

# Conserving International Order

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## COMMENTARY



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In the United States, conservatism and liberalism — often to the consternation of conservatives and liberals — are ineluctably intertwined. This turns out to be true of foreign affairs as well as of domestic affairs. Attention to this entwinement helps bring into focus the key question concerning the contemporary dispute about the post-World War II international order and the United States' role in maintaining it: What policies best advance America's interest in conserving freedom?

In the narrow sense, conservatism opposes liberalism. The former favors more limited government, freer markets, and traditional morality. The latter embraces bigger government, more state supervision of the economy, and a progressive moral sensibility.

Both esteem freedom. Conservatives for the most part believe that government should focus on securing religious, political, and economic liberty. Liberals typically argue that freedom worthy of the name depends on government rectifying social and economic inequalities through aggressive regulation and redistribution.

In the broader sense, conservatism in America is committed to preserving the American constitutional tradition, which includes both conservatism and liberalism in the narrow sense. The regime established by the Constitution has deep roots in Lockean and Enlightenment principles while also drawing sustenance from British common law, classical republicanism, and the Bible. The central task for many conservatives in the United States is to conserve the distinctively American adaptation of the modern tradition of freedom.

That task involves a paradox. The very experience of living under free institutions and enjoying the protection of individual rights inclines individuals to criticize tradition, rebel against the bonds of authority, break from established norms and practices, and chart their own way. Intoxicated with emancipation, many free individuals call on government to emancipate fellow citizens and make them, each and every one, autonomous individuals in the same mold. But the imposition of emancipation depends on a large and intrusive government and is experienced by some — particularly those who cherish tradition and prefer established norms and practices — as an invasion of their freedom.

Conservatives in America thus seek to preserve a political regime that, if left to its own devices, would foster a progressive spirit that erodes the inherited beliefs, habits, and institutions that sustain freedom. To contain progressive overreach, conservatives insist on the importance of families, education, and community to form individuals disposed to, and capable of, keeping government in check.

Something similar can be said about the post-World War II institutional, legal, and defense arrangements often described as the “liberal international order.” Grounded in U.S. security guarantees and financial largesse, this order created conditions that boosted the spread of democratic government around the world. It has yielded unprecedented economic prosperity and peace. It is liberal in the sense that it is committed to human rights, popular sovereignty, and the free movement of people and goods.

Although the liberal international order is organized around nation-states — the defining qualification for full membership in the United *Nations* — its universal commitments encourage the impulse to override national sovereignty and impose progressive norms on all nations through increasingly transnational governance. In this way, the liberal international order poses a threat to the freedom of nations that it aims to uphold.

In the winter issue of *Foreign Affairs*, Dartmouth professors of government Jennifer Lind and William C. Wohlforth argue that “[t]he liberal world order is in peril.” Populism, nationalism, and authoritarianism threaten it from within. Revisionist powers Russia, China, and Iran contest its hegemony and legitimacy. “The scale of the current problems means that more of the same is not viable,” the authors write. “Instead of expanding it to new places and new domains, the United States and its partners should consolidate the gains the order has reaped.”

Their trenchant, no-frills essay, “The Future of the Liberal Order Is Conservative,” goes beyond the observation that progressive overreach is a feature of America’s domestic constitutional order to contend that the propensity to remake all countries in the progressive image is endemic to the liberal international order. A “web of institutions, norms, and rules,” the liberal international order “has expanded over time,” they write. Following the Cold War, it “expanded dramatically.”

The expansion reflected the system’s dynamism. In East Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa, the United States and its partners sought to anchor security, foster prosperity, and protect human rights. For these purposes, they established international institutions such as the World Trade Organization and directed the United Nations to engage in more peacekeeping missions.

But the U.S.-led liberal order also acted on “revisionist” aspirations. It challenged the principal of national sovereignty on which it was built by promulgating a new “responsibility to protect” that authorized intervention in countries’ internal affairs not only to prevent, or rescue from, atrocities but “to spread liberal conceptions of human rights, freedom of information, markets, and politics.” And it embraced regime change. Twenty years before President George W. Bush announced his “freedom agenda,” President Ronald Reagan inaugurated the National Endowment for Democracy, one of the purposes of which was to transform autocratic governments into democratic ones.

Lind and Wohlforth appreciate the genuine geopolitical benefits that the expansionist and even revisionist tendencies inhering in the liberal order have brought to the United States. But the moment has come, they believe, to constrain those tendencies.

Over the last two decades, America’s and its major allies’ share of global output has substantially declined as has their share of global defense spending. At the same time, Russia, China and Iran — the liberal order’s “illiberal challengers” — have been flexing their muscles. For them, U.S. security arrangements do not reflect a system for keeping the peace but for pinning them down. “And they have no interest in making concessions on democracy and human rights, since doing so would undermine vital tools of their authoritarian control,” the authors observe. “Nor do they wish to embrace liberal economic principles, which run afoul of the (often corrupt) role of the state in their economies.”

Lind and Wohlforth offer several proposals for adjusting U.S. foreign policy to the new geopolitical circumstances. The United States should focus “on managing great-power rivalries.” Washington should only take on new allies who “bring more capabilities than costs.” And while the United States should come to the aid of democracies in peril, Washington should leave democracy promotion to non-governmental organizations.

A more restrained orientation, the authors contend, offers several advantages. Tempering the liberal order's revisionist impulses would reduce the fears of the illiberal powers, and that would create "more opportunities for the liberal states to divide and rule, or at least divide and deter." Preserving the status quo is less costly than transforming it. And by focusing on preservation, the United States can forge stable arrangements that facilitate informal as well as formal agreements with major power rivals.

A less ambitious understanding of the international order could also strengthen support for it among American voters. Polls suggest that majorities are not opposed to American leadership but dislike "costly adventures unrelated to core national security concerns."

Lind and Wohlforth regard the need for consolidation not as a repudiation of the post-World War II international order but as a prudent means of preserving it. But can the liberal order's expansionist impulses be contained? Can the United States refrain from promoting its universal ideas about freedom universally?

In the past, authors argue, the United States has exercised such restraint. U.S.-Soviet détente in the 1970s produced arms control agreements and other security understandings. It also gave the USSR's corrupt and backward economic system the opportunity to reveal its insuperable flaws and, eventually — with the helping hands of Premier Mikhail Gorbachev and President Reagan — collapse under the weight of its own inefficiency, cruelty, and incoherence.

A certain restraint is again crucial to conserving a free and open international order.

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