ourselves much credit for.

Russia is a danger to us through its failure, not through its success. The Chinese have yet to navigate the middle-income trap, to advance beyond extractive industries and basic manufacturing. They're getting there, but they're not there yet. They have yet to make the transition

from an economy of exports to one of domestic consumption, to grapple with an aging population and a society that's intolerant of immigration. President Xi's crackdown on dissent suggests that they are deeply concerned that ideas of freedom are gaining traction in the Chinese population. This explains the great firewall they have erected to block the Internet: they are genuinely afraid they may not continue holding on to power. The extensive anti-corruption campaign that Xi is overseeing does not appear to be outrunning corruption because he's not running out of people to prosecute.

Then there is the costliness of primacy should China gain it. The advantage of the US system is that, because the order is largely voluntary, it is much less expensive to enforce. Countries choose to create forms of government similar to ours; to accept the rule of law; to accept tolerance—we don't make them. The greater the extent to which they do so, the greater the share of prosperity that accrues to them. The genius of the American order is that good things go together. What we tend to see is economic and political outcomes in which stability is coupled with economic prosperity. The rules that China seems intent on setting benefit no country other than China. As a result, they will have to use much more coercion to enforce their order than we do. Consider the South China Sea, where the United States was trying to get all of the countries in the region to cooperate in pushing back with a united front against China's assertive, unilateral building of new islands for military airstrips.

But it's never easy. The new president of the Philippines was making offensive statements about President Obama and threatening to throw the United States out of the Philippines. Our government very wisely did what Lyndon Johnson did when the French behaved similarly in 1965, which is to calmly say, "When a man asks you to leave his house, you take your hat and go."[5] What the Philippines is likely to find is that the United States may be a problematic ally, but they, too, have

few better choices than opting in to the American-led order. So it is for nearly every other country.

If we fix our own problems and we remind ourselves that allies are worth having—that an order constructed across these seventy years is actually principally in our interests, not just in other peoples' interests—and we remind ourselves that we're actually good at a lot of things that other countries struggle to get right, then I bet our grandchildren's grandchildren will still be living in a world of American dominance.

Notes

1. Quoted in Paul Crook, "Whiggery and America: Accommodating the Radical Threat," in *Radicalism and Revolution in Britain, 1775–1848: Essays in Honour of Malcolm I. Thomis,* ed. Michael T. Davis (London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2000), 198.

2. Thomas L. Friedman, "Our One-Party Democracy," *New York Times,* September 8, 2009, www.nytimes.com/2009/09/09/opinion/09friedman.html (accessed May 18, 2017).

3. Ivo H. Daalder and James G. Stavrides, "NATO's Success in Libya," *New York Times,* October 31, 2011.

4. Theodore Roosevelt, "Fourth Annual Message," December 6, 1904, The American Presidency Project, www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=29545 (accessed May 19, 2017).

5. Lyndon Johnson quoted in Thomas Alan Schwartz, *Lyndon Johnson and Europe: In the Shadow of Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 105.