Competing Visions for International Order

Challenges for a Shared Direction in an Age of Global Contestation

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Chapter 2

The United States and Lost Visions of International Order in a World of Great-Power Competition

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2 The United States and Lost Visions of International Order in a World of Great-Power Competition

Ville Sinkkonen

Introduction

It is bordering on passé to argue that the brief unipolar or "liberal-hegemonic" moment that the United States enjoyed in the first two decades after the end of the Cold War is receding into the rear-view mirror (Acharya 2014; Layne 2011; Zakaria 2011). This is a result of various factors: a power transition unfolding on the systemic level, self-inflicted blunders by the United States in the Greater Middle East, a growing disenchantment globally – and increasingly within the "West" – regarding the ability of the post–World War II liberal international order to deliver for states and their people, not to mention the increasing political polarisation within the United States itself (cf. Nye 2011; Ikenberry 2018; Norrlof 2018; Stokes 2018; Trubowitz and Harris 2019).

The United States has limited, albeit by no means negligible, ability to impact the rise and fall of other great powers. However, the three other factors – let us call them policy, political legitimacy of the international order, and domestic-political dysfunction – have bearing upon a key component of great powers' international agency, namely their *visions* for international order. This visionary element of great power can be thought of as an equation. Power *capabilities* are a necessary but insufficient indicator to warrant calling a state a great power, let alone a hegemon, a term associated with the most powerful state in the system (Brooks 2012). An element of *willingness* to harness those power capabilities as well as the requisite *ambition* to strive for greatness is necessary (Layne 2006, 4; Schake 2017, 26), as is buy-in from other relevant actors in the international arena (Reus-Smit 2007). The link between endowments of power and great power is therefore complex, mediated by the realm of ideas.

At the same time, it is still the privilege of materially well-endowed states to engage in visionary world-making, because, unlike their weaker counterparts, the powerful have resources to spare when pursuing interests that go beyond merely ensuring state survival (Kitchen 2010). This tendency for conjuring up and implementing grand visions is amplified when the state in question happens to be the most powerful one in the system, a hegemonic position that the United States took full advantage of in the aftermath of World War II and again after the end of the Cold War (Ikenberry 2001; Brands 2018).

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But what happens to the visions of *declining* hegemons? Such great powers – like the United States of today – have reached the summit, but are in the process of losing their privileged position or at least in a situation where that position is growing less pronounced and increasingly contested. The present chapter therefore zooms in on the American ordering vision – or more aptly, the elite-level contestations over and concomitant struggles in articulating a vision befitting the current age. The time frame of the analysis spans the past ten years, starting from the latter years of the Barack Obama presidency until the last full year of Joe Biden's term in the White House. To achieve its objectives, the chapter relies on the analytical framework of this volume, examining the distributional, normative, institutional, and temporal dimensions of the American articulations of ordering vision. The conclusion will synthesise the discussion and look very briefly into the future, given Donald Trump's unprecedented return to the White House in January 2025.

Liberal Hegemony: A Challenged Orthodoxy

In the literature, the attitude of the United States towards international order after World War II has been described through the grand-strategic tradition of "liberal hegemony" – also referred to as "deep engagement" (cf. Brooks and Wohlforth 2016; Ikenberry 2012; Walt 2018; Nye 2019). This orientation has been *hegemonic* because the United States has sought to ensure – through a global military footprint and an elaborate network of alliances – that no hostile great power would come to dominate geostrategically vital regions, especially Europe, the Middle East, and Northeast Asia. The approach has been *liberal* in that the United States has intentionally sought to strengthen the international rules-based order along with global economic networks and multilateral institutions, while seeking to entrench values important to the United States within those networks and institutions. These two foundations of liberal hegemony have been viewed as both a guarantor of the country's success and conducive to predictable international cooperation.

After the Cold War, the Republican and Democratic administrations of George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton turned liberal hegemony into a grand strategy suited to a unipolar age. The logic seemed clear: the best way to advance US interests and maintain a benign international order would be to ensure that other major powers did not accumulate sufficient material and ideational endowments to challenge American leadership of the "New World Order" (Brands 2018). The United States would, therefore, commit to maintaining military investments, expand the market-based economic system, grow its alliance and partnership networks, and safeguard the institutions and "universal" values of the liberal rules-based order. This vision was mixed in with the centuries-old idea of the United States as an exceptional nation (Restad 2014), one "indispensable" to the international order (Albright 1998).

In the 2010s and 2020s, the liberal-hegemonic consensus has weakened due to the ongoing power shift in the international system, the crisis in the economic, institutional, and normative foundations of the liberal rules-based order, and certain fateful policy choices made by the United States. The George W. Bush administration overreacted to the tragic events of 9/11 by seeking to further bolster the United States' hegemonic position. As part of its effort to "promote a balance of power that favors freedom" in the Greater Middle East and further afield (Bush 2002, preface), the administration reserved the right to pre-emptive use of force in the service of US interests and values (Dunn 2006). At the same time, however, the United States became increasingly lukewarm about multilateral institutions and agreements – not just at the United Nations (UN), but also the Kyoto Protocol and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court – a stance that effectively undermined the United States' claim to legitimate global leadership (Reus-Smit 2007).

As the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq dragged on, economic costs and casualties reduced Americans' support for an internationally engaged foreign and security policy (Kupchan 2020). The 2007/8 Financial Crisis also left a large chink in the hegemon's armour and also signalled to others, particularly China, that the United States was far from invincible. Meanwhile, the deepening division of US domestic politics into Democratic and Republican political tribes have made it increasingly difficult for the United States to act consistently in the international arena across different administrations (Schultz 2017). In the process, the country's foreign policy debates have become more pluralistic and contested. Particularly, according to scholars and practitioners prescribing to the grand-strategic orientations of "restraint" and "offshore balancing", the commitment to liberal hegemony has misled the United States to substitute fundamental national interests with the wrong-headed promotion of liberal-democratic values in rhetoric and policy (Ashford 2021b; Mearsheimer 2019; Walt 2018).

Still Intent on Ordering the World? A Four-Dimensional Analysis

Changes on the level of the international system and order, alongside constraints imposed upon US agency through domestic politics and public opinion have been visible in the formulation of, or rather contestation and consternation over, the United States' ordering vision. This development has been visible at least since the latter years of the Obama presidency. The following unpacks the contests and commonalities of the visions prescribed to by the three previous presidential administrations in line with this volume's analytical framework, drawing on an analysis of relevant foreign and security policy documents and speeches of key protagonists, with special emphasis on National Security Strategies (NSSs) produced by the Obama, Trump, and Biden presidencies.

The Distributional Dimension: Converging on a World of Great Power Competition

Upon entering office, the Obama administration wanted to turn its attention to replenishing the internal building blocks of US power. It endeavoured to lighten the military footprint of the global battle against terrorism (Obama 2010, foreword), and, with its pivot/rebalance to Asia policy, respond to China's growing influence (Clinton 2011). Notably, the administration appeared to recognise the United States' gradually dwindling resources as well as its increasingly circumscribed ability to influence policy outcomes in an increasingly complex and interconnected world (Quinn 2011). Yet the 2015 NSS – unveiled roughly a year after Russia's first invasion of Ukraine began – never went as far as to acknowledge the ascent of a multipolar or bipolar world; in fact, American leadership of the globe was deemed an "undeniable truth" (Obama 2015, preface). However, the document did opt for a complex and fluid description of the global power constellation as "dynamic" with evolving "expectations about influence over international affairs", given "India's potential, China's rise, and Russia's aggression" (Obama 2015, 4). In such an international environment, the United States, despite its abundance of power, would need to prioritise, lest it squander "resources and influence [that] are not infinite" (Obama 2015, preface).

Donald Trump by and large rejected Obama's multipronged reading of global power dynamics, pledging to both put "America First" and "Make America Great Again". To dress the President's mercurial inclinations in a coherent garb, the administration's NSS zeroed in on the competitive dynamics between great powers. It criticised past administrations for misguided efforts to cooperate with China and Russia, which had not made these superpower challengers responsible stakeholders in the international order but instead eroded the competitive advantage of the United States and its ability to protect national interests (Trump 2017a, 2). In a "world of great power competition", the United States would increase deterrence through military spending and cajole its allies towards more equitable burden sharing in the military domain. However, in keeping with traditions of hegemonic thinking and sustained unipolarity, the United States would maintain "favorable balances of power" in the Indo-Pacific, Europe, and the Middle East (Trump 2017a, 45), and, like past administrations (cf. Obama 2015, 11), "retain an effective and safe nuclear Triad" that also protects US allies (Obama 2015, 30). Yet, in practice, the security strategy's focus on strengthening alliances was oftentimes undercut by President Trump's well-known mistrust of US allies in Europe and the Indo-Pacific (Pesu and Sinkkonen 2023; Desmaele 2021). At the same time, the Trump NSS called for the United States to secure the economic and technological basis of its dominance through domestic investment and a reassessment of international ties (Trump 2017a; see also Schadlow 2018).

The Biden (2022) NSS was delayed for months due to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. In the document, the administration maintains that the United States is entering a "decisive decade for America and the world" (Biden 2022, 6). In a diagnosis that was surprisingly similar to that offered by the preceding Trump team: "[T]he post-Cold War era is definitively over and a competition is underway between the major powers to shape what comes next" (Biden 2022). The Biden NSS and the related National Defense Strategy (NDS) identified China as a long-term challenge and the only nation that will have the ability to challenge the United States holistically going forward. Russia was seen as a regional short-term threat that – despite its aggressive conduct and flouting of international norms – lacks China's comprehensive capabilities (Biden 2022, 23–27; U.S. Department of

Defense 2022). The United States was meant to maintain its competitive advantage over great power challengers by investing especially in economic strength. Per Biden's national security advisor, Jake Sullivan, this would be measured by both the "size or efficiency" of the economy and "the degree to which it works for all Americans and is free of dangerous dependencies" (Sullivan 2023, 11). In addition, strengthening US alliance networks in both Europe and Asia and modernising American military capabilities – also nuclear ones – was seen as vital, as strategic competition would ultimately determine the parameters of the international order for decades to come. Yet, per the administration's positive reading, "[n]o nation is better positioned to succeed in this competition than the United States, as long as we work in common cause with those who share our vision of a world that is free, open, secure, and prosperous" (Biden 2022, 6).

The Normative Dimension: A Fumbling Value Leader

The Bush administration's "Freedom Agenda", founded on a belief that the United States could actively alter the values of other societies through active policies, was discredited by the excesses of the War on Terror and failures in Afghanistan and Iraq (see Hassan 2013). The Obama administration, therefore, did not fully subscribe to its predecessor's idea of the United States as an active herald of freedom and democracy, even though the president clearly believed in the universality of liberal values (Kitchen 2016, 16–17). For Obama, the United States would utilise its "power of example" to lead (Obama 2010, 10). The United States was also reluctant to commit to new military interventions to protect values except in extreme cases, such as in Libya in spring 2011 (but not in Syria in 2014). Yet, at the same time, the role of sanctions in punishing intransigent states, and by implication limiting their sovereignty, increased (Drezner 2021).

During Donald Trump's first term, the idea of the universality of freedom, democracy, and human rights took a back seat, while the chaotic presidency and Trump's challenges against domestic institutions also eroded American democracy and the country's soft power abroad (Nye 2021). Granted, the administration's security strategy nobly states that the United States seeks to promote "freedom of religion, assembly, and press . . . free trade, justice and the dignity of every human life" (Trump 2017a, 41), but in the preface of that same document, Trump paints a "beautiful vision" of "a world of strong, sovereign, and independent nations, each with its own cultures and dreams, thriving side-by-side in prosperity, freedom, and peace" (Trump 2017a, ii). Notably, the administration's focus was on negative as opposed to positive framings of freedom, in thwarting external influence and diffusions into the country, whether in the shape of people, ideas, or regulation (Sinkkonen and Vogt 2019). The president's speeches also included Christian-conservative ideas, emphasising notions like "Western civilization" (Trump 2017b), and Trump also spoke to the UN General Assembly (UNGA) about the importance of patriotism and the rejection of globalist thinking (Trump 2017c, 2018). The administration's commitment to conservative values was reflected, for example, in Trump's restriction on grants to non-governmental organisations that promote abortion rights (Trump 2017d), and efforts to prevent non-binary military service. However, the president did sign into law a sanctions bill targeting China for human rights and freedom violations in Hong Kong, ended the city's preferential treatment and unveiled an executive order citing genocide in Xinjiang – but these moves also fit with Trump's broader inclination to get tough on China (Nakamura 2020).

The Biden administration sought to return liberal and democratic values to centre stage in US foreign policy. On the one hand, Biden spoke of protecting American and, more broadly, Western democracy against internal threats (Biden 2021a). On the other hand, the administration framed great-power/strategic competition also as a struggle between democratic and authoritarian models of government (Biden 2022, 8–9). The United States saw the democratic community as a guarantee of a rules-based international system and a "free, open, prosperous, and secure" world (Biden 2022, 6), while recognising the need to maintain a lowest common denominator consensus on fundamental principles such as sovereignty and self-determination with others. This apparent pragmatism stemmed from acknowledging a central dilemma: in a world of intensifying great-power competition, it was imperative to seek cooperation to solve acute global challenges such as pandemics, climate, food, and energy crises, including with authoritarian states (Blinken 2022). At the same time, however, recognising the need for boosting the resilience of democracies, the Biden administration hosted the inaugural Summit for Democracy in late 2021. The initiative received criticism on all fronts: for hypocrisy, given America's own democratic travails, for framing the global competition in ideological terms, and for including countries with dubious democratic credentials (see Bergmann 2021). Moreover, US support for Israel in the wars in Gaza and Lebanon was used by critics to point to the inconsistencies of Biden's values-based approach (Yager 2024).

The Institutional Dimension: Selective or Transactional Multilateralism

For decades, the United States' relationship with international institutions has been marked by a pendulum swinging between more unilateral and multilateral periods (Daalder and Lindsay 2003, 12–14). Barack Obama wanted the United States to be at the centre of cooperation forums and to engage allies and other great powers to produce global goods and solve the challenges of an increasingly complex world (Obama 2010, 2015). For example, the United States was elected to the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) for the first time in 2009 and took a leading role in climate negotiations in Copenhagen and Paris as well as in global health during the Ebola epidemic. The administration initially also pushed for reform of the UN Security Council (Obama 2010), but abandoned the plans after realising that emerging powers such as Brazil, India, and South Africa were unlikely to take responsibility in the way the United States had envisioned (Patrick 2015, 119–20). However, like his predecessors George W. Bush and Bill Clinton and reflecting political constraints at home, Obama chose to use closed forums, informal commitments, and "minilateral" institutions and agreements (Patrick 2015; Kaye 2013).

These included the G7 and G70, nuclear safety summits, as well as the negotiations on the Iran nuclear deal (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action [JCPOA]), the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), and Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP).

From 2017 onwards, putting to practice Trump's America First foreign policy, the United States withdrew from several key cooperation forums, including the TPP, the Paris Climate Agreement, UNESCO, the UNHRC, the JCPOA and the World Health Organization (WHO) – the last of these during the coronavirus pandemic. Trump's (2017a, 40) NSS emphasised a direct correlation between resources expended and influence: for example, at the UN, the United States, as the largest contributor, should have more influence to determine the organisation's priorities and activities. In his address to the UNGA, Trump (2018) vowed that the United States "will never surrender America's sovereignty to an unelected, unaccountable, global bureaucracy . . . We reject the ideology of globalism, and we embrace the doctrine of patriotism". The administration's few key forays in the institutional field were informal, transactional, and minilateral in nature, most notably the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) between Australia, India, Japan, and the United States, which has the explicit aim of maintaining a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (U.S. Department of State 2019). Notably, the reframing of the region as the "Indo-Pacific" has been interpreted as a direct rebuttal of China's regional designs (He and Li 2020, 1–2).

Like Obama, the Biden administration wanted the United States back at key multilateral tables after a Trumpian interregnum. The strong support for Ukraine's sovereignty and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO's) open-door policy, the return to the Paris Climate Agreement, the WHO and the election of the United States to the UNHRC show that the United States once again wanted to steer the development of the rules-based order. As for the UN, Biden's NSS articulates an effort to reform the system, and the administration was committed to expanding the Security Council (Biden 2022, 12; U.S. Mission to the United Nations 2022). At the same time, however, the United States made further efforts to develop minilateral channels and informal institutions to excel in strategic competition. For example, the US–UK–Australia relationship deepened with the AUKUS agreement, the Quad was upgraded to a forum between heads of state, and the United States held two COVID-19 summits. Moreover, the multilateralism of the Biden administration was characteristically value-based (cf. Creutz 2022). It saw the G7 as a key forum for addressing global problems (Biden 2022, 17), while the G20 did not even deserve a mention in the NSS. This "latticework" of coexisting minilaterals amounted to "alliances . . . updated and energized for the challenges of today" (Sullivan 2023; see also 2021).

The Temporal Dimension: Time Is on My Side, or Is It?

There is an obvious temporal dimension in the key foreign policy documents of the three administrations studied. In the Obama era, in keeping with the administration's self-described more complex framing of global power, both the awareness of waning American resources and influence and the attendant urgency of responding to global threats were present. These included inter alia, failed states, nuclear proliferation, climate change, and pandemics. Yet the strategy also makes a case that the United States will “lead with a long-term perspective [as] . . . there are historic transitions underway that will unfold over decades” (Obama 2015). These transitions – linked to the global power shift, proliferation of non-state actors, technological change, the post-Arab Spring Middle East, and changes in the global economy – would force the United States towards thinking that “eschews orienting our entire foreign policy around a single threat or region” and considers “a diversified and balanced set of priorities appropriate for the world’s leading global power with interests in every part of an increasingly interconnected world” (Obama 2015). This fits with President Obama’s world view, which has been described as pronouncedly teleological: for him, “the arc of history” would ultimately “bend toward justice” (Goldberg 2016).

In Trump’s first term, the administration assumed the nostalgic inclinations of the President, who, after all, endeavoured to “Make America Great Again” against the backdrop of a present defined by an “American carnage” (Trump 2017e). This harkening back to a glorified past was clear in the NSS, which celebrated the Reagan-era notion of “peace through strength” and vowed to get the United States ready to excel in a world of great power competition. As the then Secretary of State Jim Mattis (2018, 1) argued in the unclassified synopsis of the NDS, the United States was “emerging from a period of strategic atrophy, aware that our competitive military advantage has been eroding”. In a world of “strategic interstate-competition”, the objective would be to invest heavily in a “dominant joint force” (Mattis 2018, 11), thus guaranteeing a future defined by “favorable balances of power that safeguard the free and open international order” (Mattis 2018, 1) – an open-ended commitment if there ever was one.

Before joining the Biden administration as Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), William J. Burns (2019) wrote a passage that captures the temporal challenge before the United States with remarkable introspection.

> We’re no longer the singular dominant power that we were just after the Cold War, but we’re still the pivotal player. We still have lots of assets: the world’s best military; an economy that is bigger and more innovative than anyone else’s, even though it is plagued by inequalities; and a capacity for alliances and coalition building unmatched by our rivals. We still have a window of American pre-eminence before us, in which we can help shape international order to safeguard our interests and values, before others shape it for us.

However, the extent to which the administration espoused the ideas of its CIA Director in terms of the finite nature of US ascendancy is up for debate. It did telegraph a sense of urgency and prioritisation in a world of strategic competition, putting forth a template – “a clear vision” – for success during a “decisive decade”. This included “national resilience”, “credibility on the world stage”, and “competitive advantage” through industrial policy and re-energised American democracy;

"terms of competition" that favour the United States over its rivals through broad partnerships; "strengthened deterrence" brought about by a modernised military and strategic technologies; and "a free, open, prosperous, and secure world" drawing on US "national strengths" and alliances (Biden 2022, 48). However, short of references to "managed competition", it is unclear how (or whether) the United States' key rivals, not to mention others unwilling to toe the US line, would ultimately find their place in such a world.

Conclusion and Future Prospects: From Non-Vision to Vision?

What, then, emerges from this four-dimensional analysis of the United States' ordering vision? On the one hand, it is obvious that there were differences of emphasis between the Obama and Biden presidencies, on the one hand, and the Trump presidency, on the other, especially when it comes to the normative and institutional dimensions. In the first Trump term, the US commitment to liberal-democratic values was replaced by a focus on religious, civilisational, and patriotic tropes – particularly in public appearances and speeches of the President – even if some administration policies and discourse paid lip service to democracy and human rights. Freedom was also framed in a more negative vein – and this looks to continue in Trump's second term (Lu 2025). For Obama and Biden, in contrast, values were part and parcel of what the United States can offer to the world, whether through the "power of example" or active diplomacy in the shape of the Summit for Democracy.

While the grand institutional designs of the post–World War II era were certainly a key part of the long period of American ascendancy during the Cold War and the unipolar moment, the growing disenchantment with these forays is present in the communication of all three presidencies. However, for Trump and his first administration, this is a matter of almost categorical rejection and espousal of transactionalism, whereas for Obama and Biden, US commitment to institutions is constitutive of American leadership and undergirds its potential to order the world. For Trump, and many in the current Republican Party, the way to fix the current international institutional fabric is through exit and extortion; for Biden and the Democrats, it was through selective yet at times blatantly strategic engagement. This difference in analysis will undoubtedly impact the United States' conduct during Trump's second term – whether in NATO and the US alliances in the Indo-Pacific, where calls for burden shifting as opposed to sharing will likely proliferate, or in UN institutions and key components of the rules-based order including climate, health, human rights, trade, and nuclear, where a mixture of exit and threats seeks to increase returns to the United States at the expense of others (Carnegie and Clark 2024).

Similarities emerge in the temporal and polarity dimensions. In terms of temporality, change and urgency are underlined by all three administrations. For both Obama and Biden, acknowledging changes in key factors, whether great-power relations, non-state actors, technology or potentially existential food, energy and climate crises, and pandemics, would necessitate a rejuvenation of American leadership in terms of a new outlook: by acknowledging complexity or getting back to investing in the United States' domestic economic foundations. While the Trump administration shared the latter imperative, its nostalgic doubling down on peace through strength suggests a different – or more linear – antidote for dealing with change: a traditional resource-based (and very much traditional security oriented) reading of power reflected in an urgent investment in military capabilities. This rendition of power will likely endure in the United States after January 2025, as the President and his advisors have telegraphed (Kellogg and Negrea 2024; O'Brien 2024).

Moreover, in the national security documents and relevant remarks of the three presidential administrations studied, there are various references to changes in the constellation of global power, but this does not translate into a polarity-based description of the international arena. At best, the United States acknowledges the rise of great power competitors (and other relevant actors) and at times alludes to the waning of US influence in the face of new systemic realities. However, this is done without unambiguously admitting that the United States' position as *primus inter pares* has been fundamentally altered or – in the case of Obama and Biden especially – that these changes would really mean a decreased demand for US leadership globally. In fact, an unnerving belief in America's ability to reinvent and shape the future in a manner of its choosing remains. According to President Biden (2021b), "the United States of America has always been able to chart the future in times of great change . . . to constantly renew ourselves".

Yet the manner in which both Trump and Biden moved beyond Obama's emphasis on complex interconnectedness in favour of a focus on great powers – most obviously China and to a lesser extent Russia and the "rogue spoilers" Iran or North Korea – suggests convergence around one key insight: the ascendancy of great-power or strategic competition. Upon critical inspection, however, great-power or strategic competition is not a vision for the international arena, it is a *non-vision*, for some, a description of the current state of the international system, for others, a prescription regarding the imperative to compete (cf. Ashford 2021a; Sinkkonen and Gaens 2020; Wyne 2022). The notion of great-power or strategic competition suggests little in the shape of a novel order, one to which a majority of the globe's fellow travellers could ascribe. It merely harnesses institutions and values into means through which that competition takes place (Sinkkonen 2024), while there is little thinking about what a post-great-power-competition world would look like. Doubling down on this reading of the international arena, especially vis-à-vis China, could define the second Trump term (cf. Waltz and Kroenig 2024), but the mercurial nature and personalistic policy approach of President Trump also suggests that a grand "deal" between Washington and Beijing is within the realm of possibilities (Crabtree 2025).

This lack of a shared vision is also tied to real-life policy dilemmas: What is the United States ultimately after when it comes to contesting a regional unfriendly power like Iran or Russia, not to mention its allotted long-term great-power competitor China (Cooper 2023; Pike 2024)? Should the United States seek a rejuvenation of American hegemony, a world wherein different blocs formed around key powers clash, or perhaps even a great-power *modus vivendi* where each key player respects the others' spheres of influence? In the first months of Trump's second term, the United States has, for instance, been sympathetic to Moscow's concerns over those of Ukraine and European allies, as well as openly hostile to Europe's security "free-riding" and the European Union. Some sympathetic observers see this swift policy realignment presaging a "reverse Kissinger" aimed at breaking bonds between Russia and China (Young 2025), while others interpret it as a precursor to accepting the regional pre-eminence of other great powers (Toft 2025). Both would be profound departures in post–World War II American grand strategy and elicit pushback from traditional foreign policy elites and sections of the US public (Smeltz et al. 2024; Smeltz and El Baz 2025). There is also the real possibility that the world is witnessing an exercise in revisiting Trump's old grudges – especially vis-à-vis Ukraine and Europe (Bremmer 2025) – policy incompetence and, by implication, a manifest lack of vision with dire consequences for US standing in the world. Regardless of the ultimate rationale, the fact that the United States has for years been trapped in a visionless limbo and unsure how to deal with gradually losing its hegemonic position, may present the current administration with an historic opportunity to challenge what is left of the deep engagement consensus. This would constitute an enormous blow to what still remains of the liberal international order.

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