

Reimagining Great Power Relations

Reimagining the International Environment: Part 1

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This is the first of three lectures on the changing international political, economic, and military environment after the Pax Americana. The second will consider the impact of China's rise on relationships in Asia. The third will address the changes underway in the Middle East.

International reactions to the election of Donald Trump have catalyzed a far swifter collapse of the American-led world order than anyone could have imagined. Interactions between great and middle-ranking powers are undergoing rapid evolution. The political, economic, and military interests and influence of the United States still span the globe, as does American popular culture. Nations and non-state actors in every region continue to worry about American policies, activism, or passivity on matters of concern to them. In short, the United States is still the planet's only all-around world power. But the clout that status confers is not what it used to be.

The only other polity with the potential to rival America's worldwide influence at present is the European Union (EU). It has the money but lacks the ambition or political and military cohesion to exert decisive influence beyond its periphery. Until "Brexit," the EU included two former world powers, Britain and France. Now only France -- which retains a sphere of influence in Africa and overseas territories in the Caribbean, Indian Ocean, and Polynesia -- can bring a global perspective to EU councils.

China and Japan have great worldwide economic influence but little political appeal and negligible ability to project conventional military power to regions remote from them. Russia has a nuclear arsenal that can devastate every corner of the globe. It has again become a major actor in the Middle East, but otherwise lacks economic, political, or cultural reach much beyond the confines of the former Soviet Union. Brazil and India dream of global roles but exercise

little influence beyond their immediate regions and the parts of Africa that are closest to them.

The Trump administration's rejection of multilateralism marks a major step back from international leadership by the United States. It signals that America no longer seeks to make and interpret the rules that govern the world's political, economic, and military interactions. Instead, Washington will seek unilateral advantage through piecemeal bilateral deals. This pivot away from preeminence has created a geopolitical and geoeconomic power vacuum into which other great powers are being drawn. Responsibility for the maintenance of global political, economic, and military order is everywhere devolving to the regional level.

Meanwhile, the United States is increasingly isolated on transnational issues. Official American antipathy to science on climate change and similar issues has discredited the United States as a participant in setting policies that address them. And Washington's escalating disdain for the United Nations and international law has delegitimized its role as the "world policeman." The uncertainties inherent in this situation are everywhere accelerating the formation of regional groupings. But, despite some stirring by China, there is as yet no credible successor to the United States as a global order-setter.

The U.S. armed forces remain the only military establishment with global power projection capabilities and experience in managing multinational coalitions. Generals and admirals stride the highly militarized foreign policy apparatus of the United States government. This caps a longstanding trend. Americans so thoroughly identify "power" as exclusively military in nature that it has been necessary to invent an academic concept of "soft power" to embrace measures short of war like diplomacy.

But global military primacy no longer translates into political leadership at either the global or regional levels. It doesn't even guarantee dominance in the world's regions.

Recent American military interventions abroad have consistently evoked resistance that has frustrated the achievement of their goals. Unless tied to clearly attainable political objectives, the use of force can accomplish little other than the slaughter of foreigners and the destruction of

their artifacts. This generates more blowback than security.

As American influence has receded, regional great powers like China, India, Iran, and Russia have begun to consolidate regional state systems centered on themselves. This process was underway even before “America first” impaired U.S. leadership by making American indifference to the interests and concerns of other countries officially explicit. America has now chosen publicly to redefine itself internationally as the foreign relations equivalent of a sociopath¹ – a country indifferent to the rules, the consequences for others of its ignoring them, and the reliability of its word. No nation can now comfortably entrust its prosperity or security to Washington, no matter how militarily powerful it perceives America to be.

In the United States, there has been a clear drift toward the view that outcomes, not due process, are the sole criteria of justice. Procedures – that is, judicial decisions, elections, or actions by legislatures – no longer confer legitimacy. The growing American impatience with institutions and processes is reflected in the economic nationalism and transactionalism that now guide U.S. policy. Washington now reserves the right to pick and choose which decisions by international tribunals like the World Trade Organization (WTO) it will follow or ignore.

The idea that previously agreed arrangements can be abandoned or renegotiated at will has succeeded the principle of “*PACTA SUNT SERVANDA*” (“agreements must be kept”). The result is greatly reduced confidence not only in the reliability of American commitments but also in the durability of the international understandings that have constituted the status quo. In the security arena, this trend is especially pronounced with respect to arms control arrangements. As an example,, Russia has cited American scofflaw behavior to justify its own delinquencies in Ukraine and with respect to the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty.

When a hegemon fails to pay attention to the opinions of its allies, dependencies, and client states or to show its adversaries that it can be counted upon to play by the rules it insists they

¹Mental health specialists define a “sociopath” as someone who exhibits a lack of empathy and a disregard for community norms, the rules both written and unwritten that help keep the world safe and fair for all. A sociopath is someone with no conscience who ignores reality to lead an uncaring and selfish life. The sociopath cares only for himself and lacks the ability to treat other people as worthy of consideration.

follow, it conjures up its own antibodies. In the absence of empathy, there can be no mutual reliance or collective security. Without confidence in the reliability of protectors or allies, nations must be ready to defend themselves by themselves at any moment. If covenants are readily dishonored, the law offers no assurance of safety. Only credible military deterrence can protect against attack.

The post-Cold War era began in 1990 when the international community came together to affirm that the new order should not allow large states to use force to annex smaller, weaker neighbors, as Iraq attempted to do with Kuwait. But the opening years of the 21st century have taught small and medium-sized nations a different lesson. They have learned that to preclude threats to their independence and territorial integrity from great powers they must either accommodate them, seek the protection of alliances with others, or possess the capacity to inflict severe injury on any potential attacker, no matter how militarily powerful.

They have learned that there is no longer any security to be found in the United Nations Charter or its decision-making processes. International law and vetoes in the U.N. Security Council did not protect Serbia from great power intervention to detach Kosovo from it. Nor did opposition in the Security Council prevent the coercive separation of Crimea from Ukraine. No one even bothers to mention international law in discussions of Syria, where external interventions to produce regime change have been unabashedly overt. The old rules no longer provide security. They are increasingly ignored.

An Indian general remarked after the 1990-91 Gulf War that its lesson was clear. To be secure from attack by the United States one must possess a nuclear deterrent. (Pakistan would no doubt say the same thing about India, as would some in Iraq and Iran about Israel.) Lacking nuclear weapons, Iraq and Libya saw their governments overthrown and their leaders brutally murdered. Nuclear-armed North Korea – by any measure, a far more dangerous regime – has so far been spared foreign attack. It is telling that every non-nuclear weapons state now allegedly attempting to develop such weapons and related delivery systems (including north Korea) is said to be doing so to deter an attack by the United States. Not one appears to be motivated by a desire to deter China, Europe's nuclear powers, India, Japan, Pakistan, or Russia.

Across the globe, the lessened security that results from the erosion of rule-bound order has been compounded by hysteria over attacks by terrorists. The spread of Islamophobia has paved the way for the revival of other forms of xenophobia, like racism and anti-Semitism. Illiberalism looks like the wave of the future. We are witnessing the consolidation of national security-obsessed garrison states.

Some sub-global powers -- like Iran, Turkey, Russia, and China -- are demanding deference to their power by the countries in their “near abroad” or “near seas.” They thus negate the near-universal sphere of influence that America asserted during the so-called “unipolar moment” of worldwide U.S. hegemony that followed the Cold War. They are imposing their own military precautionary zones (“cordons sanitaires”) to manage and reduce external threats from other powers. This pushback is resented by the United States, which – with no sense of irony, given its own insistence on exclusive control of the Americas – charges them with attempts to project illegitimate “spheres of influence” beyond their borders.

By disavowing longstanding U.S. commitments, the Trump administration has inadvertently confirmed foreign doubts about American reliability. Efforts to allay these concerns have garnered little credence. The ebb of U.S. influence is forcing countries previously dependent on Washington’s protection to make unwelcome choices between diversifying their international relationships, decoupling their foreign policies from America's, forming their own ententes and coalitions to buttress deterrence, or accommodating more powerful neighbors. Whatever mix of actions they choose, they also boost spending to build more impressive armed forces.

Almost all countries still under U.S. protection continue to affirm their alliance with the United States even as they ramp up a capacity to go it alone. Arms races are becoming the norm in most regions of the world. Global military expenditures grew by fifty percent from 2001 to 2015.

Not long ago, geopolitics was largely explicable in bipolar terms of US-Soviet rivalry. After a unipolar moment, the political and economic orders have gone fractal – understandable only in terms of evolving complexities at the regional or sub-regional level. Intra-regional rivalries now

fuel huge purchases by middle-ranking powers of state-of-the-art weaponry produced by the great powers. No one should confuse increased weapons purchases with a deepening of alliance commitments.

So, for example, Saudi Arabia's arms purchases have tripled in the past five years. Trends in other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member countries are similar. At the same time, the Gulf Arabs are reaching out to China, the EU, India, Indonesia, Japan, Russia, and Turkey and convening pan-Muslim coalitions against Islamist terrorism and Iran. They have undertaken unprecedentedly unilateral and aggressive military interventions in places like Libya, Syria, and Yemen. As they have done so, the countries of the Fertile Crescent – Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria – have drawn ever closer to Iran. Iraqi Kurdistan has become a *de facto* Turkish dependency.

Before a Western-supported coup ousted Ukraine's elected president², that country wobbled between East and West but was on its way into the Russian embrace. The Philippines has distanced it from the United States and bundled with China. So has Thailand. Myanmar and Vietnam, by contrast, are seeking partners to balance China. The Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have doubled down on their reliance on NATO, which they joined in 2004 to secure their independence from Russia. Cuba and Venezuela look to Russia and China for support against ongoing American policies of regime change.

Meanwhile, international governance of trade and investment continues to devolve to the regional level and configure itself to supply chains. Examples include new trade pacts, like the RCEP,³ the Pacific Alliance,⁴ and the Eurasian Economic Union;⁵ preexisting blocs like the GCC,⁶ Mercosur,⁷ and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization;⁸ as well as well-established confederations like the 27-member post-Brexit EU and the Economic Community of West

²Viktor Yanukovich, elected February 2010, overthrown and driven into exile in Russia February 2014.

³The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership comprised of the ten member states of ASEAN and Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea.

⁴Chile, Colombia, Mexico, and Peru, the "*Alianza del Pacífico*".

⁵Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia.

⁶Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

⁷Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay. Bolivia is a candidate to join. Venezuela's membership is suspended.

⁸China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, with Afghanistan, Belarus, Iran, and Mongolia as observers.

African States (ECOWAS)⁹. Each of these groupings has one or two heavyweight members at its core, constituting a natural leadership.

Where such regional arrangements have been implemented, rules are made and enforced without much, if any, reference to external powers. Thus, the EU has had no role to speak of in shaping relations between Canada, Mexico, and the United States under the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Conversely, the United States has had very little say in decisions made in Brussels on rules for trade and investment in the EU and its associated economies. Given the Trump administration's aversion to multilateralism, the United States will have no say at all in the standard-setting that will take place in either the RCEP or the 65-country pan-Eurasian economic community that is beginning to emerge from China's "belt and road" initiative. Regionalism limits the reach of great powers. Bilateralism limits it even more.

The decentralization of authority over global economic, political, and defense issues represents a net loss of influence by the U.S. and other great powers over the evolution of the international state system. But it presents both a challenge and an opportunity for middle-ranking powers. On the one hand, as U.S. and EU influence atrophies, they have an expanding role in international rule-making. On the other, they are now subject to pressure from neighboring great powers that is unmoderated by any global rules.

Take Mexico as an example. This is a proud nation of nearly 130 million people, the world's 13th largest country geographically and its 11th most populous. It has the world's 11th largest economy. By every measure, Mexico is a middle-ranking power. As such, even if it were not a member of NAFTA and the Pacific Alliance, it would have a significant voice in the G-20, the WTO, the United Nations, Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Asia-Pacific.

Interdependence has mitigated but not erased historic Mexican resentment of domineering American behavior. Mexicans have not forgotten that the United States invaded their country and annexed 55 percent of its territory in 1846 - 1848. But, since the entry into force of NAFTA in January 1994, Mexico's economy has become almost fully integrated with the American

⁹Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo.



economy through complex supply chains. Eighty percent of Mexican exports now go to the U.S. Mexico has become the United States' second largest export market and its third largest trading partner (after China and Canada). It has also quietly transformed itself into a reliably pro-American bulwark against influences from extra-hemispheric powers like Russia and China. It has proven the efficacy of economic opening and reform and has become an influential advocate of liberal economics as opposed to the perennial statism and mercantilism of most other Latin American nations.

Now Mexico is faced with demands from the Trump administration to cooperate in dismantling its interdependence with the United States. At the same time, the U.S. president is denigrating Mexicans, proposing to wall them out, and threatening to deport masses of undocumented migrants and alleged criminals to Mexico, whether they are Mexican or not and whether Mexico has any legal reason to accept them or not. Not surprisingly, Mexican opinion is now hostile to the United States. Mexico's government has little leeway for compromise. Surrender to American demands is not an option. But Mexico currently has little leverage over Washington.

So Mexico faces highly unwelcome choices. It can bargain as best it can on its own, risking its prosperity and stability on what is almost certainly a bad bet. It can seek leverage over the United States by suspending cooperation against transit by illegal migrants and the supply of narcotics to American addicts. It can make common cause against the United States by forming a global united front with other economies targeted by the Trump administration for their bilateral trade surpluses, like China, Germany, Japan, and south Korea. It can adopt Cuban-style defiance of Washington's efforts to bring it to heel, allying itself with extra-hemispheric powers like China and/or Russia or Iran. Or it could choose some mixture of all of these options. It is too early to predict what course Mexican-American relations will take in the age of Trump. They will be affected by many factors, including the state of relations between the United States and other great powers – especially China and Russia.

Mexico is far from the only middle-ranking power now of necessity maneuvering between the world's great powers. Ukraine has yet to find its place between Russia, the EU, and the United States. Turkey has distanced itself from the EU and America and formed an entente (limited

partnership for limited purposes) with Russia. Iran has reached out to India as well as Russia in order to counter the United States and the Gulf Arabs. Saudi Arabia – once exclusively attached to the United States – is actively courting China, India, Indonesia, Japan, and Russia. Pakistan is seeking to avoid having to choose between Saudi Arabia and Iran. At the same time, it has accepted the task of coordinating the activities of a pan-Islamic military alliance that implicitly counters both Iran and an ever more assertively Islamophobic India. To reduce dependence on the United States and the GCC, Egypt is courting cooperation with Iran, Russia, and Turkey. Old global alignments are everywhere giving way to more complex patterns.

Despite an unprecedented degree of interdependence between them, relations between the great powers are also in motion. Brazil, China, the EU, India, Japan, Russia, and the United States are each one another's largest or second largest trading partners and sources of foreign direct investment. They are linked to each other in global supply chains, which tend to converge in and between large economies. All are members of the Bretton Woods legacy institutions – the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and WTO. These institutions earlier accommodated the rise of Japan. More recently, they have lagged in reflecting the rapidly increasing weight of other non-Western economies in world trade and finance.

The formation of the “BRICS” group was a collective effort by Brazil, Russia, India, and China (soon joined by South Africa) to develop institutions to reflect the current distribution of global commercial and financial power and contemporary governance requirements. When Bretton Woods took place the world had just been crushed by World War II. America dominated the world economy, justifying its preeminent role in global governance. Recent shifts in economic balances of power have not been reflected in legacy institutions. Washington remains the nominal leader in them but finds itself increasingly sidelined as others feel obliged to work around it. The Trump administration's skepticism about the value of the international economic institutions that earlier generations of Americans created has accelerated the diminishment of U.S. managerial control over the global economy.

Similar erosion of U.S. primacy is evident in international politics. China, India, and Russia have met annually since 2002 to discuss how to establish a multipolar world order in which U.S.

unilateralism cannot hold sway. Antagonism between the world's greatest powers is growing. With the United States pushing back against Russia in the West and China in the East, the two are being nudged together to counter America.

To offset Sino-Russian partnership, Japan seeks rapprochement with India and Russia, leavening its longstanding exclusive reliance on the United States. China, Europe, Russia, and the United States are also courting India, which is, as always, playing hard to get. Meanwhile, China is reaching out to Europe and the EU is attempting to work with it to fill the leadership vacuum in the Asia-Pacific created by the sudden U.S. abandonment of the economic leg of its "pivot to Asia." No region is immune from realignment in its international relationships. Brazil's membership in the BRICS group symbolizes its cultivation of relationships with emerging powers to balance those it has with the United States and middle-ranking powers in the Western Hemisphere.

As a consequence of these trends, we are now well into a world of many competing power centers and regional balances. Long-term vision and short-term diplomatic agility are at a premium. Neither is anywhere evident. In their absence, territorial disputes rooted in World War II and Cold War troop movements and lines of control, arms races (nuclear as well as conventional), shifting balances of prestige, and the reduced moderating effect of international organizations are helping to escalate alienation and tension between the great powers.

The stakes are high. Trade wars that could wreck the global economy and degrade the prosperity of all are now all too easy to imagine. Armed conflict could break out at any time along the unsettled borders between China and India and China and Japan. The U.S. and Chinese navies are maneuvering against each other in the South China Sea. The two countries appear to be headed for a military confrontation over Taiwan. The Peloponnesian War and World War I remind us that squabbles between lesser powers can drag their patrons into existential strife despite their better judgment.

Notwithstanding ample opportunity to do so, the U.S., EU, and Russia failed to craft a cooperative post-Cold War order to regulate their interaction in Europe. There is no agreement

on where NATO ends and Russia begins. We now face the possibility that it will take an armed face-down to define a dividing line between them.

All great powers now share an avowed interest in containing Islamist terrorism and remediating its causes. Escalating antipathies born of territorial disputes and Chinese and Russian opposition to U.S. primacy prevent cooperation to this end. The politically expedient demonization of strategic rivals in democracies like the United States inhibits cooperation even where specific interests nearly completely coincide. The same factors diminish the likelihood of cooperation on other matters where interests substantially overlap -- like Syria and Korea.

Meanwhile, U.S. deployments of ballistic missile defenses and the increasing lethality of American nuclear warheads have convinced both Russia and China that Washington is reaching for the ability to decapitate them in a first strike. Russia and the United States are in a nuclear arms race again. China seems to have been provoked to develop a second-strike capability that, like Russia's, will be able to annihilate, not just maim America. The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists has moved its "Doomsday Clock" the closest to midnight since 1954.

The risks the world now faces were not (and are not) inevitable. They are the product of lapses of statesmanship and failures to consider how others see and react to us. The setbacks to America's ability to shape the international environment to its advantage are not the result of declining capacity on its part. They are the consequence of a failure to adapt to new realities and shifting power balances. Raging against change will not halt it. Pulling down the frameworks and trashing the rules on which North American and global prosperity were built is far more likely to prove counterproductive than empowering. Buying more military hardware will not remedy the national strategy deficit. Gutting the foreign affairs agencies and doubling down on diplomacy-free foreign policy will deepen it.

Americans are badly in need of a national conversation about their aspirations in foreign affairs and how to take advantage of the changing world order to realize them. That conversation did not take place during the run-up to the 2016 election. The inauguration did not mark an end to the chaos of the presidential transition. Forty-eight days later, most government policy positions

remain unfilled. Policy processes have yet to be defined.

In the current atmosphere, slogans displace considered judgments, intelligence about the outside world is unwelcome, expertise is dismissed as irrelevant or worse, and policy pronouncements appease the delusions of political constituencies instead of addressing verifiable realities. The Congress has walked off the job. Some sort of order must eventually reassert itself in the U.S. government, but the prospects for intelligent dialogue about the implications for American interests of developments abroad seem exceptionally poor.

But such dialogue cannot be deferred for another four years. It seems ever clearer that it will not originate in Washington. It must begin somewhere. Why not here? Why not now?