Debating America's Global Role: America First versus Liberal Internationalism

by G. John Ikenberry

U.S. president Donald Trump exits Air Force One after arriving at Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport to attend the NATO summit in The Hague on June 4, 2025. KOEN VAN WEEL/GETTY IMAGES

In its first year in office, the Trump administration—Trump 2.0—has turned world politics upside down. On issues including trade, alliances, foreign aid, climate change, international law, human rights, and cooperation among liberal democracies, President Donald J. Trump, under the banner of America First, has made sharp breaks with the long postwar tradition of American foreign policy. He has repeatedly threatened to raise tariffs to levels not seen since the 1930s, destabilizing the world economy. He has questioned the value of America's alliances and raised doubts about whether it would honor North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) security guarantees. Trump has pulled the U.S. out of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Paris Climate Agreement. He has shut down the Unites States Agency for International Development (USAID) and eliminated most of its overseas programs. In signaling a desire to annex Greenland and the Panama Canal, while also casting an eye on Canada, Trump seems to show a willingness of abandon for America's postwar role as a guarantor of United Nations norms supporting sovereignty and the territorial independence of smaller states.

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A view of the al-Jaraf area after the United States launched airstrikes in several Yemeni cities, destroying surrounding buildings in Sanaa, Yemen, on March 20, 2025. ANADOLU/ GETTY IMAGES

Trump foreign policy is so disorienting—and controversial—because it has turned the U.S. into a "revisionist" great power, putting a wrecking ball to basic norms and institutions of global order. For 80 years, the U.S. built and presided over an international order, a system that has been given various names: the Free World, the Western-led order, Pax Americana, the liberal international order. Since the end of World War II, American presidents, both Democratic and Republican, have pursued a broadly internationalist foreign policy, using the nation's preeminent position to organize and lead an international order organized around alliance cooperation, open trade, and cooperation among liberal democracies. By exercising leadership through an array of institutions and partnerships, the U.S. has made its power more legitimate and user-friendly. However, with the coming of Trump 2.0, this postwar era appears to be over.

What makes this revisionist shift in American foreign policy so surprising is that great powers do not typically seek to destroy their own international order. International orders do come and go, and great powers rise and fall. But it is historically anomalous to see the world's most powerful state actively attacking its own postwar creation. In his confirmation hearings, Secretary of State Marco Rubio made this goal quite explicit, when he said: "The postwar global order is not just obsolete, it is now a weapon being used against us." This seems to be the central message of Trump foreign policy: the U.S. is going to radically alter the terms of its relationship with the rest of the world.

Trump 2.0 foreign policy is difficult to pin down or classify. Many different labels have been used to describe it: isolationist, populist, nationalist, Jacksonian, and realist. The traditional categories that have divided past American approaches to foreign policy don't seem to apply. Trump 2.0 is not best seen as a rejection of internationalism in favor of isolationism. The Trump administration's bombing of Yemen and Iran, and announced appetite for territorial acquisitions, signal that it is not pursuing a "come home America" foreign policy. Nor is Trump 2.0 best seen as a rejection of liberal internationalism in favor of a more traditional realist approach. American realists have historically been outspoken in favor of U.S. alliances and urge support for countries such as Ukraine that have been encroached upon by rival great powers. Although Trump does share the realist view that the world is a contest for power, he does not embrace the tools of diplomatic statecraft and strategic restraint that realists typically employ.

So, what precisely is the America First approach to the world? Does Trump foreign policy have a core set of strategic goals? So far, while making clear he rejects liberal internationalism, Trump has been less forthcoming in offering a positive vision of a post-liberal internationalist order. But there are glimmerings. Some observers have argued that Trump seems to be moving in the direction of a world organized about great power pan-regions and spheres of influence. The U.S. would preside over the Western Hemisphere, while Russia would enjoy sway over its near abroad, including Ukraine, and China would establish itself as the hegemonic leader of East Asia, eventually gaining control of Taiwan. In this post-liberal internationalist vision, the world would return to a sort of 19th-century great power system, with "strong man" leaders—Xi, Putin, and Trump—dividing up and running the world. Other observers see Trump 2.0 foreign policy not as seeking to divide the world into spheres, but as using American military and economic assets to assert more direct and coercive control over various parts of the world. In this view, we are witnessing not the end of American hegemony, but its transformation from a liberal-oriented hegemon to an illiberal or predatory hegemon. As we shall see below, Trump does appear to have impulses in both these directions. What unifies them is Trump's orientation toward nationalist, unilateral, and coercive tools to pressure—and often bully—other states into accommodating his demands.

Trump foreign policy is still evolving, and the world is pushing back in various ways. Yet, despite the many ambiguities and uncertainties about where Trump foreign policy is headed, we can identify clear—and dramatic—differences between the America First approach and the postwar tradition of liberal internationalism. In what follows, I will compare and contrast these

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two approaches. The central difference is in how American power is understood and exercised. In the liberal internationalist vision, the U.S. leverages its power by building and operating within a framework of institutions and partnerships—across economic, political, and security areas—that foster and underwrite a coalition of countries aligned and working together to uphold an international order that is friendly to American values and interests. America First foreign policy sees the U.S. as a more singular great power operating in a more coldly power-political world of rivals and free riders.

I look first at the American-led postwar liberal international order, and Trump's attack upon it. After this, I look at specific dimensions of the U.S. approach to global order—the role of international institutions, trade and market openness, alliance security, democratic solidarity, human rights and international law, and hegemonic restraint. In each area, Trump's American First approach is taking the U.S. into a brave new world where relations with allies and adversaries are more unilateral, transactional, and coercive. American hegemonic leadership is becoming less liberal. The architecture of institutions and norms that provided the postwar and post–Cold War framework for conflict resolution, problem-solving, and the management of growing complex interdependence, already weakened and degraded before Trump returned to office, has continued to break down. America First leaves the U.S. with fewer allies and partners in an international system with diminished capacities to respond to the great challenges of the 21st century. At some point, the U.S. will again need to debate how it wants to engage the world, and when it does, it will again confront the choice between America First and some sort of undated version of liberal internationalism.

The U.S.-Led Liberal International Order

In the aftermath of World War II, the U.S. built and led a liberal-oriented international order. It is a far-flung and complex system of intergovernmental relations—global, regional, economic, political, security. It is built around institutions, alliances, bargains, partnerships, regimes, and shared values and interests. U.S.-led postwar liberal order-building sought to chart a "third way" between two extremes—order defined by anarchy and the balance of power, and order defined by empire and domination. The result was a sort of "world system" that provided layers of institutions—functional and political—that provided platforms for states to come together and seek mutual gains and protections. After the Cold War, the Western liberal order became the dominant political formation in world politics, built around a critical mass of liberal democracies. This post–Cold War globalized liberal order can be seen as an expansive membership association. It is multilateral and decentralized, and because of this it has tended to be open to new members. To be in the liberal order is to gain access to "club goods"—security protection, economic assistance, and other resources and tools to navigate the global system. Importantly, this American-led liberal system has not been, strictly speaking, a geographically defined order. It is an order defined by its political principles and

Protesters gather outside the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C., for a rally in support of USAID on February 5, 2025. ANADOLU/GETTY IMAGES

rules of admission. Nor is it simply a grouping composed of the world's liberal democracies. Various nonliberal states have been part of this order over the decades, playing roles as clients, strategic partners, and balancing allies.

In building the postwar order, the U.S. did not just encourage open and rules-based order, it became the organizer and manager of that order. The American political system—and its alliances, technology, currency, and markets—became fused to the wider postwar international order. Over the postwar decades, the U.S. became the leader-operator of the liberal capitalist political system—supporting the rules and institutions of liberal internationalism, but also enjoying special rights and privileges. It organized and led an extended political system built around multilateral institutions, alliances, strategic partnerships, and client states. This order was infused with and built on strategic understandings, hegemonic bargains, and diffuse reciprocity. The Western system of liberal democracies and alliance institutions tend to mute power disparities and foster reciprocity and communication between the U.S. and Europe. The U.S. provided "services" to other states through the provision of security and its commitment to stability and open markets. In turn, other states—led by the advanced industrial democracies—agreed to work with the U.S. rather than resist and balance against it.

In the first decade after the end of the Cold War, this liberal international order emerged triumphant and expanded outward. With the collapse of communism, liberal democracy was ideologically unchallenged. The number of democracies increased dramatically. Countries in all regions of the world embraced capitalism and the market. Economic growth was rapid and large numbers of people were elevated out of poverty. The U.S. and the other democracies took major steps to liberalize trade, most notably with the establishment of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the creation of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation and the (APEC) and the World Trade Organization (WTO). As great power rivalry declined, new efforts were undertaken to strengthen and create international regimes to deal with problems such as ozone depletion and climate change. Institutionalized protection of human rights expanded with several war crimes tribunals, the emergence of the "responsibility to protect" norm, and the creation of the International Criminal Court. With the emergence and explosive spread of the internet, the free flow of information between and within societies grew to unprecedented dimensions.

In the 1990s, countries once on the periphery of the Western-centered liberal order were brought into the system, though on terms that the Western states offered. China and Russia, at least initially, were engaged by Western governments. The liberal order's security architecture was also reshaped and updated. In Europe, Germany was reunified, and the former Warsaw Pact states and Soviet Baltic republics were integrated into NATO. In Asia, Washington and Tokyo reaffirmed their alliance commitments. As liberal democracies' conception of security broadened, so did the range of missions they were prepared to support. At the United Nations, international peacekeeping expanded dramatically. In the 1990s, the Security Council authorized new peacekeeping missions in Somalia, Haiti, Rwanda, Bosnia, East Timor, and elsewhere. With the creation of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Office of the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the UN's remit for security and development was widened to include human rights and humanitarianism. In all these ways, it might not be the case, as Francis Fukuyama famously argued, that history had ended, but liberal internationalism did appear to be the dominant logic of world politics.

A group of West German demonstrators tear down a section of the Berlin Wall under the gaze of East German border guards in Berlin, Germany, on November 10, 1989. COLIN CAMPBELL/GETTY IMAGES

Trump's Revisionist Challenge

The Trump administration has come to office seeking to end—or at least radically renegotiate—this postwar order. During the postwar decades, countries around the world have based their long-term calculations on the continued presence of this American-led framework for order. Whether they were allies, adversaries, or states somewhere in between, the predictability of American hegemonic leadership provided the basis for the complex organization of economic, political, and security relations. That certainty is now gone. "The

world is used to an America that conforms to a pattern, even if it traduces its own rules when they are inconvenient," British journalist Edward Luce has noted. "With Trump such clarity vanishes." Past presidents have tended to identify the country's core interests with leadership of the postwar liberal order—to play the role of liberal hegemon. Trump seems to think otherwise.

Trump 2.0 can be seen as a sort of "hostile takeover," in which the new administration is taking ownership of the American liberal international order. In a departure from past American presidents, Trump is eager to upend and break apart liberal hegemony—to "sell" underperforming assets, rewrite contracts, and monetize old relationships. He brings into his administration a very different perspective on the costs, benefits, and uses of U.S. leadership of the postwar international order. His appraisal of the "value" of liberal institutions and relations is radically at variance with that of past presidents—Trump believes it has less value and greater costs than Joe Biden and earlier presidents thought. For all the earlier postwar American presidents, the U.S.-led order was a sort of "endowment," an extraordinary accumulation of assets—domination in institutions, partnerships, and shared cooperative wherewithal—that elevates the U.S. and generates an unprecedented flow of benefits. Trump simply does not see the liberal international order in this light.

Trump's America First foreign policy entails a radical shift in how the U.S. calculates the costs and value of its vast global presence. It remains uncertain how much of a feedback loop there is in this chaotic restructuring process. Will Trump's efforts to confront and counter China, if this is his goal, entail any compromise on the coercive and transactional treatment of American allies in East Asia? In seeking trade deals with Europe in the aftermath of the tariff war, will Trump offer compromise on security cooperation in exchange of trade concessions from Brussels? At the end of this process, how much of the U.S. hegemonic order will remain? European and East Asian allies might want to remain in some sort of security system with the U.S., given the alternatives. But is it ultimately too dangerous and uncertain to do so?

Donald Trump holds a chart as he delivers remarks on tariffs during the Make America Wealthy Again event at the White House in Washington, D.C., on April 2, 2025. BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI/GETTY IMAGES

Liberal Internationalism versus America First

We can look more closely at key dimensions of America's liberal internationalist approach to postwar order, and Trump's America First alternative. Together these differences amount to very different ways in which the U.S. exercises power and leadership.

First, and perhaps most fundamentally, America's liberal leadership approach to order entails a deep commitment to building and operating within a complex system of rules and institutions. This is the hallmark of American order building in the first decade after World War II, when the large multilateral institutions, starting with the United Nations, were established. As scholars argue, these institutions perform a wide variety of functions: facilitating diplomacy, fostering expertise, establishing standards and practices, and elaborating norms of agreed upon interstate conduct. Most generally, international institutions and regimes facilitate cooperation, creating avenues and resources for states to grapple with the complex problems of interdependence. The Bretton Woods institutions, for example, provide rules and tools for leading states to manage monetary and financial relations, fostering stability in economic flows that stimulate mutually beneficial trade and growth. The UN and its many regional and functional agencies provide resources for conflict resolution and peacekeeping. International institutions such as the World Health Organization, provide technical expertise to monitor, prepare for, and coordinate international responses to infectious disease. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) promotes the peaceful use of atomic energy and promotes safeguards against its use for military purposes. Treaties and regimes have been established to regulate activities in the oceans and orbital space, while others provide functional agreements to regulate the electromagnetic spectrum and cyberspace.

Across a myriad of realms—economic, security, humanitarian, human rights, environmental, and global commons—international institutions have become part of the infrastructure of modern international relations. While some multilateral institutions date to the 19th century, the vast majority of these institutions, regimes, and treaties have been established in the postwar era. Driven by efforts to reconstruct war-torn societies and rebuild the

Important figures at the UN Monetary Conference gather for a photo in Bretton Woods, New Hampshire, on July 3, 1944. From left to right: Camille Gutt (Belgium), M. S. Stepanov (Russia), Henry Morgenthau Jr. (U.S.), Arthur de Souza Costa (Brazil), and Leslie G. Melville (Australia). AP IMAGES

postwar system, and later by the rapid growth in globalization, the number of intergovernmental institutions steadily expanded, today reaching over a total of around three hundred.

It is not an accident that the rapid growth in international institutions has taken place during the decades when the U.S. emerged as a global superpower. From the Cold War era onward, American leaders have seen international institutions as valuable tools for the building of a stable, open, and friendly international order. In opening up the world economy after the war, the U.S. used the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) regime to launch rounds of reciprocal tariff reductions, and later used the World Trade Organization to enshrine rules and mechanisms for the arbitration of disputes. In this and other areas, the U.S. has seen multilateral institutions as a way of creating a stable and congenial set of platforms for doing business with other countries. The U.S. has an interest in having regular access to other countries for trade and resources, and institutions facilitate the bargains and mechanisms for advancing this outcome. Informal institutions, such as the G7, also provide a framework for the advanced democracies to work together—and for the projection of American leadership. By creating institutional connections with other countries, the U.S. is able to draw these countries into America's orbit. Institutions also help reinforce the certainty that stable cooperation relations will exist into the future, allowing the U.S. and its partners to invest in long-term mutually beneficial projects of economic and political advancement. Finally, when the U.S. supports and operates within an array of institutions and multilateral regimes, American power appears more legitimate and welcome in the eyes of other states around the world.

America First does not come with an agenda to completely disentangle the U.S. from this world of multilateral institutions. But it does look more skeptically on their uses or benefits. For example, in withdrawing from the WHO, Trump rejects what others see as its value to the U.S. in fostering international capacities to prevent or mitigate future pandemics. In withdrawing from the Paris Climate Agreement, Trump is discounting the nature of the problem of global warming itself. The administration's general distrust of scientific expertise and technocratic knowledge also diminishes its interest in participating in these efforts at cooperation. Taking a more transactional approach, Trump sees greater bargaining advantages accruing to the U.S. by engaging in bilateral negotiations, bringing American market power and other national assets to bear. Liberal internationalism argues that the costs of lost policy freedom associated with making binding multilateral agreements is, in the long term, generally less than the benefits that come from coordinating policies with other countries, particularly other liberal democracies.

U.S. Marines take part in Operation Mainbrace, a NATO naval exercise, in North Jutland, Denmark, on September 28, 1952. FPG/GETTY IMAGES

Second, American's liberal internationalist approach to leadership involves seeking security through binding alliance ties to other core partners in Europe and East Asia. Security cooperation is a core idea in the liberal internationalist tradition. By linking their security into a system of mutual protection, liberal democracies are able to aggregate their military capabilities, strengthen political relations, and use the alliance structure to consult and coordinate on a wider range of issues. To be sure, alliances are important tools for traditional realist reasons: states combine and coordinate their military capabilities in response to external threats. But liberal internationalists argue that security pacts can also be useful in building and reinforcing political relations among democracies, binding these states together and creating an institutional architecture that strengthens political community.

This logic of security cooperation has been seen across the 20th century, beginning with Woodrow Wilson's call for a post-1919 system of collective security. While Wilson's efforts ultimately failed, after World War II, the U.S. and its democratic allies did succeed in forging cooperative security relations. The NATO security pact, founded in 1949 by the U.S., Canada, and core European partners, was established in response to growing worries about the Soviet threat. But it was also embraced by democracies on both sides of the Atlantic as a vehicle to bind Germany to France and the U.S. to Europe. As the first peacetime military alliance the U.S. entered into outside the Western Hemisphere, NATO reduced European worries about America's commitment to their security. This, in turn, provided assurances to Western European states to move forward with wider efforts at building a postwar European political community. For NATO architects, the pact represented a breakthrough in building a Western security order and enshrining shared political—even shared civilizational—values. In the 1950s, the U.S. also created bilateral security pacts with Japan, South Korea, and other East Asian countries, each embodying this same binding logic. When the Cold War ended, America's security ties to Europe and East Asia were not only preserved but expanded, underscoring the importance that liberal democratic leaders attached to cooperative security even when the external threats that justified these pacts had disappeared or at least greatly diminished.

The America First approach takes a very different view of the uses and value of alliances. Trump has repeatedly raised concerns about what he sees as the excessive and unbalanced costs of the U.S. alliance system. The demand by Trump that NATO and East Asian allies pay more for their own defense is at the core of his foreign policy agenda. More generally, for Trump, security alliances are not a sacred commitment but transactional—and contingent. Trump has questioned the American obligation to honor NATO's Article V commitment to come to the assistance of fellow allies. Countries that do not pull their weight may not get protection. So too, America First thinking resists the larger postwar narrative of security alliances as constitutive of the larger community of like-minded democracies. The contrast between Biden's liberal internationalist understanding of NATO and Trump's approach is seen in their respective reactions to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The Biden administration emphasized the centrality of NATO in defending Western countries and upholding principles at the heart of the postwar order. "To Mr. Biden, halting the aggression that has led to Europe's largest war since the defeat of Nazi Germany was essential to preserving the post–World War II order," notes *New York Times* journalists Maggie Haberman and David Sanger. "Mr. Trump has never had much use for those alliances, or the order they created for the past 80 years."

Third, American leadership of an open and loosely rules-based world economy is also at the heart of the liberal internationalist vision. The conviction, traced back to the classical theories of Adam Smith and David Ricardo, is straightforward: open trade and exchange, properly managed, benefits all countries, as the logic of comparative advantage and specialization facilitates economic growth across the system. Open trade is further strengthened by principles of nondiscrimination and reciprocity, reinforcing notions of fairness and equal access. Countries open their economies to trade and investment, often as they gain

Recently imported, brand-new Honda cars are parked awaiting delivery to dealerships at the port of Bristol, England, on May 6, 2025. ANNA BARCLAY/GETTY IMAGES

equal access to their prospective trade partners. Liberal international thinking goes further in arguing that organized and rules-based trade can also reinforce political ties between countries, creating "vested interests" in trading states that encourage their governments to pursue foreign policies that support stable and peaceful relations. These open trade relations require states that participate in the trade regime to have domestic institutions that protect property rights and the autonomous working of market capitalism. As such, the system of open trade is not universal; it is a system in which participation hinges on a state's commitments to its rules and obligations.

The U.S. over the last 80 years has based its claims to global leadership on the sponsorship and promotion of this open trading system. From the early postwar efforts to establish a system of rules to coordinate the reduction of tariffs to the creation of the WTO, American presidents have led efforts at trade liberalization. To be sure, the U.S. and other industrial countries have always engaged in intensive trade negotiations to insure equal treatment and guard critical sectors from unfair or predatory trade practices. Efforts to liberalize trade through the reduction of non-tariff barriers have also been met with limited success. With the rise of China, who joined the WTO in 2001, the trade regime has experienced massive increases in the volume of trade and investment. In recent years, however, China's enlarged presence in the trade system has led to political backlash to what many see as Beijing's unfair state-directed industry promotion and trade practices.

The turn away from trade liberalization as a centerpiece of American leadership began before Trump 2.0. The Biden administration raised tariffs on Chinese imports, introduced export controls on high-end computer chips, and secured massive spending for high-technology development. Biden's national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, signaled this shift in a far-reaching speech that urged a move away from free trade to more managed economic relations that would protect American workers and national security. But the Trump administration has gone far beyond these steps, upending the entire system of international trade with the threat and implementation of massive unilateral tariffs. Trump has famously said that *tariffs* is "a beautiful word," indicating his deep support for the general retreat from America's commitment to an open, multilateral trade system.

French president Emmanuel Macron (L), Italian prime minister Giorgia Meloni (C), and U.S. president Joe Biden (R) attend a work session at the G7 Summit hosted by Italy in Savelletri on June 13, 2024. LUDOVIC MARIN/GETTY IMAGES

A fourth feature of American-led liberal internationalism is the embrace of deep collaborative ties with other liberal democracies. This commitment to democratic solidarity was on display across the postwar and post–Cold War decades in countless ways: in building security alliances, fostering trade and economic ties, and working together as a loose coalition in international institutions and forums. In many ways, the G7 summit process is emblematic of this orientation. Each year, the seven leading industrial democracies meet to discuss global problems and seek to identify ways to coordinate their policies to advance a common agenda. Typically, the leaders of other like-minded countries, such as South Korea and Australia, join the gathering. U.S. presidents since the 1970s have used these gatherings as occasions to reaffirm the shared interests and values of the liberal democratic world. The actual coherence and efficacy of this grouping of democracies has ebbed and flowed over the decades. But these states have remained a durable grouping working across economic, political, and security realms to defend the Western-oriented postwar system of rules and institutions. The defense of liberal democracy and the protection of human rights have laced the rhetoric and actions of American administrations from Roosevelt and Truman to Reagan and the post–Cold War presidencies.

Trump's America First approach signals an abrupt departure from this postwar tradition. Trump has questioned liberal internationalist narratives of American exceptionalism and the value of working in close coalition with other industrial democracies. While the Biden administration framed the Russian war on Ukraine as a struggle between democratic and autocratic forces, Trump has seen it more as a sphere of influence problem to be worked out by "strongman" leaders,

A young boy rests beside empty USAID vegetable oil tins in the Dagahaley refugee camp, part of the larger Dadaab refugee settlement in Dadaab, Kenya, on July 9, 2011. OLI SCARFF/ GETTY IMAGES

such as Putin and himself. Under Trump, the U.S. has also retreated from its leadership in advancing and protecting human rights abroad. Reflecting this shift, Secretary of State Rubio recently issued a new directive to U.S. embassies to restrict their criticism of tainted foreign elections. The cable cited Trump's America First vision in which relations with other countries should be based on shared interests, treating "disputes over a nation's freedoms as needless distractions." This action has been part of a wider effort to dismantle and downsize agencies and institutions with primary responsibility for promoting democracy and human rights, most notably the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, the National Endowment for Democracy, and USAID. With Trump's transactional approach to foreign policy and eagerness for deal making with autocrats, the old political alignments privileging relations with other democracies fades into the background.

Finally, America's liberal internationalist approach has involved at least a loose adherence to a norm of strategic restraint. This entails a willingness by Washington to abstain from the abusive and indiscriminate exercise of power, particularly towards its allies and partners. To be sure, the U.S. has compiled a mixed record as a hegemonic power—ignoring allies, acting unilaterally, circumventing institutions, undercutting norms, and using its power advantages for its narrow, often parochial, interests. Nonetheless, the general calculation of American presidents has been that working with allies and partners within the array of alliances and Western institutions makes America's power position more acceptable to others. Restraint is manifest most clearly in the willingness of American presidents to engage in deep and sustained policy dialogues, creating a process of give and take that allows all sides to give voice to their views and shape the policy outcomes. The fact that the G7 states are tied together in both economic and security agreements and commitments also facilitates reciprocity and bargaining. For example, the trade disputes between the U.S. and Japan in the late 1980s and 1990s were moderated by the fact that the two countries had deep alliance ties, which had the effect of expanding the range of policy voices seeking a mutually agreeable outcome.

Guided by America First, the U.S. appears to exhibit less hegemonic restraint. In fact, the Trump administration has actively signaled its impatience with the give and take of policy concertation. Unilateralism, often announced over social media, has been the hallmark of Trump 2.0. The old economic-security bargains that undergird American hegemonic leadership have ended, with alliance ties no longer linked to the settlement of trade controversies. The decline in hegemonic restraint is also seen in the provocative moves by the administration that seem to break old norms of partnership. Vice President J. D. Vance's speech at the Munich Security Conference giving support to a right-wing German extremist party over the head of the Berlin government was widely seen as such a break with acceptable norms of conduct between close allies. Trump's threat of steep tariffs on Brazil because of its domestic prosecution of its past president for attempting a coup is another example of departures from norms of restraint.

Conclusion

The Trump administration is redefining America's role in the world. It entails a departure from a broadly liberal internationalist approach that has guided U.S. global leadership for 80 years. The old and long-standing pillars of the American global position—alliances, international institutions, open markets, democratic solidarity, hegemonic restraint—are weakening or disappearing. Within the larger global system, the norms, institutions, and relationships that have served to stabilize world politics are weakening as well. Great uncertainty exists about the future. For decades, the U.S. has put itself at the center of the world system, offering its leadership and a liberal internationalist approach to the organization of economic, political, and security relations. America First amounts to a fundamental rejection of this strategy of leadership. The Trump administration will have several more years to pursue its brand of foreign policy, but it is not too soon to step back to assess the great choice before the U.S.: liberal internationalism or America First?

Discussion Questions

1. How does the essay define the difference between "America First" and "liberal internationalism" in terms of how U.S. power is exercised internationally?

2. Ikenberry describes four features of American liberalism that President Trump's "America First" platform departs from: a commitment to institutions and their rules, security cooperation, an open and rules-based economy, and a commitment to democratic solidarity. Which of these features is it most important for the U.S. to maintain? Which departure do you think is most detrimental?

3. Ikenberry states that "for Trump, security alliances are not a sacred commitment but transactional—and contingent." To what extent do you think security alliances are cooperative versus transactional?

4. In discussing strategic restraint, Ikenberry notes that "trade disputes between the U.S. and Japan . . . were moderated by the fact that the two countries had deep alliance ties, which had the effect of expanding the range of policy voices seeking a mutually agreeable outcome." If negotiations and agreements between the U.S. and other countries depend on trust, what—if anything—can replace that in Trump's America First vision?

5. After reading the article, what do you think are the broader implications of Trump's retreat from promoting democracy and human rights abroad?

6. Should moral leadership still be a defining feature of U.S. foreign policy, or are there other, more pressing security concerns that now take precedence?

7. The essay suggests that open trade has historically reinforced political stability among countries. Does economic globalization still serve that purpose today?

8. The essay ends by framing the U.S. as facing a fundamental choice between liberal internationalism and America First. Is there a possible middle ground between these two visions of America's role in the world?

Suggested Readings

Beckwith, Ryan Teague. "Donald Trump Outlines 'America First' Foreign Policy." *TIME*, 2016. Summarizes Trump's 2016 articulation of "America First," providing insight into the origins and personal rationale behind his foreign policy approach.

Demillo, Andrew. "Book Review: 'America First' Is a Resonant History of FDR's Fight Against Isolationist Movement." *Associated Press*, 2024. Highlights historical parallels between Trump's "America First" and past U.S. isolationist tendencies, providing context for evaluating contemporary foreign policy.

Mearsheimer, John J. "Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order." *International Security*, 2019. Examines structural flaws in the liberal international order, arguing it is only sustainable in a unipolar world and framing Trump's policies as a response to multipolarity.

Snyder, Robert S. "Realist or Just Anti-Liberal? Trump's Foreign Policy in Retrospect." *International Journal: Canada's Journal of Global Policy Analysis*, 2024. Argues that Trump's first-term foreign policy promoted anti-liberal values abroad to strengthen them domestically, rather than following realist principles.

Solís, Mireya. "'America First' Is a Losing Strategy on Trade." Brookings, 2017. Provides an economic analysis of why "America First" undermines trade stability and economic growth, emphasizing the benefits of open trade policies.

Stone, Brad. "America Cast Itself as the World's Moral Leader, Not Anymore." *Bloomberg*, 2025. Discusses the consequences of the U.S. forgoing moral leadership under Trump and the implications for global credibility.

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