Toward a Global Society of States

by Michael Lind

Here is an instructive and entertaining exercise for students of American foreign policy. Match the quotation to the appropriate American statesman: Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, or Woodrow Wilson.

The first quotation is this: "Our aim should be from time to time to take such steps as may be possible toward creating something like an organization of the civilized nations, because as the world becomes more highly organized the need for navies and armies will diminish." Woodrow Wilson, you might think, the naive idealist who dreamed that the League of Nations would put an end to war. But no. The words belong rather to President Theodore Roosevelt, in his 1905 State of the Union address.

Perhaps you'll have better luck with the second example: "Unhappily for the other three [parts of the world], Europe, by her arms and by her negotiations, by force and by fraud, has in different degrees extended her dominion over them all. Africa, Asia and America have successively felt her domination. The superiority she has long maintained has tempted her to plume herself as the mistress of the world, and to consider the rest of mankind as created for her benefit. Men . . . have in direct terms attributed to her inhabitants a physical superiority. . . . Facts have too long supported these arrogant pretensions of the European." Thomas Jefferson, surely, denouncing European imperialism and racism. No again: Alexander Hamilton, the quintessential realist, in *The Federalist* 11.

Here, in fact, is Jefferson, sounding like the "realist" Hamilton in a letter of 1814: "Surely none of us wish to see Bonaparte conquer Russia, and lay thus at his feet the whole of Europe. This done, England would be but a breakfast. . . . It cannot be to our interest that all Europe should be reduced to a single monarchy." And here, sounding like his bellicose critic Roosevelt, is Wilson in 1919 describing what it would take for the United States to be an independent great power if the League of Nations did not secure world peace: "We must be physically ready for anything to come. We must have a great standing army. We must see to it that every man in America is trained to arms. We must see to it that there are munitions and guns enough for an army that means a mobilized nation."

As the quotation game suggests, it's a mistake to divide the architects of American foreign policy into "realists" and "idealists." Realpolitik of the Continental kind, with its contempt for international law and its elevation

of the pursuit of national self-interest by brute force, has had little influence in the United States. (It's not surprising that one of the few American proponents of this school, Henry Kissinger, is a German émigré.) American realists such as Hamilton, Theodore Roosevelt, and Henry Cabot Lodge had a healthy respect for the role of military power in foreign affairs, but they also believed in international cooperation—among "civilized" nations, if not among all countries. America's leading "idealists," for their part, have been willing to use force, particularly when the interests of the United States and the international community have converged. Jefferson waged war on the Barbary pirates, who threatened American shipping and Mediterranean commerce in general. Wilson ruined his presidency and his health in his campaign to persuade the Senate to ratify U.S. membership in the League of Nations, the purpose of which was not to eliminate the role of power in world politics but to replace the "balance of power" with a "community of power."

If the American tradition of foreign policy, then, is neither militaristic realpolitik nor ineffectual pacifism, how should it be described? The mainstream American philosophy of foreign policy, from the 18th century to the 21st, belongs to a broad school of thought that scholars call the "Grotian tradition," after Hugo Grotius, a 17th-century Dutch theorist of international law. From Grotius and like-minded thinkers such as Samuel von Pufendorf and Emmerich de Vattel, the Founding Fathers learned that, after the 17th-century Wars of Religion, the Roman empire and medieval Christendom in the West had been replaced by a "society of states," their number limited initially to the countries of Europe and—by extension—their settler colonies in the Americas. "Europe," Montesquieu declared, "is a nation composed of many nations." The British philosopher David Hume similarly viewed Europe and its American and Russian outliers as part of a great commonwealth made up of "a number of neighboring and independent states, connected together by commerce and policy." "A society of states (or international society)," the 20th-century British scholar Hedley Bull has written, "exists when a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and values, form a society in the sense that they conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules of their relations with one another, and share in the working of common institutions." There is a complex mixture of order and anarchy in the international system, best described perhaps by Alexis de Tocqueville when he wrote of "the society of nations

> THE GREATEST THREAT TO THE EUROPEAN SOCIETY OF STATES CAME FROM CONQUERORS . . . WHO SOUGHT TO REPLACE THE SYSTEM OF INDEPENDENT STATES WITH A NEW EMPIRE RESEMBLING THAT OF ROME.

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Attempting to put a benign spin on America's first major imperial adventure, "New Faces at the Thanksgiving Dinner" (1898) cast the colonies won in the Spanish-American War in an unflattering light.

in which each separate people is, as it were, a citizen—a society always semi-barbarous, even in the most civilized epochs, whatever efforts are made to improve and regulate the relations of those who compose it."

The greatest threat to the European society of states came from conquerors such as Charles V, Louis XIV, and Napoleon, who sought to replace the system of independent states with a new empire resembling that of Rome. In the 17th century, Pufendorf wrote that all European states were "obliged to oppose with all their power" what he called "the monarchy of Europe, or the universal monopoly, this being the fuel with which the whole world may be put to flame." Montesquieu argued that modern states should try to avoid being absorbed into a single "universal monarchy" such as the Roman Empire. And Hume, in his essay "Of the Balance of Power," agreed that states should unite in alliances to prevent any single state from reducing them to the status of mere provinces in a universal empire.

In their attitude toward the Western society of states, the American Founders were conservative. They seceded from the British Empire to join the existing international system, not to overthrow it, as the French Jacobins and Soviet Communists would attempt to do. Even as they hoped that, over time, more states would adopt republican government on the basis of the American example, they adopted the diplomatic institutions and norms previously worked out by the European monarchies and empires. Thus, the great American legal scholar James Kent begins his *Commentaries on American Law* (1826) as follows: "When the United States ceased to be a part of the British empire, and assumed the character of an independent nation, they became subject to that system of rules which reason, morality, and custom had established among the civilized nations of Europe, as their public law."

Empire without "Overstretch"

It is easy to say that when Osama bin Laden assaulted the world's remaining superpower, he and his network and those who supported him got their just desserts and appropriate oblivion.

But that conclusion is almost beside the point.

The larger lesson—and one stupefying to the Russian and Chinese military, worrying to the Indians, and disturbing to proponents of a common European defense policy—is that in military terms there is only one player on the field that counts. . . .

To put it another way, while the battle between the United States and international terrorism and rogue states may indeed be asymmetrical, perhaps a far greater asymmetry may be emerging: namely, the one between the United States and the rest of the powers.

How is this to be explained? First, by money. For the past decade and well before that, the United States has been spending more on its defense forces, absolutely and relatively, than any other nation in history. While the European powers chopped their post-Cold War military spending, China held its in check, and Russia's defense budget collapsed in the 1990s, the U.S. Congress duly obliged the Pentagon with annual budgets ranging from about $260 billion in the middle of the decade to this year's $329 billion.

Everyone knew that, with the Soviet Union's forces in a state of decrepitude, the United States was in a class of its own. But it is simply staggering to learn that this single country—a democratic republic that claims to despise large government—now spends more each year on the military than the next nine-largest national defense budgets combined. . . .

Nothing has ever existed like this disparity of power; nothing. I have returned to all of the comparative defense spending and military personnel statistics over the past 500 years that I compiled in *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, and no other nation comes close. The Pax Britannica was run on the cheap, Britain's army was much smaller than European armies, and even the Royal Navy was equal only to the next two navies. Right now all the other navies in the world combined could not dent American maritime supremacy.

Charlemagne's empire was merely western European in its reach. The Roman empire stretched farther afield, but there was another great empire in Persia, and a larger one in China. There is, therefore, no comparison.

But this money has to come from somewhere, primarily from the country's own economic resources (in long wars, powers often borrow from abroad). Here again is an incomparable source of U.S. strength, and one that has been increasing in the past few years. . . . This steady economic growth, along with the curbing of inflation in the 1990s, produced the delightful result that America's enormous defense expenditures could be pursued at a far lower relative cost to the country than the military spending of Ronald Reagan's years.

In 1985, for example, the Pentagon's budget equaled 6.5 percent of gross domestic product and was seen by many as a cause of U.S. budgetary and economic growth problems. By 1998, defense spending's share of GDP was down to 3.2 percent, and today it is not much greater.

Being Number One at great cost is one thing; being the world's single superpower on the cheap is astonishing. . . .

What are the implications, for the world and for America itself?

First, it seems to me there is no point in the Europeans or Chinese wringing

their hands about U.S. predominance, and wishing it would go away. It is as if, among the various inhabitants of the apes and monkeys cage at the London Zoo, one creature had grown bigger and bigger—and bigger—until it became a 500-pound gorilla. It couldn't help becoming that big, and in a certain way America today cannot help being what it is either.

It is interesting to consider the possible implications for world affairs of the existence of such a giant in our midst. For example, what does it mean for other countries, especially those with a great-power past such as Russia and France, or with great-power aspirations such as India and Iran?

Russian president Vladimir Putin's government is faced with the difficult choice of trying to close the enormous power gap, or admitting that would merely overstrain Russia's resources and divert the nation from the more sensible pursuit of domestic peace and prosperity.

French Europeanists need either to recognize that the chances of creating a true equal to American military, diplomatic, and political weight in world affairs are an illusion, or they need to exploit the recent display of Europe's bystander role to make fresh efforts to unify the fractured continent.

Think, also, of the implications for China, perhaps the only country that—should its recent growth rates continue for the next 30 years and internal strife be avoided—might be a serious challenger to U.S. predominance. More immediately, relish the message this mind-boggling display of the American capacity to punish its opponents has sent to those nations who had hoped to change the local status quo in the Korean Peninsula, in the Taiwan Straits, the Middle East—in the not-too-distant future.

As the crew of the *Kitty Hawk* and other vessels of the U.S. Navy take their shore leave, one hears the distant rustle of military plans and feasibility studies by general staffs across the globe being torn up and dropped into the dustbin of history.

Reflect also on the implications for international organizations, especially those involved in Western defense and/or global peace and security. True, some NATO forces played an ancillary role, and European states lent bases to the United States, supplied intelligence, and rounded up suspected terrorists; but the organization's other members may have to face the prospect of being either a hollow shell when the Americans don't play, or an appendage to Washington when they do.

Can one have a reasonably balanced United Nations Security Council when there now exists, in addition to the gap between its five permanent veto members and the nonpermanent members, a tremendous and real gulf in the power and influence of one of the five and the other four?. . . .

Will this "unipolar moment," as it was once called, continue for centuries? Surely not.

"If Sparta and Rome perished," Rousseau said, "what state can hope to endure forever?"

It is a fair point. America's present standing very much rests upon a decade of impressive economic growth. But were that growth to dwindle, and budgetary and fiscal problems to multiply over the next quarter of a century, then the threat of overstretch would return. In that event, the main challenge facing the world community could be the possible collapse of U.S. capacities and responsibilities, and the chaos that might ensue from such a scenario.

But from the flight deck of the USS *Enterprise*, that scenario seems a long way off for now.

—Paul Kennedy

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Where Americans have differed from their European counterparts, without rejecting the basic customs and rules of the society of states, is in their deep antagonism toward imperialism, the coercive rule of one ethnic nation over others. (Early American writers who use "empire" in an archaic sense to mean "national territory" should not be interpreted as endorsing colonial rule.) In the past, American support for self-determination was often limited by racism. Southern slaveowners, for example, feared that the establishment in 1804 of a black Haitian republic, independent of France, would inspire slave revolts in the United States; tragically, at the Versailles Conference in 1919, the United States teamed up with the British Empire to block Japan's proposal that international law ban racial discrimination. (By contrast, antiracism was a basic norm of the international system the United States helped to set up after 1945.)

But there has long been a more generous strain at work in the society. In the early 19th century, for example, the United States welcomed the independence of the Latin American republics from Spain for philosophical as much as for geopolitical reasons. The Monroe Doctrine, which held that the Americas should be an empire-free zone, was violated by France when it took advantage of civil war in the United States to establish a Mexican empire, headed by its puppet, the Hapsburg prince Maximilian. Abraham Lincoln, who had opposed the U.S. war against Mexico (1846–48), supported the republican nationalist Benito Juárez in his battle to free Mexico from France. After Lincoln's assassination, the threat of U.S. intervention in Mexico led the French to withdraw. Lincoln was a principled anti-imperialist who hoped that the Union victory in the Civil War would inspire liberal republicans throughout the world.

Of course, the United States has at times engaged in old-fashioned territorial imperialism—it annexed northern Mexico; it conquered Spain's Caribbean and Philippine empire in 1898; it repeatedly sent marines to topple or install governments in the Caribbean and Latin America. But America's imperialism, despite episodes of brutality, was constrained by republican principles. With the exceptions of Alaska and Hawaii, the geographic expansion of the United States ended with the annexation of the thinly populated northern portion of Mexico. White American statesmen did not want to admit large nonwhite populations in Latin America and the Caribbean to full citizenship, as republican theory required, but they also did not want to rule them without their consent, as republican theory forbade. (Had it not been for 19th-century American racism, much more of Mexico might now be part of the Union.) The few small overseas territories the United States governs today, such as Puerto Rico and Guam, are anomalous exceptions that prove the rule.

Most U.S. interventions in the Caribbean, Central America, and the Philippines occurred to prevent rival great powers—imperial Germany and Japan in the early 20th century, the Soviet Union during the Cold War—from gaining control of crucial strategic assets. The Philippines and Hawaii were valuable chiefly as bases for a U.S. naval presence that kept the European empires and Japan from monopolizing the economic and military resources of China and its surrounding countries. Although some U.S. investors

exploited America's military role for their own purposes, sea power and geopolitical prestige, not profit, were on the minds of American presidents when they sent in the marines. When the evolution of naval and air power made the Panama Canal strategically irrelevant, the United States ceded it to Panama. There is no contradiction between this kind of limited and incidental strategic imperialism, which has permitted the United States to take part in global power struggles by using overseas military bases, and the principled hostility of American leaders to attempts by the European powers and Japan to divide most of the earth's inhabitants and resources among a small number of autarkic empires. Precedents for America's oceanic web of ports, canals, coaling stations, and airfields can be found in the maritime empires created by such older commercial republics as Venice and the Netherlands.

The U.S. protectorate and alliance system during the Cold War, if it was an empire at all, was a temporary empire of defense, not an empire of conquest and exploitation. The presence of U.S. forces in West Germany and Japan allowed those countries to build strong democracies and vibrant economies without being intimidated by the Soviet Union and China. Although the United States supported anticommunist governments in West Germany and Italy in the early years of the Cold War, there was never any possibility that America would invade Western Europe and topple governments, as the Soviet Union did in East Germany (1952), Hungary (1956), and Czechoslovakia (1968). And unlike the Soviet Union, which parasitically exploited its more affluent Eastern European satellites, the United States helped restore Western Europe's economy through the Marshall Plan and encouraged the formation of a powerful economic rival, the European Economic

The United States has refused to sign the land mines convention, signed but not ratified the Kyoto Protocol and other pacts, and withdrawn from one major agreement, the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty.

Community (now the European Union). American proxy wars in Korea, Indochina, Afghanistan, and other countries of no significant economic value were part of the campaign to thwart the Soviet bid for global military and diplomatic hegemony. It does not just distort language to call America's alliance diplomacy and antihegemonic wars against imperial and Nazi Germany and the Soviet bloc "imperialism" and "colonialism"; it obscures the truly innovative nature of what American leaders have sought to do.

From the time the United States emerged as a great power around 1900, most American leaders have shared the vision of a global society of states that would be an alternative to a world divided among closed imperial economic and military blocs. In the world that Americans wanted, applying the principle of self-determination would result in the replacement of large multinational, dynastic empires with dozens or hundreds of new nation-states—preferably, but not necessarily, democratic republics similar to the United States. In the postimperial world order envisioned by leading Americans before 1945, a global market based on free (or perhaps managed) trade would replace the exclusive economic blocs of the British, French, and other empires. This "Open Door" principle was first applied to prevent the carving up of China into imperial economic zones, and it was then generalized to the entire world economy after World War II through the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and the World Trade Organization (WTO). International organizations—the League of Nations after World War I, the United Nations and other bodies after World War II—were to offer permanent forums for diplomacy; international law and the decrees of international institutions were to be enforced by a global steering committee led by great powers, such as the permanent members of the UN Security Council.

In the early 20th century, variants of this vision were shared by "realists" and "idealists" alike. To enforce international decisions and norms, for example, idealist Woodrow Wilson emphasized collective security actions taken by every nation in concert, while his realist critics Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Cabot Lodge favored international policing by a few "civilized" great powers, such as the United States, Britain, and France. But Roosevelt and Lodge shared with Wilson the goals of promoting international organization and arbitration and reciprocally reducing trade barriers.

The broadly shared American vision of a postimperial, global society of states was finally realized by Franklin D. Roosevelt—Theodore's cousin, who had served Wilson as an assistant secretary of the navy. During World War II, Article 3 of the 1941 Atlantic Charter, which declared the "right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they live," was an accurate statement of American policy. When the British argued that Article 3 did not apply to their empire, Under Secretary of State Sumner Welles replied in 1942: "If this war is in fact a war for the liberation of peoples, it must assure the sovereign equality of peoples throughout the world, as well as in the world of the Americas. Our victory must bring in its train the liberation of all peoples. Discrimination between peoples because of their race, creed, or color must be abolished. The age of imperialism is ended."

Throughout World War II, FDR sought the peaceful liquidation of the old empires of his British and French allies, even as he joined them in opposing the new empires of Nazi Germany, imperial Japan, and fascist Italy. Although he was willing to make some concessions to them, the American president wanted the British out of India and the French out of Indochina, and he conditioned U.S. help for Britain on the abolition of "imperial preference" in trade and investment and the creation of a truly global economy. An aide's report of comments made to him at Yalta by FDR reflects how much the president's anti-imperial idealism was buttressed by realism:

> The President said he was concerned about brown people in the East. He said that there are 1,100,000,000 brown people. In many Eastern countries, they are ruled by a handful of whites and they resent it. Our goal must be to help them achieve independence—1,100,000,000 enemies are dangerous. He said he included the 450,000,000 Chinese in that. He then added, Churchill doesn't understand this.

Adolf Hitler, who had long dreamed of an alliance between Germany and Britain against the United States, ranted that Roosevelt "says he wants to save England but he means he wants to be ruler and heir of the British Empire." In fact, FDR wanted to do something far more radical than merely create an American empire of a traditional kind. He wanted to create a nonimperial world—a global society of states to replace the old Europe-centered society of states. In return for giving up their exclusive empires, great powers would have a place in the new global system as joint guarantors of peaceful change. FDR's list of global "policemen" varied; at different times he saw Britain, the Soviet Union, and China as partners of the United States. Whatever their identity, the great powers, rather than exploit their exclusive spheres of influence as predatory empires of the past had done, would act in concert to benefit the overall system, as the great powers of Europe had sometimes done in the 18th and 19th centuries.

FDR mistakenly assumed that the postwar Soviet Union would act as a traditional great power. Instead, after the defeat of Hitler, Joseph Stalin and his successors created an empire in Eastern Europe, helped bring Mao Zedong to power in China, and promoted the expansion of a Moscow-centered communist bloc that included outposts in Korea, Indochina, Cuba, and Africa. The veto power the Soviet Union enjoyed as a permanent member of the UN Security Council kept that body deadlocked from the late 1940s to the 1990s. At the same time, the need to enlist British and French support in the Cold War caused successive U.S. administrations to tolerate a slower pace of decolonization in Asia and Africa than FDR had envisioned.

Although the Grotian ideal of a civilized society of states has been the basis for mainstream American foreign policy, there has always been a concomitant dissenting tradition of American exceptionalism. In this view, the United States is not to be a new Roman Republic or a larger Britain but a new Israel. In 1952 Ronald Reagan, whose Midwestern mother belonged to the Disciples of Christ, echoed this venerable analogy between the United

States and Old Testament Israel: "I believe that God in shedding his grace on this country has always in this divine scheme of things kept an eye on our land and guided it as a promised land."

The source of this messianic view of America's role in the world is the Protestant Reformation. New England Protestants feared that the Roman Catholic Church, working through the British monarchy, might strangle the Protestant "saints" in their American refuge. The granting of toleration to Catholics in British Canada by the Quebec Act of 1774 alarmed many Protestants in the American colonies. In the imagination of today's Protestant evangelicals, the United Nations and "secular humanism" have replaced the British Empire and the Catholic Church as the hubs of international evil, but apocalyptic paranoia remains part of American culture.

American exceptionalism oscillates between isolationism and evangelicalism. Virtue must be protected in America from a corrupt world—or imposed by America on a corrupt world. At times (such as the two decades between the First and Second World Wars), American exceptionalists have wanted to create a Fortress America and leave the rest of the world to succumb to decadence, anarchy, and tyranny. In other circumstances, American exceptionalists have been energized by a millennial fervor for reforming the world. The two impulses have sometimes coexisted. In the 1890s, for example, one fervent Protestant evangelical politician, William Jennings Bryan, denounced American imperialism, and an equally fervent Protestant evangelical preacher, Josiah Strong, argued that it was America's destiny to Christianize the world by means of an expansive foreign policy.

IT MIGHT BE NECESSARY TO MAKE IMMORAL CONCESSIONS TO ALLIES TO ENLARGE OR MAINTAIN A COALITION, AND THE PURITY OF AMERICA'S PURPOSE IN FOREIGN POLICY WOULD THEN BE DILUTED.

The isolationist wing and the evangelical wing of American exceptionalism share a dread of alliances: It might be necessary to make immoral concessions to allies to enlarge or maintain a coalition, and the purity of America's purpose in foreign policy would then be diluted. Even worse, alliances might infect the godly American republic with Old World viruses—autocracy, perhaps, or collectivism. This fear explains why the United States participated in World War I as an associated power, not an ally. It explains, too, why the United States for many years refused to grant diplomatic recognition to the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China; merely to engage in ordinary diplomatic relations with an evil regime is to condone its crimes. American exceptionalism is responsible as well for the frequent use of economic and military sanctions to punish all kinds of transgressions by foreign countries. And its influence can be sensed both in the American Left's enthusiasm for private disinvestment campaigns against countries with

objectionable governments and in much of the American Right's reflexive unilateralism and suspicion of international organizations and treaties.

During the Cold War, the realist and exceptionalist traditions were both represented among supporters of the successful U.S. strategy of containment of Soviet expansion. Realists sought to check and reduce Soviet imperial power, while exceptionalists viewed the struggle as one for universal human liberty—or against "godless" communism. But long before the end of the Cold War, during the Vietnam era, consensus in U.S. foreign policy had already broken down.

During the 1990s, the Clinton administration pursued what it called "assertive multilateralism"—signing a number of treaties, including the Kyoto Protocol and the treaty to create an international war crimes court, that even some Clinton Democrats had qualms about, and that the succeeding Bush administration unceremoniously dropped. The unilateralist philosophy that initially guided the presidency of George W. Bush in turn proved to be inadequate to dealing with the crisis in the Middle East. Multilateralism and unilateralism are tactics, and the attempt by pundits and policymakers to promote them to the level of strategic "doctrines" is a mistake.

The alternative to both a reflexive multilateralism that subordinates U.S. national interests to a veto by small and weak countries with their own agendas and an arrogant unilateralism that offends important allies is the strategy preferred by both Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt, who envisioned a concert of the "civilized" great powers. This approach places responsibility for the management of global peace and progress less on the UN General Assembly than on the permanent members of the UN Security Council—the United States, Russia, Britain, France, and China (all now democracies except for the last). The replacement of the obstructionist Soviet Union by a postimperial Russian nation-state has enabled the Security Council to function at times as its designers had intended—by authorizing joint great-power interventions in Kuwait and the Balkans, for example. The Security Council remains handicapped, however, by the fact that its permanent members do not include great powers such as India, Japan, and Germany.

A great-power concert can also work through institutions outside the UN system. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization, for example, was not part of the original UN framework, but since the end of the Cold War it has shown signs of evolving into a regional European/Middle Eastern police force. During the 1970s and 1980s, the Group of Seven (G-7, and later G-8) nations became an informal steering committee for the world economy. It remains to be seen whether the "quartet" of the United States, the European Union, Russia, and the United Nations that has coalesced to deal with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict can be effective. It is worth noting, however, that the "trio" consisting of the United States, the European Union, and Russia controls a majority of both the world's wealth and its military power.

In the long run, new kinds of world order that we cannot now imagine may become possible and desirable. But until that happens, the goal of American strategy ought to remain what it has been for generations: a world in which a handful of great powers sharing basic liberal values cooperate to manage conflict and competition in a global society of sovereign states. ❑