Prescribing an American Grand Strategy for the Era of Renewed Great Power Competition

Kashish Parpiani

Abstract: Donald J. Trump's declaration of the reemergence of "great power competition" comes at a pivotal juncture in American history. The Trump administration has borne traits of activist grand strategies toward preserving American primacy with the announced great power competition against China and Russia. This article prescribes a tempered approach for America to pursue its primacy while also addressing the pitfalls of the current system, which counterintuitively accentuate Russian and Chinese insecurity to feed their revisionist approach to the liberal order. The United States must sustain its military edge and challenge Chinese and Russian transgressions, but it must also reform institutions, recalibrate partnerships, and reinstate credibility of the liberal order.

Keywords: United States, China, Russia, great power competition, liberal internationalism, grand strategy

In the post–Cold War world, the United States has largely pursued liberal internationalism as its grand strategy. Theoretically, it features along the activist former half of the primacy, liberal internationalism, selective engage-

Kashish Parpiani is a research fellow at the Observer Research Foundation (ORF) in Mumbai, India. His research interests include U.S. grand strategy, U.S. civil-military relations, and U.S. foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific. Parpani holds postgraduate degrees in international relations from the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore, and in U.S. foreign policy from the University of Warwick in Coventry, UK. He has published with the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv, Israel; the Centre on Asia and Globalization in Singapore; the *Times of Israel*; and the Rising Powers in Global Governance project in Istanbul, Turkey. He has presented papers at international conferences organized by Shanghai University and the International Studies Association.

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ment, and restraint spectrum of grand strategy options. The United States has pursued an expansive conception of interests abroad, prioritized unparalleled U.S. military primacy, advocated for the spread of liberal Wilsonian values (i.e., encouraging foreign nations to adopt liberal democratic fundamentals for socio-political organization of their societies), and spearheaded the postwar institutions that champion free market economics.

However, the liberal internationalist outlook under presidents William J. "Bill" Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack H. Obama led to expansive and costly military adventures, spurring a decline in its currency as the standard preset of U.S. security and foreign policy. The abhorrence to American activism has only culminated with the rise of conservative nationalism. In many ways, the Donald J. Trump administration's foreign policy has paid heed to the sentiment against U.S. activism abroad that resonates with the less activist conceptions of grand strategy. However, in view of its announced reemergence of great power competition against China and Russia, it has borne some traits of activist grand strategies. A recent case in point being the Trump administration's push for an increase to the U.S. defense budget by more than $50 billion.

This article probes a resultant American grand strategy to address the dichotomy posed by a decline in the currency of liberal internationalism and rising Chinese and Russian challenges to the liberal order. The article prescribes an approach that requires reviewing Chinese and Russian revisionist actions as stemming from their insecurity with the current order—to be discussed in subsequent sections. Hence, the article advocates for the United States to pursue its primacy, while also focusing on reforming institutions, recalibrating partnerships, and reinstating credibility of the U.S.-led order.

American Grand Strategies in the Post–Cold War World

Defined as the "highest form of statecraft . . . the intellectual architecture that lends structure to foreign policy," *grand strategy* has heavily featured in American foreign and security policy discourse.[1] The reasons for this are primarily two reinforcing factors. First, the United States—through the Cold War and especially in the post–Cold World era—has remained a prominent power. The same has been true not only in terms of its continued economic and military primacy but also America's soft power influence capturing the imagination of successive generations across the globe. This outsized influence has translated into the United States also honing expansive interests—evidenced by its unparalleled power projection capabilities and stewardship of global institutions that comprise the liberal world order. Hence, given its expansive role, American foreign policy has been undergirded with a certain sense of policy foresight and prioritization of threats and interests.

Second, the United States has a strong domestic political culture of rigor-

ous debate on the country's role in the world. Partly informed by the aforementioned factor of expansive interests, the domestic political culture also stems from a wide subscription to the idea of *American Exceptionalism*. Often defined as the belief that the United States "has a moral obligation to take a leadership role in world affairs," nearly two-thirds of the American populace are reported to endorse that belief.[2] Politically, this has meant the institutionalization of the need to have an informed discourse on the matter. For instance, the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 stipulates that the executive branch must regularly submit a report to the U.S. Congress—and the American public by that extension—on its *National Security Strategy* (NSS).[3] Although, over the years, administrations have reduced the frequency of this—from annually to once every term—the NSS has proven to be an effective tool by which one can ascertain the guiding principles behind an administration's foreign and security policy.

As a result, much of the academic pedagogy on grand strategy has also been America-centric. Scholars often cite prominent guiding principles to U.S. foreign policy, such as the policy of containment articulated by George F. Kennan in *Foreign Affairs* in 1947—as manifestations of American grand strategy.[4] However, during the ensuing years, four theoretic conceptions of U.S. grand strategy have emerged as dominant in its international relations discourse: primacy, liberal internationalism, selective engagement, and restraint. The four represent a scale of sorts on the degree of intensity of American activism abroad.

The theoretic conception of *primacy* means the United States "accepts its dominance and seeks to maintain it" and often advocates the "use of military force to achieve policy goals," stemming from an "extremely broad conception of U.S. interests."[5] Liberal internationalism also construes U.S. interests in broad terms but emphasizes sustaining the persisting international system via the spread of democracies and market economies.[6]

From a security standpoint, some scholars also deem it as *cooperative security*—purporting the furtherance of multilateral security institutions (e.g., the North Atlantic Treaty Organization) or multiple bilateral security arrangements (e.g., the "hub and spokes" alliance network in the Asia-Pacific) that have the United States at its core.[7] *Selective engagement*, however, underscores a limited scope of U.S. interests with its central concern being to prevent "wars among the world's major industrial and military powers on the scale of the world wars."[8] Last, *restraint* underscores the imperatives of clear articulation of American interests, stemming from a Realpolitik understanding of the United States lacking "the need, the capability, and the mandate to manage global security."[9]

Given international relations' multifaceted, dynamic nature, successive U.S. administrations' foreign policies hardly fit entirely into one of the discussed variations. The alternatives simply serve the theoretic function of according a

degree of parsimony to analyze U.S. foreign policy. However, post–Cold War U.S. foreign policy reflects a dominance of activist grand strategies—chiefly liberal internationalism, due to the enduring tenets of American international relations: sustaining unparalleled U.S. military primacy, pursuing the spread of liberal democratic values, and spearheading the institutions that comprise the liberal world order.

A barometer for underscoring the relevance of greater U.S. activism on the policy level is the pertinence of so-called "domino theories" in U.S. foreign and security policy discourse. *Domino theories* are said to string together a sequence of "individually imaginable, but collectively implausible, major events, to generate an ultimate threat to the United States and then argue backward to the extreme importance of using military power to stop the fall of the first domino."[10] The influence of such a line of argument that warrants U.S. action—mostly militaristic, was evident in the Clinton administration's advocacy of American intervention in Sub-Saharan Africa and Eastern Europe. Then-Secretary of State Madeleine Albright notably rationalized intervention in those distant conflicts as not fitting "neatly into any national security framework but which, if left unattended could erode the foundation of freedom and threaten world peace."[11] Similarly, in the George W. Bush administration's advocacy for intervening in Iraq, the underlying rationale for the Global War on Terrorism was construed as the United States acting against "emerging threats before they are fully formed . . . [and] to extend the benefits of freedom across the globe."[12] Subsequently, although having campaigned against military adventurism, the Obama administration militarily intervened in Libya stemming from a conviction "that a failure to act in Libya would have carried a far greater price for America."[13]

The bungling outcome—in terms of casualties and treasure—of these interventions aside, the result has been a downturn in the currency of liberal internationalism and U.S. activism at large.

Decline of Liberal Internationalism and Reemergence of Great Power Competition

The decline in support for a liberal internationalist outlook has been a slow development in the post–Cold War U.S. polity. At the end of the Cold War, commentators often touted the coming of America's "unipolar moment."[14] U.S. activism abroad came to be seen at the core of "a new world order, where brutality will go unrewarded and aggression will meet collective resistance."[15] Thereafter, the template was set with no peer competitor on the horizon: America can "be safe only in an Open Door world—a world shaped by America's liberal ideology."[16]

Under this rubric, an American exceptionalism-induced characterization of

U.S. activism abroad emerged. For instance, in dampening allegations of American hegemonic excesses, U.S. security and foreign policy discourse came to be dominated with the view of the international environment being "far more likely to enjoy peace under a single hegemon," and that the United States runs "a uniquely benign imperium" owing to its promotion of liberal democratic values.[17]

Coupled with rising defense budgets to the average of about $500 billion in the immediate post–Cold War timeline (FY 1992–2000 in 2015 US$ constants), U.S. activism abroad often assumed a militaristic character. Interventions rationalized by "domino theories" led the United States into military engagements in Haiti, Rwanda, Somalia, and the former Yugoslavia.[18] Following the 11 September 2001 attacks, this inclination grew with the Global War on Terrorism to pursue expansive combat missions in Iraq and Afghanistan and assist local missions in Libya, Yemen, Syria, and Niger.[19]

The resultant war fatigue—with the U.S. effort in Afghanistan surpassing the Vietnam War to become America's longest war, and the loss of more than 6,500 U.S. military personnel (reportedly at least 4,486 in Iraq and 2,385 in Afghanistan) at a cost of nearly $6 trillion—perhaps led to 57 percent of Americans in a 2016 Pew Research Center poll to agree with the statement: the United States should "deal with its own problems and let others deal with theirs the best they can."[20]

In addition, the rise in the currency of conservative nationalism has spurred an abhorrence toward U.S. activism abroad. Although calls for a less activist America were always marginally present in the U.S. security and foreign policy community since the end of the Cold War, Trump's "America First" outlook was a first in terms of its resonance in the 2016 presidential election. Thus, culminating with the election victory of Trump, that sentiment against U.S. activism accentuated further with Trump's election rallying points of allied nations shortchanging America either in terms of mounting large trade surpluses with the United States or burdening the United States with overbearing security commitments.

A testament to that are the results of a recent November 2018 Pew Research Center poll on foreign policy priorities, which reflects that younger Americans are increasingly opposed to U.S. commitments abroad. The poll found that young Americans (younger than 30) to be less likely to advocate limiting the influence of Russia and China—only 3 in 10 people concurred.[21] On reducing U.S. military commitments abroad, more than one-third (34 percent) of young Americans concurred.[22] Meanwhile, on combating terrorism, only 27 percent of Americans younger than 50 deemed it a top priority.[23]

The Trump administration's foreign policy conduct thus far has reflected some of those apprehensions. On NATO, President Trump has rallied against

allies' contributions and derided American largesse underwriting foreign nations' security.[24] On trade imbalances, the Trump administration has sought to disconnect economic ties from security matters and has sought renewed "reciprocal" deals with partner nations.[25] On the promotion of Wilsonian values, Trump's former secretary of state Rex Tillerson notably called for "divorcing" policy from values.[26] On liberal internationalists' push for multilateral platforms and institutions, the Trump administration has withdrawn from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (commonly known as the Iran nuclear deal) and even initiated U.S. withdrawal from the United Nations Human Rights Council and the Paris Agreement.[27]

The Trump administration has also attempted to reduce U.S. military commitments. In Afghanistan, Trump initiated negotiations with the Taliban, breaking away from U.S. foreign policy precedent and toward an eventual withdrawal of troops.[28] In Syria, the Trump administration has not only initiated a troop withdrawal but also left the fate of the Kurds—operational allies of the United States against the Islamic State—in the hands of Turkey.[29] In Yemen, Trump has continued his predecessor's policy of not actively getting involved on the ground and ramped up support to partner nations such as Saudi Arabia—albeit with much controversy.[30]

These moves reflect the Trump administration's inclinations toward restraint and/or selective engagement. However, at the same time, the Trump administration has reflected some traits of primacy. For instance, in sustaining America's military's superiority, the Trump administration passed increases to the U.S. defense budget—topping $716 billion in 2019 and nearly $750 billion slated for 2020.[31] In underscoring American imperatives to tackle emerging threats, the Trump administration approved the elevation of the U.S. Cyber Command to a unified combatant command responsible for cyberspace operations.[32] It also announced the creation of the U.S. Space Command with a "projected manpower" of "1,450 personnel—390 military officers, 183 enlisted personnel, 827 civilians, and 50 contractors."[33]

The rationale behind these Reaganesque "peace through strength" moves toward U.S. military capability and readiness can be further ascertained in Trump's initial NSS. Released in late 2017, it announced the reemergence of "great power competition." In doing so, the NSS identified two competitors—China and Russia—wanting "to shape a world antithetical to U.S. values and interests." Additionally, the NSS stated that Russia and China are "fielding military capabilities designed to deny America access in times of crisis and to contest our ability to operate freely in critical commercial zones during peacetime. In short, they are contesting our geopolitical advantages and trying to change the international order in their favor."[34]

This focus on combating Russian and Chinese challenges to the interna-

tional order—and U.S. primacy by that extension—stand in contradiction to some of the earlier discussed restraint/selective engagement inclinations. Given the decline in the currency of liberal internationalism and increased opposition to U.S. activism, a renewed approach for American grand strategy is warranted.

Emergent U.S. Grand Strategy—Rethinking Primacy

An emergent American grand strategy—commensurate with the challenges posed by China and Russia to the liberal world order and the political constraints posed by a decline in the currency of liberal internationalism—must encompass a renewed consideration of Chinese and Russian actions. As the Trump NSS notes, Beijing and Moscow wish to order—or reorder—the current international system in accordance with their interests.[35] In that sense, they are rightly considered revisionist powers. However, many of their actions also stem from a sense of insecurity—spurred by the limitations of the current U.S.-led order.

Both China and Russia have been beneficiaries of the current system to a certain degree. For instance, since 1990 and its accession into the World Trade Organization in early 2000s, China has lifted more than 800 million people out of poverty—an unprecedented feat in the history of the world.[36] The Soviet Union underwent a near bloodshed-free dissolution, with its United Nations Security Council veto power and vast nuclear arsenal spread mainly across Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, seeing a peaceful transfer in the hands of the Russian Federation.[37] However, Chinese and Russian insecurity stands accentuated in the face of incommensurate representation in U.S.-led institutions, encircling America-centric security arrangements, and dampened credibility of multilateral approaches to issues of global governance.

Correspondingly, a U.S. grand strategy for the renewed era of great power competition must encompass a pursuit of sustaining its primacy—in terms of rightly calling China out on its unfair trade practices and pushing back against Russian cyber operations into foreign nations' democratic processes. However, in consideration of the discussed decline in support for liberal internationalism and opposition toward excessive U.S. activism abroad, that commensurate grand strategy must refrain from a military-intensive, containment-centric approach toward China and Russia. Instead, in recognition of the conservative internationalists' pertinent observation of the liberal order being the "outer perimeter" of U.S. security, the United States must spur China and Russia's further integration into the order to prevent them from disrupting those institutions that consolidate U.S. primacy.[38]

Their further integration would dampen the counterintuitive effects of a supposed containment approach by not emboldening hardliners in Beijing and Moscow that often cry foul over U.S. hegemony of the liberal order. Addition-

ally, the discussed precedent of China and Russia being beneficiaries of the order would only temper their revisionist impulses of overturning it. Hence, Washington must seek to consolidate its primacy via reforming institutions, recalibrating partnerships, and reinstating credibility of the U.S.-led order.

Reform Institutions

In the post–Cold War era, the rise of a multilateral world has witnessed a surge in competing interests. As a result, consensus to issues of global governance have become a rarity. Moreover, the institutions that comprise the liberal order have often been criticized as not representing current realities and balances of power. For instance, consider the voting shares of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank's International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD). A simple perusal of the figures of P5 countries and India, Germany, and Japan reflects its detachment from the current ordering of percentage share of world gross domestic product (GDP).[39]

However, these institutions have been amenable to reform. For instance, the 2010 Fourteenth General Review of Quotas at the IMF shifted "more than 6 percent of quota shares from over-represented to underrepresented member countries" but failed to accord rights commensurate with the status of member states' share of world GDP. The absence of much-needed reforms to these

Table 1.1. Representation in U.S.-led institutions of major powers relative to global economic share

Country	Percentage share of world GDP (PPP)	Percentage share of IMF voting rights	Percentage share of World Bank IBRD voting rights
China	19.24	6.09	4.37
United States	15.03	16.52	15.68
India	8.07	2.64	3.00
Japan	4.05	6.15	7.89
Germany	3.15	5.32	3.96
Russia	3.07	2.59	2.74
United Kingdom	2.20	4.03	3.71
France	2.15	4.03	3.71

Sources: "GDP Based on PPP, Share of World: Percent of World," International Monetary Fund, accessed 15 May 2019; "IMF Members' Quotas and Voting Power, and IMF Board of Governors," International Monetary Fund, accessed 15 May 2019; and "International Bank for Reconstruction and Development Subscriptions and Voting Power of Member Countries," World Bank, accessed 15 May 2019.

U.S.-led institutions perpetuate underrepresented powers to engage in "forum-shopping," mounting "a direct challenge to preexisting multilateral institutions" via creating alternate institutions.[40]

China and Russia both have reflected this tendency in terms of setting up the BRICS New Development Bank and the BRICS Contingent Reserve Arrangement.[41] From the standpoint of furthering its economic footprint, China's One Belt, One Road initiative is also one pertinent example. Furthermore, China and Russia also cofounded, with other Eurasian countries, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, which now also happens to include Iran and Afghanistan with observer status. Lastly, China spearheaded the creation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank with India—another underrepresented country—as its second-largest contributor of capital.

This increase in the number of forums not only makes international cooperation on matters of global governance more complex but also undercuts the liberal order, decreasing Washington's influence by extension.[42] Going forward, the United States must spearhead the reform of these institutions that are the bedrock of the American stewardship of liberal market economics.

Recalibrate Partnerships

For 165 years of its existence during two centuries, the United States stayed away from partnerships owing to the Jeffersonian dictum of avoiding "entangling alliances."[43] In the post–Second World War period, however, American commitments abroad peaked, stemming from Cold War considerations. Until right before the fall of the Berlin Wall, the United States had 356,000 troops stationed in Europe and 141,000 troops stationed in East Asia to serve as a bulwark against the possibilities of Soviet expansionism and temper historical rivalries of Japan and Germany with their respective regional neighbors.[44] By 2014, those numbers had dropped by 81 percent and 43 percent, respectively, to leave about 66,000 U.S. troops stationed in Europe (mainly in the United Kingdom, Germany, and Italy) and 81,000 U.S. troops in Asia (primarily in Japan and South Korea).[45]

However, according to a study by Michael Beckley of Tufts University, the United States continues to have entangling defense arrangements under the Organization of American States (OAS); NATO; Australian, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty (ANZUS); bilateral security pacts with allies such as Japan and the Philippines; and some informal defense commitments (e.g., Israel and Taiwan).

In all, U.S. defense commitments persist with about 69 countries that account for around 75 percent of the world's economic output and are home to one-quarter (more than 2 billion people) of the world's population.[46] These partnerships most definitely strengthen American power and multiply its edge

Table 1.2. U.S. defense pacts, 1945–2014

OAS	NATO	ANZUS	Bilateral
Antigua and Barbuda (1981), Argentina (1947), Bahamas (1982) Barbados (1967), Belize (1991), Bolivia (1947), Brazil (1947), Chile (1947), Colombia (1947), Costa Rica (1947), Cuba (1948–62, 2009), Dominica (1979), Dominican Republic (1947), Ecuador (1947), El Salvador (1947), Grenada (1975), Guatemala (1947), Guyana (1991), Haiti (1947), Honduras (1947), Jamaica (1969), Mexico (1947), Nicaragua (1947), Panama (1947), Paraguay (1947), Peru (1947), Saint Kitts and Nevis (1984), Saint Lucia (1979), Saint Vincent (1981), Suriname (1977), Trinidad and Tobago (1967), Uruguay (1947), Venezuela (1947)	Albania (2009), Belgium (1949), Bulgaria (2003), Canada (1949), Croatia (2009), Czech Republic (1999) Denmark (1949), Estonia (2003), France (1949), Greece (1951), Hungary (1999), Iceland (1949), Italy (1949), Latvia (2003), Lithuania (2003), Luxembourg (1949), Netherlands (1949), Norway (1949), Poland (1999), Portugal (1949), Romania (2003), Slovakia (2003), Slovenia (2003), Spain (1981), Turkey (1951), United Kingdom (1949), West Germany (1955–90), Germany (1990)	Australia (1951), New Zealand (1951–86)	Israel (1962), Japan (1951), Pakistan (1959), Philippines (1951), South Korea (1953), Taiwan (1954)

Note: names accurate as of time of pact.
Source: Compiled in Michael Beckley, "The Myth of Entangling Alliances—Reassessing the Security Risks of U.S. Defense Pacts," *International Security* 39, no. 4 (Spring 2015): 23, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00197.

in terms of enhanced power projection capabilities of it honing nearly 800 bases and outposts in more than 70 countries around the world.[47] However, in recent times, these partnerships have also come under fire owing to conservative nationalism's ire against expansive commitments sapping American resources. At the same time, they tend to accentuate Chinese and Russian insecurity.

The post–Cold War eastward expansion of NATO has in large parts emboldened the hardliners in Moscow about its continued existence even years after the end of the Cold War, whereas the U.S. hub and spokes alliance arrangement has spurred the Chinese to pursue antiaccess/area denial (A2/AD)

capabilities to push back the U.S. presence in China's immediate periphery in the Pacific.[48] Moreover, the unclear raison d'être of these partnerships in the post–Cold War era has only added to the misperceptions surrounding an American encirclement of Russia and China. Compounded by the reduced frequency of confidence-building mechanisms such as the Russia-NATO Council and China's exclusion from the recent Pacific Rim exercises only accentuates the perception in Moscow and Beijing about an American containment agenda.[49]

Going forward, the United States must recalibrate its justification for its partnerships across Europe and Asia—possibly in the context of counterterrorism missions or humanitarian and disaster relief efforts and enhance confidence-building measures to dampen misperceptions of American encirclement. Certainly, the alliances' role as a bulwark against Russian and Chinese expansionism would continue. However, to dampen the persisting ambiguities over their justifications, recalibrating them on the basis of common challenges such as terrorism can be useful.

Reinstate Credibility

American ambivalence on multilateral solutions to global governance issues has dampened the efficacy of the liberal order and its agenda-setting role. For instance, the U.S. stewardship on human rights issues stands shortchanged due to its nonratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.[50]

The potency of the liberal order's dictum on nonmilitarization of the high seas is undercut by the U.S. holdout on the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.[51] In then pressing for the peaceful resolution as per maritime international law of the territorial disputes between China and its neighbors in the South China Sea, U.S. credibility—and the liberal order's efficacy by that extension—stands in question.

Given Russia and China's pivotal role in tackling some of the world's most pressing issues—from North Korea's nuclear brinkmanship to the fate of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad—credibility of the United States becomes central. Instead, recent developments such as American withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal may have induced cynicism in Moscow and Beijing about cooperation with the United States on common threats and interests.[52]

For instance, consider the case of the negotiations for the Iran nuclear deal. In the run-up to the agreement under the Obama administration, China and Russia supported about four rounds of crippling sanctions against Iran at the United Nations Security Council. Once those sanctions successfully coaxed Iran to the negotiating table, cooperation with those otherwise adversarial nations

helped in brokering a deal. China was key in breaking an impasse over the Arak heavy water nuclear facility (or IR-40). Beijing jump-started the negotiations by suggesting "a redesign plan to modify the reactor so as to disable its potential for making weapons-grade nuclear materials."[53]

Going forward, a commensurate American grand strategy for the era of renewed great power competition should also encompass cooperation with friends and foes alike toward common challenges of global governance.[54] The same would not only strengthen the liberal order's efficacy but also reinstate U.S. credibility with adversaries like Beijing and Moscow.

Conclusion

The Trump administration is on point in announcing the reemergence of "great power competition." Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has faced competition from China and Russia. Although Washington's economic and military primacy remains intact, Beijing and Moscow pose myriad challenges —asymmetric challenges in cyberspace and symmetric via the use of proxies and vassals. Their central challenge, however, is to the post–Second World War liberal order, which conservative internationalists rightly argue forms the outer perimeter of American security.

In envisioning a commensurate grand strategy for an increase in opposition to American engagement abroad, the United States must consolidate its primacy via addressing the pitfalls of the current system, which counterintuitively accentuate Russian and Chinese insecurity that in turn spurs their revisionist approach to the liberal order. This article thus advocates for the United States to sustain its military edge and challenge Chinese and Russian transgressions—unfair trade practices and cyber intrusions into democratic processes. However, it must also reform institutions by increasing unrepresented nations' stakes in the order, recalibrate partnerships by defining the raison d'être of those alliances in terms of common challenges such as combating terrorism and/or humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and reinstate credibility of the U.S.-led order by upholding precedents of cooperation with friends and foes alike.

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