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The Real Crisis of Global Order

Illiberalism on the Rise

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# The Real Crisis of Global Order

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## Illiberalism on the Rise

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*Alexander Cooley and Daniel H. Nexon*

**T**he election of Donald Trump in 2016 sparked a major debate over the nature and fate of the liberal international order, suddenly caught, it seemed, between the Charybdis of illiberal great-power challengers and the Scylla of a hostile U.S. president. Trump may have lost the presidency in 2020, but the liberal order remains under threat. If anything, recent events have underlined the magnitude of the challenges it faces—and, most important, that these challenges are only one manifestation of a much broader crisis endangering liberalism itself.

For decades after World War II, the dominant factions in both the Democratic and the Republican Parties were committed to the project of creating a U.S.-led liberal international order. They saw Washington as central to building a world at least partly organized around market exchanges and private property; the protection of political, civil, and human rights; the normative superiority of representative democracy; and formally equal sovereign states often working through multilateral institutions. Whatever its faults, the order that would emerge in the wake of the Cold War lifted millions out of poverty and led to a record percentage of humanity living under democratic governments. But it also removed firebreaks that made it more difficult for turmoil at one political level to spread to another—by, for instance, jumping from the subnational to the national to the regional and, finally, to the global level.

Key players in the established democracies, especially in Europe and North America, assumed that reducing international barriers

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would facilitate the spread of liberal movements and values. It did for a time, but the resulting international order now favors a diverse array of illiberal forces, including authoritarian states, such as China, that reject liberal democracy wholesale, as well as reactionary populists and conservative authoritarians who position themselves as protectors of so-called traditional values and national culture as they gradually subvert democratic institutions and the rule of law. In the eyes of many right-wing Americans and their overseas counterparts, Western illiberalism looks perfectly democratic.

Soon after his inauguration, U.S. President Joe Biden began talking about “a battle between the utility of democracies in the twenty-first century and autocracies.” In doing so, he echoed a widespread view that democratic liberalism faces threats from both within and without. Authoritarian powers and illiberal democracies are seeking to undermine key aspects of the liberal international order. And the supposed pillars of that order, most notably the United States, are in danger of succumbing to illiberalism at home.

Whether they want to “build back better” or “make America great again,” every American analyst seems to agree that the United States needs to first sort itself out to effectively compete with authoritarian great powers and advance the cause of democracy on the global stage. But the two major political parties have very different understandings of what this project of renewal entails. This schism is far greater than disputes over economic regulation and public investment. Partisans see the other side as an existential threat to the very survival of the United States as a democratic republic.

The United States is one of the more polarized Western democracies, but its political conflicts and tensions are manifestations of broader, international processes. The U.S. reactionary right, for example, is linked to a variety of global networks that include both opposition political movements and governing regimes. Efforts to shore up liberal democracy in the United States will have cascading and sometimes unpredictable effects on the broader liberal order; at the same time, policymakers cannot set the country’s affairs in order without tackling wider international and transnational challenges.

All of this goes way beyond giving American democracy a fresh coat of paint and remodeling its kitchen. The crisis cannot be addressed by simply recommitting the United States to multilateral institutions, treaties, and alliances. Its roots are structural. The nature of the con-

temporary liberal international order leaves democracies particularly vulnerable to both internal and external illiberal pressures.

In their current form, liberal institutions cannot stem the rising illiberal tide; governments have struggled to prevent the diffusion of antidemocratic ideologies and tactics, both homegrown and imported. Liberal democracies must adapt to fend off threats on multiple levels. But there is a catch. Any attempt to grapple with this crisis will require policy decisions that are clearly illiberal or necessitate a new version of liberal order.

### **OPEN FOR INSTABILITY**

Critics of the notion of a new cold war between China and the United States highlight fundamental differences between the world of today and that of the early decades of the Cold War. The Soviet Union and the United States formed the centers of discrete geopolitical blocs. By contrast, Beijing and Washington operate in overlapping and interconnected geopolitical spaces. For years, politicians in Washington have debated how many restrictions to place on Chinese investment in the United States. There was no such angst, and no need for it, when it came to the Soviet Union. U.S. companies did not outsource production to Soviet factories; the Soviet Union was never a significant supplier of finished goods to the United States or its key treaty allies.

A wide range of developments—all of which accelerated over the last three decades—have made the world denser with flows of knowledge and commerce, including the expansion of markets, economic deregulation, the easy mobility of capital, satellite communications, and digital media. People are more aware of what is happening in different parts of the world; formal and informal transnational political networks—limited during the Cold War by hard geopolitical borders and fewer, costlier forms of long-distance communication—have grown in both importance and reach.

These unfolding changes jumbled the geopolitical landscape that emerged after the implosion of the Soviet Union. No single, uniform international order replaced the more bifurcated international order of the Cold War; the world, despite the hopes of neoliberal politicians, never became “flat.” Instead, the international order that took shape by the turn of the century was highly variegated. Many of the new democratic regimes that appeared in the 1990s were only tenuously democratic; optimists wrongly dismissed early indications of

weak liberal democratic institutions as but bumps on the road to full democratization. Eastward across Eurasia, liberal ordering became increasingly patchwork. Some states, such as China, managed to effectively access the benefits of the liberal economic order without accepting the requirements of political liberalism.

Many analysts in those years promised that market expansion would produce robust middle classes that would in turn demand political liberalization. They argued that the development of a global civil society—underpinned by human rights, the rule of law, and environmental nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)—would help cultivate and mobilize pro-democracy forces, especially in the post-Soviet space. The Internet, widely imagined as an unstoppable force for freedom, would do its part to spread the irresistible appeal of both liberal economic principles and liberal political freedoms.

One could still make a case for optimism even after 2005, the last year that had a net increase in global democracy, according to the pro-democracy advocacy group Freedom House. But in retrospect, it seems hopelessly naive.

In 2001, only a few months before China formally entered the World Trade Organization, the September 11 attacks drove the United States to embark on the global war on terrorism. The Bush administration adopted or expanded a host of illiberal practices, including the torture of “unlawful combatants” through “enhanced interrogation” techniques and via “extraordinary renditions” to third-party governments, and embraced a militarized version of democracy promotion. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the accompanying doctrine of preemption further strained relations between the United States and European allies such as France and Germany. The upheavals of the “color revolutions”—liberal uprisings in post-Soviet countries (in Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine in 2004)—and the Arab Spring, which flared in 2010, further underscored the threat posed by agents of the liberal order, such as international institutions, Western NGOs, and social media. Authoritarian and illiberal regimes increasingly pursued strategies to inoculate themselves from these transnational liberal threats.

The cumulative result of technological innovations, policy choices made by liberal powers, and evolving authoritarian practices was “asymmetric openness”—the strange reality that the contemporary liberal order works better for authoritarian regimes than it does for liberal democracies. Authoritarian states can curtail the effect on their popula-

tions of international civil society, multinational corporations, economic flows, and even the Internet much more effectively than can liberal democracies. Authoritarians can use the freedom of global flows—as afforded by liberal policies, whether economic or political—to advance their own illiberal influence. They do so while variously interdicting, excluding, and controlling cross-national flows of ideas, organizations, information, and money that might threaten their hold on power.

### **THE AUTHORITARIAN ADVANTAGE**

The openness of liberal countries—one of the core principles of such societies—has become a liability. A fundamental problem confronting U.S. policymakers—and one that is especially challenging to those whose assumptions were shaped by governing during the 1990s and early years of this century, when the United States exercised hegemony—is the adeptness with which illiberal states and political movements exploit an open and interconnected global system.

Openness is not producing a more liberal global media and information environment; authoritarians build barriers to Western media in their own countries while using access to Western platforms to advance their own agendas. For example, authoritarian states now enjoy expanded media access to the democratic world. State-run global media outlets, such as China's CGTN and Russia's RT, receive billions of dollars in government support and maintain a plethora of foreign bureaus and correspondents, including in Western democracies—even as authoritarian regimes increasingly exclude Western media. China expelled BBC correspondents and banned the British network from broadcasting in the country in 2021 for its coverage of abuses in Xinjiang.

Similarly, authoritarian-sponsored organizations and lobbying groups continue their activities within open societies even as countries such as China and Russia ban Western officials, academics, and think tankers. Contemporary autocrats are image conscious. They use new technologies and social media platforms to shape their global profiles and elevate their standing with both domestic and international audiences. They routinely contract the services of public relations firms in the West, which portray their clients as popular at home, emphasize their geostrategic importance, and whitewash histories of repression and corruption. Autocrats also attempt to influence policymakers in liberal democracies by funding think tanks and sponsoring “study tours” and other junkets. Reputation management firms—retained by illiberal governments and



oligarchs from autocracies—carefully scan global media and threaten litigation to dissuade negative coverage and deter investigations.

Digital technologies enable new instruments of domestic and transnational repression. They have allowed the security services of both powerful countries (such as China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey) and weaker ones (such as Belarus, Rwanda, and Tajikistan) to intensify campaigns to monitor, intimidate, and silence political opponents in exile and activists in diaspora communities—even those residing in countries normally considered safe havens, such as Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States. As a recent investigation into the Israeli technology company NSO Group and its Pegasus spyware highlighted, authoritarian governments engage in extensive digital surveillance of dissidents and journalists from other countries, often with the aid of corporations based in democratic states.

Western technology companies were once self-proclaimed champions of openness. Now, many are capitulating to pressures from their host countries to remove content and tools that could be used to facilitate mobilization against the regime. Just prior to the parliamentary elections in Russia in September 2021, the Kremlin convinced Apple and Google to remove an application developed by supporters of the jailed opposition leader Alexei Navalny that was designed to help coordinate the opposition vote. Navalny accused the technology giants of acting as the Kremlin’s “accomplices.”

International institutions are also bending to the will of authoritarians. China under the leadership of President Xi Jinping has aggressively sought to curtail criticism of the country in UN human rights forums. According to the advocacy group Human Rights Watch, Beijing has sought to “neutralize the ability of that system to hold any government accountable for serious human rights violations.” Authoritarian states have banded together in coalitions such as the Like-Minded Group to oppose criticism of the human rights practices of individual countries, privilege state sovereignty, and block the accreditation of NGOs and diminish their role in authorized UN processes, such as the Universal Periodic Review. China now leads four UN agencies and has pushed for its preferred leadership candidates in others, including the World Health Organization. In September, the World Bank Group canceled its influential “Doing Business” annual study after an external investigative report found that its leaders, for political reasons, had applied “undue pressure” on their staff to improve China’s position in the 2018 ranking.

Not only can authoritarian states operate freely in the universalist institutions of the liberal international order, but they are also constructing an ecosystem of alternative ordering institutions from which they exclude or significantly curtail the influence of liberal democracies. By founding new regional economic and security organizations, China and Russia can press home their regional agendas via institutions that openly reject the dissemination of political liberal norms and values, use those institutions to help organize illiberal blocs within more venerable international organizations, and maintain exit options should liberal ordering institutions become less welcoming to authoritarians.

### **THE ROT WITHIN**

The threat to liberal democracies also comes from within. The liberal order is anchored by two large federations: the United States and the European Union. Both are also home to some of the most potent and potentially consequential forces of illiberalism. These assume, broadly speaking, two forms: the illiberal actions that liberal democratic governments themselves take in seeking to counter perceived threats and the antidemocratic forces seen in illiberal political movements, parties, and politicians.

Democratic governments have always grappled with tradeoffs between liberty and security, and liberalism has always faced dilemmas about how far to tolerate illiberal actors. The U.S. government condoned the subnational racial authoritarianism of Jim Crow and racial segregation for the majority of the twentieth century, with horrific consequences. U.S. national security policy after 9/11 contributed to the current crisis of the liberal order by, among other things, promulgating the doctrine of preemptive war and militarizing democracy promotion. The United States' embrace of speculative capitalism and its overly financed economy made it the epicenter of the 2008 financial crisis. Most recently, the global pandemic has normalized tighter border controls and more restrictive immigration policies and undermined the legitimacy of protections for refugees.

In order to push back against illiberal forces, most notably China, democratic governments have adopted policies that cut against the openness that characterizes the contemporary liberal order. Washington has used coercive instruments to intervene in global markets in an attempt to preserve U.S. access to and superiority in strategically important technologies. Security concerns related to the potential large-scale Chinese surveillance of Western telecommunications traffic, for



example, led the Trump administration to place substantial pressure on its allies to reject Chinese 5G technology. Even many U.S. politicians and foreign policy officials who are, unlike Trump, committed to market liberalism generally consider this policy a success.

Genuine support for broad-based economic decoupling from China remains limited, but the growing rivalry between Beijing and Washington has produced other, albeit partial, moves away from market liberalism in the name of competitiveness and strategic autonomy. Stuck in the reconciliation process at the time of this writing, the U.S. Innovation and Competition Act is the first significant bipartisan legislation in years to embrace national industrial policy. In this respect, it represents a very limited reversal of the open liberalism, or neoliberalism, of the post–Cold War period.

The neoliberal variant of market liberalism—the push, starting in the 1970s, toward ever-greater deregulation, privatization, and capital mobility—eroded social protections and increased inequality, including by dramatically refashioning the tax code to benefit high-income earners and U.S. corporations. But instead of reversing these policies, many U.S. politicians prefer to place the blame on Chinese trade practices. Maintaining tariffs on Chinese goods appeals to populist sentiments and benefits a limited number of workers in industries that compete against Chinese imports, such as steel. But the harm it inflicts on export industries and consumers is greater. So far, the tariffs do not seem to have produced a new, better trading arrangement with China.

Efforts to grapple with homegrown antidemocratic forces also threaten to undermine liberal norms and values. In the United States, liberals and progressives have called for changes in procedural rules to prevent democratic backsliding. They champion taking an aggressive stance against right-wing militias and paramilitary organizations, stacking the Supreme Court with liberal judges, and abandoning long-standing legislative practices, such as the filibuster. When overtly illiberal regimes take these same measures, observers rightly accuse them of undermining democracy.

The fact remains that liberal democracies do face very real threats from the rise of reactionary populism, conservative authoritarianism, and other antidemocratic movements. In the United States, one of the two major political parties remains beholden to an authoritarian demagogue. Motivated by the “Big Lie” (the objectively false claim that

Democrats stole the election from Trump through systematic voter fraud), the Republican Party is purging officials who stood in the way of efforts to overturn the 2020 presidential election. Republican voter-suppression efforts are accelerating. Extreme gerrymandering has already made some states—such as Maryland, North Carolina, and Wisconsin—de facto legislative anocracies, or systems of governance that mix democratic and autocratic features. If these trends continue, procedural changes may prove to be the only way to prevent the unraveling of democracy in the United States.

### **CULTURE WARS AND POWER POLITICS**

More broadly, liberalism risks undermining itself. At the heart of contemporary political liberalism lies the belief that certain rights and values are universal—that they exist regardless of differences among countries, cultures, or historical backgrounds. The human rights treaty system embraces this understanding; signatory states commit to protecting specific rights, such as due process, and to refraining from particular violations of human rights, such as torture.

The expansion of liberal rights in recent decades, however, has fueled a growing backlash. The Obama administration's effort to promote LGBTQ rights abroad, usually through the State Department, sparked anger among conservatives in countries as different as the Czech Republic and Uganda. The sprawl of contemporary liberal values—from LGBTQ rights to gender equality to the rights of migrants—invites pushback in both democratic and nondemocratic states. It provides illiberal politicians with opportunities to isolate specific liberal values and use them as wedge issues against their opponents.

Moscow, perhaps inadvertently, succeeded in casting itself as a beacon of traditional values through a campaign to demonize LGBTQ rights as a stalking-horse for child sexual abuse. There is nothing particularly novel about this kind of strategy. What is notable is how it has become transnational and, in so doing, has served as a basis for illiberal policies in other countries. Such wedge strategies are also used to undermine support in the international community for reformers by tying them to illiberal values. For example, Amnesty International briefly revoked Navalny's "prisoner of conscience" status following a Kremlin-backed information campaign that highlighted xenophobic comments he had made in the past about Central Asian migrants.

The point is not that the United States should retreat from making LGBTQ rights part of its foreign policy or that Navalny's alarming views on Central Asian migrants are of no consequence. It is that in advancing liberal rights, policymakers have to navigate significant tradeoffs, inconsistencies, and contention.

This extends beyond matters of democracy promotion and civil rights. The Biden administration has correctly declared corruption to be a national security risk. But anticorruption measures will inspire blowback that also poses a national security concern. Aggressive measures will threaten politically connected oligarchs in Europe and elsewhere. Corrupt autocrats are likely to see a number of anti-kleptocracy efforts, such as expanding diligence requirements for service providers and prohibiting foreign officials from accepting bribes, as a serious threat to their regimes and will rally their publics against these new forms of "domestic interference." Important steps for conserving liberalism, even defensive ones, will generate pushback against the liberal order—and not just from overseas. Anticorruption measures threaten a wide range of U.S. politicians, businesspeople, and consultants. In recent years, and especially after the 2016 election, such measures have become another source of partisan polarization.

## **REACTIONARIES WITHOUT BORDERS**

That polarization is not a discrete national phenomenon. U.S. reactionary populism is a specific manifestation of a global trend. The international popularity of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban among right-wing commentators, ethnonationalist leaders, and conservative celebrities (particularly American ones) highlights the transnational character of illiberal networks. Orban—whom the Biden administration noticeably did not invite to the planned Summit for Democracy in December—has emerged as a media darling of the American right: a head of state who denounces the power of the philanthropist George Soros, touts anti-immigration policies, and champions traditional values.

The Conservative Political Action Conference—a major forum of the American right—plans to hold its 2022 annual meeting in Hungary. The Fox News host Tucker Carlson—arguably the single most influential conservative media personality in the United States—spent a week in Hungary in the summer of 2021 to interview Orban, praise his government, and tell his audience that Hungary is a model

democracy. Carlson echoed Orban's vision of a world in deep cultural crisis, with the fate of Western civilization supposedly in the balance; that perceived peril is the glue that unites the transnational right.

Orban consolidated power through tactics that were procedurally legal but, in substance, undercut the rule of law. He stacked the courts with partisans and pressured, captured, or shut down independent media. Orban's open assault on academic freedom—including banning gender studies and evicting the Central European University from Hungary—finds analogies in current right-wing efforts in Republican-controlled states to ban the teaching of critical race theory and target liberal and left-wing academics.

The guardrails designed to ward off illiberalism have failed. The political scientist R. Daniel Kelemen, for example, points to how the EU, a supposed paragon of liberal democratic norms, did essentially nothing to prevent authorities in Hungary and Poland from incrementally weakening their democracies. The European Parliament institutes region-wide party groupings that effectively shield anti-EU parties, such as Hungary's Fidesz and Poland's Law and Justice party, from sanction. The common European labor market allows political opponents and disgruntled citizens to leave by simply relocating to other European countries, weakening the battle against illiberal policies at home.

These dynamics are not, in fact, all that different from those at play in the U.S. federal system: the courts shield antidemocratic practices such as extreme gerrymandering and targeted voter suppression, and some Republican-controlled states have enacted laws designed to let legislatures intervene in local election oversight under the pretense of preventing fraud. Many of those Republican officials who have become alarmed at the party's sharp authoritarian turn have done little or nothing in response for fear of personal political repercussions or of damaging the party's electoral prospects.

The elevation of Orban by American right-wing intellectuals and television hosts is a high-profile illustration of how the dense interconnections that form the core of the liberal order can facilitate the rise of antidemocratic movements. Another is the membership of Eduardo Bolsonaro, one of the sons of Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, in a

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*The United States cannot  
contemplate defeating its  
current authoritarian  
challengers in a total war.*

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*Apply illiberally: Orbán and Trump in Washington, D.C., May 2019*

nationalist group founded by the U.S. reactionary populist Steve Bannon. Dark money from the United States underwrites illiberal parties and movements abroad. At the same time, kleptocrats launder funds into U.S. bank accounts, real estate, and even politics. This stokes populism in the United States via its corrupting influence. Many oligarchs and kleptocrats see the patrimonial governing style of reactionary populists such as Trump as supportive of their interests and so are happy to support them in any way they can. Russian financing, often funneled through Kremlin-affiliated oligarchs, subsidizes right-wing and culturally conservative organizations in Europe and North America with the aim of undermining the liberal order.

As fissures widen in many ostensibly liberal democracies, a U.S. foreign policy aimed at defending liberal democracy will require the Biden administration—or any future Democratic administration—to take sides in the domestic politics of allied, democratic, and semi-democratic countries. When the Obama administration tried this approach, its efforts were haphazard and ineffectual. The Biden administration has notably refrained, at least publicly, from leveraging Trump-era security commitments to Poland to pressure the ruling Law and Justice party on the country's democratic backsliding.



The Trump administration, on the other hand, openly endorsed illiberal right-wing governments in Hungary and Poland; it is possible that Trump's efforts to support Andrzej Duda in the 2020 Polish presidential election helped him eke out a win over the more liberal Rafal Trzaskowski, the mayor of Warsaw. Neither the Trump administration nor the Trump-appointed ambassador to Hungary pressed Orban to reverse his decision in 2018 to evict the Central European University—established with money from George Soros—despite the fact that the university represented the largest single U.S. investment in higher education in post-Cold War Europe.

There is no question that a U.S. president who more openly and substantively aligns with center-right, center-left, and liberal parties overseas will risk further politicizing American foreign relations—most notably with respect to the broad transatlantic agenda that still commands support from influential Republicans. But as is the case with many of the dilemmas created by rising illiberalism, trying to avoid further politicizing this or polarizing that means, in practice, handing a substantial advantage to illiberal forces.

## **ECHOES OF HISTORY**

For many, this peculiar moment in the international order augurs the coming of a new cold war, driven by an intensifying rivalry between Beijing and Washington. But a better, albeit still strained, historical analogy can be found in the “Twenty Years’ Crisis”—the fraught period between World War I and World War II when democracies faced multiple pressures, including the Great Depression, reactionary conservatism, revolutionary socialism, and growing international tensions.

Liberal democracies appeared rudderless, internally divided, and generally incapable of rising to the challenge. They struggled to adapt to globalizing technological forces, including new means of mass communication that illiberal forces could use adroitly to their advantage. International migration stoked nativism. Illiberal policies and ideas were on the global offensive, spreading through old and new democracies alike. The late 1920s and early 1930s saw democratic powers—France, the United Kingdom, and the United States—do little to block the rise of fascism abroad or prevent the slide of fledgling democracies into conservative authoritarianism.

The United States finds itself in a not entirely dissimilar position today. Republicans spent the 2020 presidential campaign calling the



Democratic Party “communist” and associating their rivals with authoritarian capitalist China; right-wing media claim that Beijing is implicated in many of their favorite *bête noires*, including critical race theory. For their part, Democrats tied Republicans, and especially Trump, to the far-right ideology of white nationalism and invoked the specter of extremist militias and other domestic militant groups. U.S. policymakers struggle to pursue a coherent and effective foreign policy in defense of the liberal order for the simple reason that the American public is fundamentally divided.

This historical parallel even provides some limited grounds for optimism. The standard story holds that the vast spending program of the New Deal made liberal democracy attractive again; President Franklin Roosevelt transformed the United States into an “arsenal of democracy.” The United States, together with its allies, defeated Germany, Italy, and Japan on the land and the sea and in the skies. This comprehensive defeat, as well as the ample publicity given to the atrocities committed by the Axis powers, left fascism discredited and stigmatized.

Biden seems to favor this analogy. In his domestic policy, he has attempted his own version of the New Deal through a combination of several significant spending bills, including the American Rescue Plan, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, and one other infrastructure bill—which was in limbo at the time of this writing. In his foreign policy, Biden wants to build a coalition of democracies under U.S. leadership to meet the challenge of rising illiberalism and especially to oppose Chinese and Russian efforts to reconstruct the international order along more autocratic lines. The White House hopes that the meeting of leaders in forums such as the Summit for Democracy will bolster this initiative.

### **ON WHOSE TERMS?**

The odds, however, are not in the administration’s favor. The United States remains the wealthiest and most powerful country in the world, but China is challenging the United States’ influence over the international order—and will continue to do so even if its dramatic rise tapers into stagnation. Washington is reaping the costs of two decades of failures in the Middle East and Central Asia. The United States burned through truly staggering sums of money in those failed overseas entanglements, ultimately purchasing the breakdown of U.S. hegemony in the Middle East and the total collapse of its nation-building project in Afghanistan.

But the domestic front should be even more worrisome for the United States. The two parties may muddle through and avoid tanking U.S. liberal democracy—no small achievement considering Republican actions in the wake of the 2020 presidential election. There remains, however, the overwhelming crush of intense political polarization, hyperpartisan scorched-earth tactics, and legislative gridlock. These ills have generated a host of further problems. Both U.S. allies and U.S. rivals are acutely aware that any agreement they make with the United States may not outlive the sitting administration. The U.S. Senate cannot ratify treaties for the foreseeable future, which limits Washington's ability to attempt significant reforms of the international order, including exercising consistent leadership on matters such as climate change.

After 30 years of worsening political polarization and dysfunction in the country, the U.S. foreign policy establishment has failed to reckon with this reality. Some acknowledge that promoting liberal democracy is now a less relevant priority than preventing democratic backsliding. But such policy debates still do not address the likelihood that the next administration will reverse any new policy, whether the consequences of such a reversal would be better or worse than never enacting a new policy in the first place, or how a new policy might be adjusted to make it harder to undo.

Rather than openly confronting this reliability problem, foreign policy analysts float the idea, explicitly or implicitly, that a specific approach—to managing U.S. relations with China, for instance, or to international trade—will be the one that magically provides the basis for a new, bipartisan consensus. But this puts the cart before the horse. If Americans could forge a broadly shared understanding of international threats and an agreement about the purpose of U.S. foreign policy, then there wouldn't be a serious domestic political crisis to solve in the first place.

A daunting set of problems resides within the structure of the liberal order itself. The current arrangement is too rife with tensions, too internally fragmented, and too asymmetrically vulnerable. In order to survive, the liberal order will have to change.

U.S. officials who sincerely wish to defend the liberal order will need to choose sides, both domestically and in the conduct of U.S. foreign policy. In doing so, they will blur the distinction between liberal and illiberal practices. They will need to break domestic norms, such as not modifying the size and jurisdiction of the federal judiciary because of its ideological disposition. They will also need to back away

from post–Cold War norms, such as limiting favoritism toward political factions in and among major democratic allies. And they will need to do so with the clear understanding that these actions could backfire and provide rhetorical cover for illiberal and antidemocratic practices at home and abroad.

On the economic front, both Democrats and Republicans seem willing to sacrifice some amount of openness, but with very different ends in mind. Fortunately, most of the steps required to conserve the liberal order—such as clamping down on the flow of foreign kleptocratic money into the United States—would deal significant blows to external illiberal forces, even if they’re conceptualized as domestic policies.

Grappling with domestic illiberal threats remains a thorny exercise. Of course, the defense of liberal democracy has produced terrible excesses in the past, including ugly repression and horrific violence. U.S. officials adopted decidedly illiberal policies during the Red Scare that followed World War I, when the specter of Bolshevism loomed large. In trying to stem the rising right-wing extremist tide today, the United States risks returning to those dark times. But the alternative of inaction—Western liberalism’s failure to beat back fascism in the 1930s—remains a dangerous prospect.

History is an imperfect guide. Fascism was defeated—at least for a time—on the battlefields of World War II. Had Hitler been less interested in military conquest, fascist states might be a perfectly normal part of the current global landscape. The Soviet Union, for its part, collapsed because of a combination of the inefficiencies of its command economy, nationalist pressures, and policy choices that turned out very poorly.

The United States cannot really contemplate defeating its current authoritarian challengers in a total war, as that would likely produce a catastrophic nuclear exchange. Its most important authoritarian challenger, China, is a totally different kind of polity than the Soviet Union was. China is wealthy and relatively dynamic, and although it has its share of structural problems, it is not abundantly clear that its shortcomings are any worse than those of the United States.

In short, neither of the historical routes to the ideological victory of liberalism seems likely. This means that liberal democracies really do need to assume that they will not retake the catbird seat of the international order anytime soon. And so the question becomes not whether the liberal order will change but on whose terms. 🌐