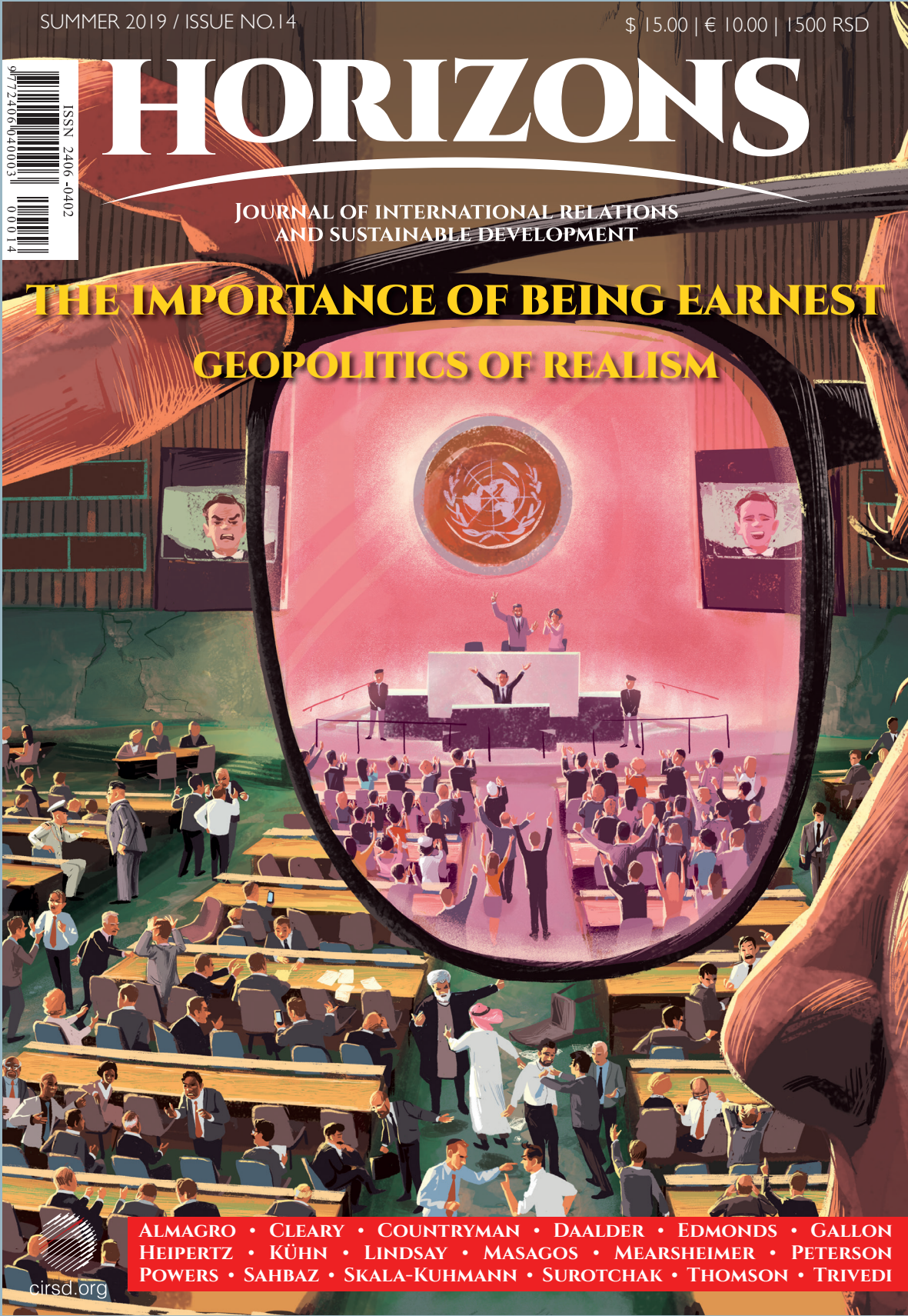




# HORIZONS

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AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

## THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST GEOPOLITICS OF REALISM



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# REALISM AND RESTRAINT

John J. Mearsheimer

**I**T HAS been a central consideration of mine to examine what happens when a powerful state pursues liberal hegemony—motivated in large measure, of course, by American foreign policy in the post-Cold War era. But to understand how liberalism works in international politics, it is necessary to understand how it relates to nationalism and realism, both of which profoundly affect the interactions among states. This essay will work through the relationship among those three ‘-isms,’ before making recommendations for the future conduct of American foreign policy.

Let me state the main ones in summary form at the onset. First, the United States should jettison its grand ambitions of liberal hegemony. Not only is this policy prone to failure, it tends to embroil the American military in costly wars that it ultimately loses. Second, Washington should adopt a more restrained foreign policy based

on realism and a clear understanding of how nationalism limits a great power’s room to maneuver. Although realism is not a formula for perpetual peace, a foreign policy informed by realism will mean fewer American wars and more diplomatic successes than will a policy guided by liberalism. Nationalism works to make an ambitious policy abroad even less necessary. In brief, the United States should learn the virtue of restraint.

**W**hat is the likelihood that the United States will move away from liberal hegemony and adopt a realist foreign policy?

The answer to this question depends on two closely related considerations: the future structure of the international system—or to put it in more concrete terms, the global distribution of power—and the degree of agency or freedom liberal states have in choosing a foreign policy.

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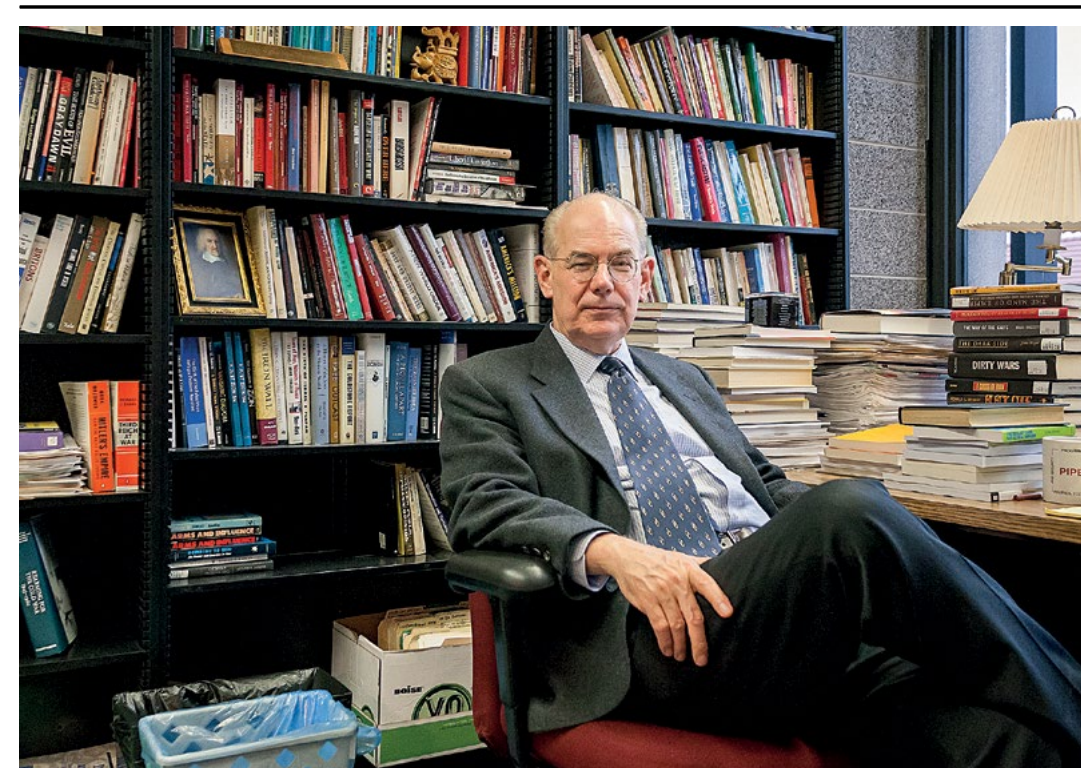


Photo: Courtesy of the Author

*The author in his office at the University of Chicago*

**A** powerful state can pursue liberal hegemony only in a unipolar system in which it need not worry about threats from other great powers. When the world is bipolar or multipolar, on the other hand, great powers have little choice but to act according to realist dictates, because of the presence of rival great powers. There is good reason to think unipolarity is coming to an end, mainly because of China’s impressive rise. If so, American policy makers will have to abandon liberal hegemony. But there is a serious downside: the United States will have to compete with a potential peer.

Perhaps China will run into significant economic problems and suffer a precipitous slowdown in its growth, in which case the system will remain unipolar. If that happens, it will be difficult for the United States to abandon liberal hegemony. A crusader impulse is deeply wired into liberal democracies, especially their elites, and it is difficult for them not to try to remake the world in their own image.

Liberal regimes, in other words, have little agency when presented with the chance to embrace liberal hegemony. Nevertheless, once it becomes clear

that liberal hegemony leads to one policy failure after another, we may reasonably hope that the liberal uni-pole will wise up and abandon that flawed strategy in favor of a more restrained strategy based on realism and a sound appreciation of nationalism. Countries do sometimes learn from their mistakes.

### THE FOLLY OF LIBERALISM ABROAD

As I have repeatedly emphasized, I believe liberal democracy is the best political order. It is not perfect, but it beats the competition by a long shot. Yet in the realm of international politics, liberalism is a source of endless trouble. Powerful states that embrace liberal hegemony invariably get themselves into serious trouble both at home and abroad. Moreover, they usually end up harming other countries, including the ones they sought to help.

Contrary to the conventional wisdom in the West, liberalism is not a force for peace among states. Despite its numerous virtues as a political system, it is a poor guide for foreign policy.

The principal source of the problem is that liberalism has an activist mentality woven into its core. The belief that all humans have a set of inalienable rights, and that protecting these rights should override other concerns, creates a powerful incentive for liberal states

to intervene when other countries—as they do on a regular basis—violate their citizens' rights. Some liberals believe that illiberal states are by definition at war with their people. This logic pushes liberal states to favor using force to turn autocracies into liberal democracies, not only because doing so would ensure that individual rights are never again trampled in those countries, but also because they believe liberal democracies do not fight wars with each other.

Thus the key to safeguarding human rights and bringing about world peace is to build an international system consisting solely of liberal democracies. Liberalism calls as well for building international institutions and cultivating an open international economy, measures also thought to be conducive to peace.

But liberalism has another important strand that should discourage liberal democracies from interfering in other states' politics, and certainly from invading them. Most liberals maintain that it is impossible to reach a universal consensus on first principles, and thus individuals should be as free as possible to decide for themselves what constitutes the good life and to live their lives accordingly. This fundamental belief is the reason for liberalism's great emphasis on tolerance, which is all about respecting the rights of others to think and act in ways that one considers wrongheaded.

One might think this basic logic would also apply to international politics and so would incline liberal states to stay out of other states' internal affairs. Liberal powers, in this telling, should even respect the sovereignty of illiberal states. But they do not, mainly because liberals actually believe they know a great deal about what constitutes the good life, although they do not acknowledge or maybe even recognize that fact.

Liberalism effectively mandates the creation and maintenance of liberal states across the globe, because there is no way under an illiberal state that individual

rights can enjoy the prominence liberalism assigns them and the protection they warrant. In effect, liberals are saying they have a universally valid and enduring insight about what constitutes the good life: having a liberal state that guarantees the inalienable rights of all its citizens. Given this conviction, it is not surprising that powerful liberal states adopt highly interventionist policies abroad.

States pursuing liberal hegemony, however, run into serious trouble. One reason is that support for individual rights does not run deep in most countries, which means that turning an autocracy into a liberal democracy is usually a colossal task.

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Liberal foreign policies also end up clashing with nationalism and balance-of-power politics. Liberalism is no match for either of those other '-isms' when they clash, in large part because they are more in line with human nature than liberalism is. Nationalism is an exceptionally influential political ideology that holds much greater sway than liberal-

ism. It is no accident that the international system is populated by nation-states, not liberal democracies. Moreover, the great powers that dominate the system typically follow realist principles, causing major problems for countries exporting liberal values.

In short, liberalism is a fool's guide for powerful states operating on the world stage. It would make eminently good sense for the United States to abandon liberal hegemony, which has served it so poorly, and pursue a more restrained policy abroad. In practice that means American policymakers should embrace realism.

### REALISM AND RESTRAINT

Most students of international politics associate realism with rivalry and conflict. This, of course, is one reason realism is so unpopular in liberal societies. It is also disliked because realists consider war a legitimate

tool of statecraft that can be employed to either maintain the balance of power or shift it in an advantageous way.

Advocates of *realpolitik* downplay the prospects for cooperation among states, moreover, because they think countries have to provide for their own security, given that they operate in a world with no higher authority to protect them. To maximize their survival prospects, those states have little choice but to compete for power, which can be a ruthless and bloody business. Realism does not inspire a hopeful outlook for the future.

Nevertheless, realists are generally less warlike than liberals, who have a strong inclination to use force to promote international peace, even while they dismiss the argument that war is a legitimate instrument of statecraft. This point is illustrated by Colgate University political scientist Valerie Morkevičius’s observation that most realists opposed America’s invasion of Iraq in 2003, while America’s three most prominent just war theorists (Jean Elshtain, James Turner Johnson, and Michael Walzer) “viewed the war more positively.” She concludes that “conventional wisdom

holds that realists support the recourse to war more than just war theorists. I argue that the opposite is true: just war theory produces a more bellicose orientation than realism.”

Many realists actually believe that if states acted according to balance-of-power logic, there would be

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hardly any wars between the great powers. These “defensive realists” maintain that the structure of the international system usually punishes aggressors and that the push toward war usually comes from domestic political forces. Great powers, in other words, most often go to war for non-realist reasons. This perspective is nicely captured in

the title of Charles Glaser’s important article “Realists as Optimists.”

Other prominent defensive realists include Jack Snyder, Stephen Van Evera, and even Kenneth Waltz, who is sometimes mistakenly said to argue that international anarchy causes states to act aggressively to gain power. Two other realists, Sebastian Rosato and John Schuessler, advocate a realist foreign policy for the United States that they describe as a “recipe for security without war.”

The historian Marc Trachtenberg, who looks at the world from the perspective of a defensive realist, explicitly argues that following the dictates of realism leads to a relatively peaceful world, while acting according to what he calls “impractical idealism” leads to endless trouble. His reading of history tells him that “serious trouble developed only when states failed to act in a way that made sense in power-political terms.” Conflict occurs when states “squander [power] on moralistic, imperialistic, or ideological enterprises.” Realism, he maintains, is “at heart a theory of peace, and it is important that it be recognized as such.” In brief, “power is not unstable.”

I do not share this sanguine understanding of realism. The structure of the international system often forces great powers to engage in intense security competition and sometimes initiate wars. International politics is a nasty and brutish business, and not just because misguided liberal ideas or other malevolent domestic political forces influence states’ foreign policies. Great powers occasionally start wars for sound realist reasons.

Still, even if states act according to my harsher version of realism, they

are likely to fight fewer international wars than if they follow liberal principles. There are three reasons why even hard-nosed offensive realists like me are less likely to advocate war than liberals. First, because *great powers operating under realist dictates are principally concerned with maximizing their share of global power, there are only a limited*

*number of regions where they should be willing to risk a war. Those places include the great power’s own neighborhood and distant areas that are either home to another great power or the site of a critically important resource. For the United States, three regions outside the Western Hemisphere are of vital strategic importance today: Europe and East Asia,*

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This means the United States should not fight wars in Africa, Central Asia, or areas of the Middle East that lie outside the Persian Gulf. During the Cold War, for example, realists maintained that American policymakers should avoid wars in the “Third World” or “Developing World” because it was populated with minor powers that were of little strategic

significance. Almost every realist opposed the Vietnam War, because Vietnam's fate held little strategic consequence for the global balance of power.

Liberals, on the other hand, tend to think of every area of the world as a potential battlefield, because they are committed to protecting human rights everywhere and spreading liberal democracy far and wide. They would naturally prefer to achieve these goals peacefully, but they are usually willing to countenance using military force if necessary. In short, while realists place strict limits on where they are willing to employ force, liberals have no such limits. For them, vital interests are everywhere.

Second, *realists are inclined to be cautious about using force or even the threat of force because they recognize that balance-of-power logic will compel other states to contain aggressors, even if they are liberal democracies.* Of course, balancing does not always work, which is why wars sometimes occur. Great powers are especially vigilant about their security, and when they feel threatened, they invariably take measures to protect themselves. This wariness explains why Russian leaders have stubbornly opposed NATO enlargement since the mid-1990s and why most American realists opposed it as well. Liberals, however, tend to dismiss balance-of-power logic as irrelevant in the twenty-first

century. This kind of thinking helps to make liberals less restrained than realists about using military force.

Third, *realists are Clausewitzians in the sense they understand that going to war takes a country into a realm of unintended consequences.* Occasionally those consequences are disastrous. Virtually all realists appreciate this basic fact of life because they study war closely and learn that leaders who take their countries to war are sometimes surprised by the results.

The mere fact that it is hard to be certain about how a war will turn out makes realists cautious about starting them, which is not to say war never makes sense. Circumstances sometimes call for unsheathing the sword. Liberals, on the other hand, are usually not serious students of war at an intellectual level, probably because they are not inclined to treat war as a normal instrument of statecraft. Clausewitz's *On War* is unlikely to be on their reading lists. Thus they tend to have little appreciation of war's complexities and its potential for unwelcome outcomes.

To be clear, realism is not a recipe for peace. The theory portrays a world where the possibility of war is part of the warp and woof of daily life. Moreover, realism dictates that the United States should seek to remain the most powerful state on the planet. It should maintain hegemony in

the Western Hemisphere and make sure that no other great power dominates its region of the world, thus becoming a peer competitor. Still, a foreign policy based on realism is likely to be less warlike than one based on liberalism.

Finally, *a proper understanding of how nationalism constrains great powers, especially in their relations with minor powers, provides further reason for the United States to adopt a policy of restraint.*

A brief analysis of how American policymakers thought about interacting with smaller powers during the Cold War shows that they not only failed to appreciate how nationalism limits Washington's ability to intervene in other states, but also did not understand how that ism works to America's advantage.

If the United States had to run the Cold War all over again, or had to engage in a similar security competition in the future, it would make good sense to pursue containment in a markedly different way.

#### NATIONALISM AND RESTRAINT

For much of the Cold War, American leaders worried about who ruled the minor powers in every region of the world. The great fear was that any country governed by communists

would help promote communism in neighboring states, which, in turn, would cause additional states to follow suit. The Soviet Union, of course, played a central role in this story. As a great power committed to spreading communism across the globe via institutions like the Comintern, it was thought to have a relatively easy task. Communism was a universalist ideology with broad appeal. With Soviet sponsorship, more

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and more states would jump on that bandwagon until, at some point, Moscow would dominate the international system. This phenomenon was known as the domino theory.

The American response to this perceived threat was to do everything possible to prevent minor powers from "going communist." Washington intervened in the politics of virtually every country whose politics showed signs of moving leftward, which led the United States into hard-nosed social engineering on a global scale.

In practice, this approach meant (1) giving money, weapons, and other resources to friendly governments to keep them in power; (2) fostering coups against perceived foes, including democratically elected rulers; and (3) intervening directly with American troops.

This strategy was doomed to fail. Social engineering in any country, even one's own, is difficult. The problems are multifaceted and complex, resistance is inevitable, and there are always unintended consequences, some of them bad. The task is even more demanding when social engineering is imposed from outside because nationalism, which is ever present, makes the local population want to determine its own fate without foreigners interfering in its politics.

These interventions also fail because the intervening power hardly ever understands the target country's culture and politics. In many cases, the foreigners do not even speak the local language. The problems are even worse when a country tries to use military force to alter another country's social and political landscape, as the United States has rediscovered in Afghanistan and Iraq after previously discovering it in Vietnam during the Cold War. The ensuing violence will make the invading country look like an oppressor, further complicating its efforts to promote positive change.

This is not to deny that during the Cold War the United States sometimes successfully interfered in the

politics of minor countries. But even some of those successes came back to haunt American leaders. For example, the 1953 coup in Iran that put the shah back in power gave the United States an important ally for about twenty-five years. But it poisoned relations between Tehran and Washington after the Shah was toppled in 1979 and Ayatollah Khomeini came to power. Indeed, memories of the 1953 coup continue to mar relations today, more than sixty years later. And that was a success! As Lindsey O'Rourke shows, most U.S. coup attempts did not even achieve their short term goals. American interventions could also prove remarkably costly for the target states. The number of citizens of other countries killed by the United States and its allies during the Cold War is stunning.

Worst of all, these interventions were unnecessary. The domino theory did not describe any serious threat: it assumed that universalist ideologies like Marxism would dominate local identities and desire for self-determination. They do not. Proponents of the domino theory failed to understand that nationalism is a far more powerful ideology than communism, just as it is far more powerful than liberalism.

*Minor powers are likely to pursue independent foreign policies and resist the influence of the great powers unless it suits their interests, which it sometimes does but mostly does not.*

Nationalism is all about self-determination. Nations want to control their own fates, and where sovereignty is concerned their political leaders are jealous gods. They want to do what they think is in their country's interest and not be pushed around by other states, even those with which they share an ideology. It is not surprising that communist countries across Eastern Europe deeply resented taking orders from Moscow during the Cold War. So did China. Nor is it an accident that the Soviet Union disintegrated in good part because Ukrainians, Azeris, Armenians, Georgians, Estonians, and many others wanted independence. Minor powers are likely to pursue independent foreign policies and resist the influence of the great powers unless it suits their interests, which it sometimes does but mostly does not. "Puppet states" exist more often in name than in reality.

America's Cold War policy of hyper involvement in the affairs of minor powers was exactly the wrong strategy. Instead of trying to control their political orientation, Washington should have adopted a hands-off policy. The ideological orientation of a country's leaders matters little for working with or

against them. What matters is whether both sides' interests are aligned.

In almost all of the Cold War cases where the United States had serious dealings with minor powers, the smart strategy would have been to do little to influence who came to power and concentrate instead on working with whoever was in charge to promote America's interests. In the face of a rigidly controlling communist ideology, this strategy might have accomplished what decades of armed interventions could not: move popular sentiment to favor America.

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During the Cold War, in short, the United States should have been much more open to seeking friendly relations with communist states, just as it occasionally made sense to have unfriendly relations with democracies. In fact, Washington did have good relations with a few communist countries during the Cold War, because it made good strategic sense for both sides to get along. Chinese-American relations are a case in point. The United States and communist China were deeply antagonistic for the first twenty-plus years of the Cold War, but that changed in the early 1970s, largely as a consequence of the Sino-Soviet split, which meant that

both Beijing and Washington were hostile to the Soviet Union and thus well positioned to join forces.

The United States ended up working well with a communist state that it had earlier identified as a fallen domino.

The case of Vietnam provides more evidence of the limits of universal ideologies like communism and the power of national interests, which, of course, are tightly bound up with nationalism. Ho Chi Minh, the Vietnamese leader, was both a communist and a fervent nationalist. He was seriously interested in befriending the United States after World War II, but the Truman Administration foolishly rejected his overtures because he was a communist.

America ended up fighting a long and brutal war against Vietnam mainly because of misguided fears based on the domino theory. After the United States suffered a decisive defeat in that unnecessary war, communist Vietnam fought wars against communist Cambodia and communist China. Moreover, once the Cold War ended, relations between Hanoi and Washington improved significantly and today are better than ever, mainly because both fear a rising China.

If the United States had not been deeply involved in the developing world, might the Soviet Union have

invaded a host of minor powers and turned them into puppet states? Perhaps the Soviets might have attacked a few smaller countries, but the result would not have been a steady string of communist victories. On the contrary, the Soviets would have ended up in one quagmire after another.

Just look at what happened when the Soviet military moved into Afghanistan in 1979. They were stuck for ten years and ultimately suffered a humiliating defeat. American interests would have been well served if the Soviets had had more Afghanists, just as Moscow would have been well served if the United States had had more Vietnams. Baiting and bleeding the other side was a smart strategy for both superpowers.

Yet it is still difficult for American policymakers to think along these lines. Most of them fail to appreciate the power of nationalism and instead overestimate universal ideologies like communism and liberalism. Nevertheless, the historical record shows that the best strategy for a great power dealing with minor powers is to avoid getting involved in their domestic politics—and certainly not to invade and occupy them unless it is absolutely necessary. Aggressive intervention is what great powers should try to draw their rivals into doing. U.S. policymakers should keep this lesson in mind if the Sino-American security competition continues to heat up.

A proper understanding of the relationship between liberalism, nationalism, and realism suggests that even the mightiest powers on the planet—including the United States—should pursue a foreign policy of restraint.

Any country that fails to understand that basic message and tries instead to shape the world in its own image is likely to face unending trouble.

#### WHERE IS AMERICA HEADED?

The American foreign policy establishment would surely resist any move to abandon the pursuit

of liberal hegemony and adopt a foreign policy based on realism. Both the Democratic and Republican parties are deeply wedded to promoting liberalism abroad, even though that policy has been a failure at almost every turn. Although the American public tends to favor restraint, the governing elites pay little attention to public opinion—until they have to—when formulating foreign policy.

Nevertheless, there is good reason to think this situation is about to change, for reasons beyond the control of the foreign policy establishment. It appears that the structure of the international system is moving toward multipolarity, because of China's striking rise and

the resurrection of Russian power. This development is likely to bring realism back to the fore in Washington, since it is impossible to pursue liberal hegemony when there are other great powers in the international system.

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American policy-makers have not had to concern themselves with the global balance of power since the Cold War ended and the Soviet Union collapsed, but the unipolar system seems to have been short-lived, which means that the United States will once again have to worry about

other great powers. Indeed, the Trump Administration has made it clear, to quote Secretary of Defense James Mattis, that “great power competition between nations is a reality once again,” and “great power competition, not terrorism, is now the primary focus of U.S. national security strategy.”

In a world of three great powers, especially when one of them has China's potential military might, there is sure to be security competition and maybe even war. The United States will have little choice but to adopt a realist foreign policy, simply because it must prevent China from becoming a regional hegemon in Asia.

That task will not be easy if China continues to grow economically and militarily. Still, liberalism will most likely continue to influence U.S. policy abroad in small ways, as the impulse to spread democracy is by now hardwired into the foreign policy establishment's DNA. Although great-power competition will prevent Washington from fully embracing liberal hegemony, the temptation to pursue liberal policies abroad will be ever present.

In addition to this lingering tendency to adopt liberal strategies on the margins of a largely realist foreign policy, there is also the danger that U.S. policymakers will not fully grasp that nationalism limits their ability to intervene in other countries just as much as it limits their adversaries' ability to conquer other states. They failed to understand the effects of nationalism both during the Cold War and in the post-Cold War world, and there is no assurance they will get it in the future.

Even with the return of realism and the demise of liberal hegemony, it will still be imperative to sound the tocsins about the dangers of a liberal foreign policy and the importance of understanding how nationalism limits great powers' ability to act.

There is also an alternative scenario. The Chinese economy could encounter serious problems

that markedly slow its growth over the long term, while the American economy grows at a solid pace. In that situation, the present power gap, which clearly favors the United States, would widen even further and make it impossible for China to challenge American power. One might wonder whether Russia is likely to pose a future challenge to the United States, even if China does not.

America's three principal great-power rivals from the twentieth century—Germany, Japan, and Russia—are all depopulating and the United States is likely to become increasingly powerful relative to each of them over the next few decades. China is the only country on the planet with the potential to challenge U.S. power in a meaningful way, but if it does not realize that potential, the United States will remain by far the most powerful state in the international system. In other words, the system will not remain multipolar for long before reverting back to unipolarity.

In that event, American policymakers would be free to continue pursuing liberal hegemony, since they would again have little reason to worry about the U.S. position in the global balance of power. Even the further foreign policy disasters that would surely follow would not endanger the security of the United States because no other

great power could threaten it. Should this scenario pan out, is there any hope that Washington might abandon liberal hegemony and adopt a foreign policy that emphasizes restraint rather than permanent war?

There is no question that it would be difficult to get the United States to stop pursuing liberalism abroad, simply because liberal democracies reflexively want to create a world populated solely with liberal states. Barack Obama's experience is instructive here. During the 2008 presidential campaign, he emphasized that he would end America's involvement in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, avoid getting the United States tangled in new conflicts, and concentrate on nation-building at home instead of abroad.

But he failed to change the direction of U.S. foreign policy in any meaningful way. American troops were still fighting in Afghanistan when he left office, and he oversaw American involvement in regime change in Egypt, Libya, and Syria. He removed U.S. troops from Iraq in 2011 but sent them back in 2014 to wage war against ISIS, which had overrun large parts of Iraq and Syria. It is clear from a series of wistful interviews he gave *The Atlantic* before leaving office in January 2017 that he understood "the Washington playbook" was deeply flawed, yet he had operated according to its rules and

strategies. He was ultimately no match for the foreign policy establishment.

Still, there is a glimmer of hope that a unipolar United States could be persuaded to move away from liberal hegemony. Powerful liberal states do have agency and are not doomed to follow a misguided strategy, even though the pressure to do so is enormous.

The main reason to think the United States can move beyond liberal hegemony revolves around the distinction between the decision to adopt that strategy when the opportunity first presents itself and the decision to forsake it after seeing the long-term results. It is almost impossible to stop a liberal state, when it first gains unipolar status, from embracing that extraordinarily ambitious policy. It promises great benefits and its costs are not yet apparent. But once the strategy has been tried and its flaws become clear, derailing it becomes possible.

The 2016 presidential election shows that liberal hegemony is vulnerable. Donald Trump challenged almost every aspect of the strategy, reminding voters time after time that it had been bad for America. Most importantly, he promised that if he were elected president, the United States would get out of the business



of spreading democracy around the world. He emphasized that his administration would have friendly relations with authoritarian leaders, including Vladimir Putin, the current *bête noire* of the liberal foreign policy establishment. He was also critical of international institutions, going so far as to call NATO obsolete. And he advocated protectionist policies that were at odds with the open international order the United States had spearheaded since the end of World War II. Hillary Clinton, meanwhile, vigorously defended liberal hegemony and left no doubt she favored the status quo. Although foreign policy was not the central issue in the election, Trump's opposition to liberal hegemony undoubtedly helped him with many voters.

One might argue that Trump's campaign rhetoric is irrelevant because the foreign policy elites will tame him just as they tamed his predecessor. After all, Obama challenged liberal hegemony when he was a candidate, yet as president he was forced to stick to the Washington playbook. The same will happen to Trump. Indeed, there

is already some evidence that efforts by the foreign policy establishment to tame Trump have at least partly succeeded and that his initial policies show considerable continuity with his predecessors' policies.

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foreign policy.

The good news is that there is already a small and vocal core of restrainers that can serve as the foundation for that select group. Still it is essential to win over others in the foreign policy establishment. That task should be feasible because most people do learn, and it should be manifestly clear by now that doing social engineering on a global scale does not work. We have run the experiment and it failed. People with the capacity to learn should be

To help ensure that the United States does not go back to liberal hegemony, should neither China nor Russia prove a sufficient rival, it is essential to come up with a game plan that is independent of Donald Trump or any particular successor. For starters, the best way to undermine liberal hegemony is to build a counter-elite that can make the case for a realist-based

open to at least considering an alternative foreign policy. Although many members of the elite will no doubt want to stick with liberal hegemony and try to implement it more successfully, its fundamental flaws cannot be overcome.

The historical record provides reason to think that much of the foreign policy establishment can be convinced of the virtues of realism and restraint. The United States, after all, has a rich tradition of elite-level restrainers, as the journalist Stephen Kinzer makes clear in *The New Flag*, where he describes the great debate that took place between American imperialists and anti-imperialists at the close of the nineteenth century. Although the expansionists carried the day, they barely won, and the restrainers remained a formidable presence in debates about American foreign policy throughout the twentieth century. Thus, as Kinzer notes: "Those of us who are trying to push America to a more prudent and restrained foreign policy are standing on the shoulders of titans—great figures of American history who first enunciated the view and to continue to make their argument is something quintessentially American."

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It is also crucial to win over young people who are likely to become part of the foreign policy establishment. That should be possible because those newcomers are not heavily invested in liberal hegemony and thus more likely than their elders to be open to new ideas.

The first order of business for the counter-elite hoping to rein in American foreign policy is to build formidable institutions from which they can make the case. This message should be aimed at the broader public as well as politicians and policymakers. The public is an especially important target because it is likely to be receptive to arguments for restraint. Most Americans prefer to address problems at home rather than fight endless wars and try to run the world. Unlike the foreign policy establishment, they are not deeply committed to liberal hegemony, so it should be possible to persuade many of them to abandon it. The best evidence of the public's dissatisfaction with liberal hegemony is that the last three U.S. presidents all gained the office by campaigning against it. Hillary Clinton, on the other hand, defended liberal hegemony to the hilt in 2008 and again in 2016 and lost both times, first to Obama and then to Trump.

The central message that restrainers should drive home is that liberal hegemony does not satisfy the principal criterion for assessing any foreign policy: it is not in America's national interest. In other words, selling a realist foreign policy requires an appeal to nationalism, which means asking Americans to think hard about what makes the most sense for them and their fellow citizens. This is not a call for adopting a hard-edged nationalism that demonizes other groups and countries. The emphasis instead is on pursuing policies based almost exclusively on one criterion: what is best for the American people?

To make their case, restrainers should emphasize three points. First, *the United States is the most secure great power in recorded history and thus does not need to interfere in the politics of every country on the planet.* It is a hegemon in the Western Hemisphere, and it is separated from East Asia and Europe—the regions where other great powers have historically been located—by two giant moats, the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. It has thousands of nuclear weapons, and in the scenario we are considering here, it is the only great power in the international system.

Second, *liberal hegemony simply does not work.* It was tried for twenty-five years and left a legacy of futile wars, failed diplomacy, and diminished prestige.

Finally, *liberal hegemony involves significant costs for the American people,*

*The historical record provides reason to think that much of the foreign policy establishment can be convinced of the virtues of realism and restraint.*

*in both lives and money.* The ongoing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are expected to cost more than \$5 trillion. Surely if we were intent on adding that much to America's huge national debt, the money could have been better spent on education, public

health, transportation infrastructure, and scientific research, just to name a few areas where additional investment would have made the United States a more prosperous and livable country. Perhaps the greatest cost of liberal hegemony, however, is something else: the damage it does to the American political and social fabric. Individual rights and the rule of law will not fare well in a country addicted to fighting wars.

Restrainers will surely encounter the argument that appealing to American nationalism is selfish and that a powerful country like the United States has the resources and the responsibility to help people in trouble around the world. This argument

might make sense if liberal hegemony worked as advertised. But it does not.

The people who have paid the greatest cost for Washington's failed policies in the post-Cold War period are foreigners who had the misfortune of living in countries that American policymakers targeted for regime change. Just look at the greater Middle East today, which the United States, pursuing liberal hegemony, has helped turn into a giant disaster zone. If Americans want to facilitate the spread of democracy around the world, the best way

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to achieve that goal is to concentrate on building a vibrant democracy at home that other states will want to emulate.

The case for a realist-based foreign policy is straightforward and powerful,

and it should be compelling to a large majority of Americans. But it is still a tough sell, mainly because many in the foreign policy elite are deeply committed to liberal hegemony and will go to enormous lengths to defend it. Of course, the best way to put an end to

liberal hegemony would be for China to continue rising, thus ending unipolarity and making the question moot. But then the United States would have to compete with a potential peer competitor, a situation no great power wants to face. It would be preferable to retain the unipo-

lar world, even though it would tempt American policymakers to stick with liberal hegemony. For that not to happen, Americans must understand the dangers of a liberal foreign policy and the virtues of restraint. ●