U.S. Strategy in a New Geopolitical Age

By Barry Pavel and Peter Engelke


We have entered a new era in world history, a post-post-Cold War age that holds both great promise and peril for the United States, its allies, and everyone else. The roughly 350 years since the Peace of Westphalia have featured the nation-state as by far the most dominant global actor (Westphalia ended the Thirty Years’ War in 1648 and ushered in the modern era of international relations centered on the sovereign nation-state, known since as the Westphalian state system). But in our age, nation-states are being joined on the global stage by powerful individuals, groups, and other nonstate actors that are disrupting the traditional world order, for better and for worse. We call this a “Westphalian-plus” world, in which nation-states must engage on two distinct levels: with other nation-states and with an array of important nonstate actors. A series of unfolding megatrends is driving this new reality, which includes disruptive technological revolutions that have set in motion a vast dynamism in global affairs. Thus, a hybrid world is emerging.

Since the end of World War II, the United States has emphasized stability in key regions around the world. However, global trends are making it far more difficult to maintain stability because diffusion of power across nearly every domain of human experience is making the world less predictable. If the United States aims to restore stability to global order, it must harness these vast, and increasingly powerful, global changes.

Our new era calls for a new approach that we call “dynamic stability.” The United States would continue to pursue its goals of economic prosperity, global security, and protection of the global commons, all while upholding its core values. Yet borrowing from the scientific definition of “dynamic stability,” we see that the United States must become better at anticipating, adapting to, and harnessing increased turbulence if it wishes to maintain stability.1 In short, the United States must harness change in order to save the system.

The Westphalian-plus world offers enormous opportunities to strengthen U.S. prosperity and security, but only if the United States identifies and monitors the most important changes underway, works with allies to seize opportunities and meet challenges, and systematically realigns its resources and institutions to support its efforts.

The Westphalian-Plus World

The Westphalian-plus world is characterized by speedy and massive change. Challenges confront world leaders at a pace that appears faster, more novel, and more volatile than at any time in the past.2 Key global trends driving such change include the rapid shift of power among nations and diffusion of power to nonstate actors.

If the 20th century was the trans-Atlantic century, then the 21st century may be the trans-Pacific century. According to the Asian Development Bank, the Asian share of global gross domestic product will double from 26 percent in 2011 to 52 percent by 2050.3 Economic and demographic power also is moving toward other world regions. Latin America, for instance, has well-educated and highly connected populations, significant energy reserves, and other core assets.4 Over the past decade, sub-Saharan Africa contained seven of the world’s 10 fastest-growing economies;5 this region, however, faces enormous challenges, including managing the world’s highest population growth rates.6 The Middle East is beset by conflict, but it too contains great dynamism. Arabian Gulf countries, for instance, have invested huge sums in knowledge economies.7 The region contains a youthful, and often entrepreneurial, population that is well-connected to the global economy.8

At the same time, increased wealth, better education, and access to advanced personal technology have resulted in billions of empowered individuals like never before in history. The cost of advanced technology has plummeted, enabling people of even modest means to access powerful tools. Disruptive technologies of the future likely will include big data, additive manufacturing, biotechnology, and robotics and artificial intelligence. Biotechnology is an apt example: Scientific and economic advances in genomics, molecular diagnostics, human augmentation, etc. should lead to improved quality of life for billions of people. However, the chance of error leading to a biological catastrophe (“bio-error”) is increasing as more actors experiment with biotechnology, and the potential for adversaries’ use of
biological military or terrorist application (“bioterror”) also is growing.

For strategists and policymakers, a world in which states pull fewer levers presents a set of thorny problems. Individual empowerment could mean greater demand for accountable, effective, and democratic forms of governance, but the diffusion of power to nonstate actors makes global governance a far harder proposition because it’s no longer obvious who gets to participate and how. Moreover, an obvious worry is that nonstate actors, including criminal and terror organizations, will apply themselves toward dark ends, e.g., the Islamic State (ISIS or “Daesh”), a nonstate actor that places modern technology in the service of a radical and antimodern agenda. Indeed, social media, for example, is as important a weapon for ISIS as anything used on the traditional battlefield.

Dynamic Stability

“Dynamic stability” best describes our recommended approach to U.S. strategy in the Westphalian-plus world. Under this approach, the United States would seek to harness the dynamism playing out across key regions and domains including technology, energy, information, etc., to secure and advance its interests. Continuing to ignore or downplay the change unfolding globally could weaken rather than enhance the rules-based international system and its achievements. To do so most effectively, U.S. strategists should heed the following four basic principles:

Adjust Interstate Mechanics

Any system that is not malleable enough to adjust when power shifts likely will be torn asunder by its very brittleness. U.S. leaders ought to view the current alignment among nations as an evolving instrument that should be adjusted over time. Adjustment works when different actors buy into the premise upon which the system is built. However, as the U.S. diplomat Henry Kissinger argued in his book, World Order, the difficulty is that some states do not always accept the legitimacy of that premise. Both Russia and China, Kissinger argues, begin with divergent assumptions about world order that, in turn, lead to contrasting, even clashing, understandings about how to govern the world and who should have the greatest say in doing so. A core task remains to find new ways to manage the rise of state actors with different outlooks while preserving the governance norms and best attributes of the system that the United States has led since 1945.

Play a Multilevel Game

Diplomacy consists of far more than diplomats engaging other diplomats in high-stakes gamesmanship. Leaders should become more comfortable playing a multilevel game that includes management of the transformational shifts being brought about by nonstate actors and technological development. Acting strategically in this world means paying greater attention to how the United States can shape global perceptions. For example, public diplomacy should be upgraded to match the scale and novelty of this century’s challenges. Information and communications technology advances are creating the possibility for greater collaboration between governments and the public. Social media ought to be seen as a two-way device that can build relationships, provide timely information, and bypass “calcified traditional channels and … networks of influence” anywhere on Earth. Indeed, social media is a powerful new type of tool that diplomats and policymakers must better utilize to achieve their ends.

Build Strength through Coalitions

A practical consequence of adjusting interstate mechanics and playing a multilevel game is that the U.S. government should be more active in building coalitions with a range of public and private actors. Advancing U.S. interests will require a high volume and frequency of engagement across multiple domains, often under conditions that are in great flux. Power will be exercised through leveraging connectivity—through networks of state and nonstate actors—to build ad hoc coalitions under less-than-ideal conditions such as disaster or pandemic response.

Although it is erroneous to assume that democratic states’ interests always align, democracies have much to gain from cooperating on a great many issues. Our colleague Ash Jain has asserted that the democratic states need a “standing entity focused on advancing the norms and principles of a liberal world order,” a function unfulfilled by organizations such as NATO or the UN Security Council. Jain and the Atlantic Council now coordinate the Democracies 10 (D-10) forum, which is designed to promote strategic cooperation on global geopolitics and advance democratic norms and values.

The U.S. government also needs to deepen its partnerships with nontraditional actors. U.S. companies and individuals are powerful forces abroad, and the U.S. government ought to leverage their capabilities more systematically. The U.S. government should intensify outreach to global civil society as well. Building such partnerships can backfire, such as when foreign governments accuse the United States of meddling, but the gains far outweigh the drawbacks.

Hone the ART of Strategy

U.S. leaders ought to refine a set of attributes that enable the United States to prosper in a turbulent world. These attributes are agility, resiliency, and transparency, also called ART. Agility is a keystone of strength; in the Westphalian-plus world, anticipation of and deft response to events are more valuable than ever before. The U.S. government must build capacity to adroitly handle fluid and nonlinear crises. The U.S. government’s many departments and agencies must collaborate more effectively and be better at building ad hoc coalitions to achieve its aims abroad. In a
world where strategic shocks are more common, policies, institutions, and society itself must be resilient. Deepening the United States’ ability to absorb blows from abroad, and bounce back quickly, will be essential for maintaining global leadership. Finally, greater transparency will signal that U.S. behavior is based on longstanding commitments to widely shared norms, not merely a great power flexing its muscle. Clarity of intent, priorities, and methods will enhance U.S. credibility as a good-faith actor and as a steward of the global system.

U.S. Goals
A strategy is a structured approach to harnessing available means to attain a desired end; in more common terms, “it gets you there.” Dynamic stability is not an end in itself but a strategy toward that end. The United States’ goal should be to sustain a global order that reflects its ideals and serves its interests. This overarching goal comprises the following four objectives: values, prosperity, security, and the global commons.

Values
The United States derives its power from the ability to lead by ideal and aspiration instead of by force. The United States and its allies constructed the postwar order that has benefited scores of nation-states and billions of people. Today’s broadly shared international norms—including democratic governance, the rule of law, and individual human rights—reflect U.S. ideals and are worth preserving.

The best way to realize a world consistent with U.S. values is to find common ground. With states that do not share the full spectrum of U.S. values, opportunities exist for carving out and solidifying governance norms and principles to which they nonetheless can subscribe. These include the rule of law, due process, transparent governance, respect for human and minority rights, prevention of illicit trafficking and piracy, protection of the global commons, and protection of vulnerable populations.

U.S. leaders might find traction in moving different parts of this agenda forward—albeit through different pathways and at different speeds depending on circumstance. Doing so would enable the United States to build a wider range of partnerships and enable it to more effectively advance its agenda. Moreover, doing so would help insulate the United States against the charge of hypocrisy—that behind U.S. proselytizing lies only sheer power. Whether deserved or not, that accusation has turned away a good number of potential U.S. partners.

Prosperity
After World War II, the United States purposefully set up a system to enable others to prosper. The success of this system is the main reason U.S. relative power has declined since 1945. Other states, including China, have found that opening their economies to global exchange within this order leads to growth and national prosperity.

To maintain this economic order, the United States should continue to push for rules that enable trade within global, market-based systems. Embracing a rules-based economic order is paramount to ensuring that trade is conducted fairly. Of course, this system is no panacea. The United States should remain open to new refinements and rules to avoid financial meltdowns. Building resiliency into the global economic system is necessary to ward off deep economic downturns, which the world has experienced twice in the past 80 years and one of which helped trigger a world war.

As such, the United States should work with allies and partners to strengthen the global economic system. Historic trade arrangements such as the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership and the Trans-Pacific Partnership are cases in point. If successfully finalized, both sets of trade negotiations would reaffirm the economic component of a global order and induce China and others to buy into that order.

Finally, the United States should work to adjust major multilateral economic institutions. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) were designed before economic power diffused from the historic industrial core. China’s desire to launch parallel lending institutions, including the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank and a New Development Bank, stems from this divergence between economic power and institutional reality, as well as a concern that other major powers, including rival regional powers—the United States in the case of the World Bank and IMF, Japan and the United States in the case of the Asian Development Bank—are in control of these institutions.

Security
U.S. military power is not the solution to every strategic problem, yet the United States cannot abjure the use of military force abroad. Doing so would convince adversaries that there is no price to pay for aggression or coercion and would contribute to further deterioration of the current order.

Maintaining consensus among friends and allies about the desirability of the U.S. security guarantee is a fundamental reason why the exercise of U.S. military power since 1945 has remained, on balance, more stabilizing than destabilizing. When friends and allies of the United States believe that the United States is acting judiciously and appropriately, then the exercise of U.S. military power is greeted with far greater support than when the perception is that the United States is acting heavy-handedly.

Part of the challenge for U.S. policymakers is to realize that many security issues cannot be resolved only by using the military instrument. U.S. global posture will need to be nimble as security challenges become more complex. The United States’ decades-long preponderance in the military sphere, as valuable as it is, might predispose U.S. leaders to view foreign-policy problems through the lens of the military; in other words, use of the U.S. military can become the United States’ solution to every international problem. A preferable approach is to adhere to a “whole-of-government” approach that places more equitable value on a panoply of tools including diplomacy, economics, energy, and development.
Protection of the Global Commons

The United States must reinvigorate its efforts to protect the global commons, which includes the oceans, space, airspace, cyberspace, and climate. The security field has long defined the global commons in the first four of these domains. In light of the increasing evidence of accelerating climate change and its significant national-security consequences, it is important to include climate in the definition of global commons.24

Protecting the global commons is a foundational end for two major reasons. First, the interconnected nature of the global system means that the integrity of the commons is key to the proper functioning of everything else. The world’s oceans, cyberspace, and airspace are the stages upon which global trade and exchange occur. Second, the United States reaps significant benefits (both military and economic) from the global commons, and has a vested interest in maintaining them for both the present and the future. Protecting the commons serves the material interests of the United States and its allies and underscores U.S. commitment to acting in the best interests of humankind.25

The Case for U.S. Leadership

The United States remains well-positioned to continue leading the rules-based global order; indeed, the United States may be best-suited to thrive in the new Westphalian-plus world. The U.S. economy remains enormous and resilient, despite the difficulties of the recent financial crisis. The U.S. military remains unmatched, and any competitor would have to invest heavily for decades to compete on equal terms globally.26 Demographically, the United States may be aging but, due to immigration and other factors, will retain a large and dynamic population relative to peers.27 U.S. technical innovation and business savvy remain powerful forces in the global economy.28

The United States also possesses the world’s most formidable set of soft-power assets. The sheer number of U.S. firms, nongovernmental organizations, media conglomerates, cities, states, and individuals engaged abroad, as well as the depth and breadth of connections with global counterparts, are unmatched. U.S. culture derives from experience integrating immigrants from every corner of the globe, resulting in a heterogeneous society that freely imports and exports people, ideas, and goods.29

However, the United States has weaknesses and limitations. At some point, U.S. leaders must address economic challenges that include overhauling the country’s increasingly decrepit infrastructure, ensuring its youth acquire world-class education without financial hardship, ensuring that its workers can compete in this century’s knowledge industries, and retaining U.S. innovative leadership.30

Politically, Washington’s increasingly prominent disputes detract from U.S. influence in the world. During the Cold War, the United States sold itself and its system as a brighter alternative to the Soviet system. The appeal of the U.S. model and credibility of its leadership will wane if the U.S. government itself hinders the allure of the U.S. system. Despite these reservations, however, a cursory review of the world’s powers, including China, Russia, India, and Europe, shows that no other country possesses both the assets and the willingness to provide global leadership.

China and Russia appear to be candidates for assuming the mantle of global leadership. Russia possesses genuine national strengths, including a massive natural-resource endowment, a sizable and well-equipped conventional military, a modernizing nuclear deterrent, and a leadership that has demonstrated agility in response to changing conditions. But Russia’s strengths are outweighed by significant structural weaknesses including a bleak demographic outlook, vulnerability to the commodity cycle, and little in the way of ideals that inspire others to follow its lead.31

China is a far more formidable case. China has a strong sense of national identity, a political leadership that aims to reset international relations on its own terms, an enormous population, and a huge and growing economy. Yet China also faces obstacles: an aging population, rising labor costs that threaten to undercut its export-oriented manufacturing economy, massive environmental problems, and the challenges of transitioning to a consumer economy.32 China might overcome all these limitations, but is it prepared to grapple with a world characterized by global flows of information, people, and cultural messaging? China’s regime retains suspicions of foreign cultural influence and treats culture as a strategic battleground.33 Finally, China’s generally poor relations with its neighbors are a microcosm of its lack of strong alliances based on enduring friendships. China has created rivals instead of friends, which contrasts with the United States’ extensive alliances, many of which are based on common values and warm cultural ties.34

India, like China, has enormous potential that could someday translate into global ascendancy. Realizing this potential, however, is a long-term prospect that will occupy India’s leaders for decades. They likely will remain preoccupied with a crowded domestic agenda that includes poverty alleviation, gender equality, education, anticorruption, rapid urbanization, and the need for infrastructure. Additionally, it remains to be seen if the Modi government will prove willing to alter India’s traditionally modest global aspirations.35

Unlike Russia and China, Europe is closely aligned with the United States, and this relationship remains a bedrock component of the U.S. global network of alliances and partnerships. Europe has much going for it yet faces significant obstacles to regaining its place at the top of the global order. Politics is primary among these. The European Union (EU) in no way provides a coherent voice for Europe. In foreign affairs, deep-seated policy disagreements among EU member states are the norm rather than the exception. Structurally, Europe faces significant problems ranging from euro implementation to long-term demographic decline from low fertility and rapid aging.36
None of the world’s middleweight powers—a large group represented by countries such as Japan, Germany, Great Britain, Australia, and Brazil—is in a position to assume the mantle of global leader and likely never will. Nonetheless, each of these nations is an important actor in regional and world affairs, albeit in different ways at different times and across different domains. Most are and will remain critical partners for the United States.

Conclusion

If a nation is to avoid aimless drift, thinking and acting strategically are absolute imperatives. Yet strategy is difficult to navigate. In the words of the esteemed strategist Lawrence Freedman, leaders and their advisors need to develop the ability to “think ahead, forge coalitions and hold on to long-term objectives,” all while staying pragmatic and “shifting [intermediate] goals as new opportunities arise.”

Yet more is required for success. Any effective strategy will require a United States that is more than merely capable of leading its allies and partners. It will require a United States that also possesses the fortitude to lead. After more than a decade of sustained combat operations with uncertain outcomes in Afghanistan and Iraq, and buffeted by economic storms—both cyclical and structural—the U.S. public no longer may be as willing to support a strategy that requires robust engagement abroad. There is certainly ample evidence for this assertion among the U.S. body politic.

For seven decades, the United States’ leaders and citizenry have assumed the mantle of leadership in service of the country’s global vision. The generations of U.S. citizens that led and came of age during World War II learned a hard lesson in the worst of circumstances—that a free, peaceful, and prosperous world required the United States’ constant and vibrant leadership.

We are now at a similar juncture in U.S. and world history. Today, rapidly changing circumstances cry out for more activist U.S. leadership across a broad range of fronts. Without an active and engaged adaptation of existing approaches, systems, processes, alliances, and other structures led by the United States, the list of global threats and challenges will multiply, which in turn would erode U.S. prosperity, security, and reputation. A status-quo approach would lead to the slow deterioration of institutions and arrangements and open the door to the possibility of catastrophic failure, to the great detriment of all.

The United States must actively lead the world through this tumultuous period of history.

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Endnotes

1. In engineering, dynamic stability is defined as “the ability of a system or object to return to a previously established steady motion, after being perturbed” (see http://www.dictionaryofengineering.com/definition/dynamic-stability.html).

2. The global strategist Parag Khanna argues that there are strong historical antecedents to the changes we are witnessing, something akin to a return to the diplomatic conditions that prevailed during the pre-Westphalian Middle Ages. See Parag Khanna, How to Run the World: Charting a Course to the Next Renaissance (New York: Random House, 2011).


8. On the region’s grassroots entrepreneurial scene, see Christopher M. Schroeder, Startup Rising: The Entrepreneurial Revolution Remaking the Middle East (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).


17. On how the U.S. diplomatic community can understand and address these issues, see Cabral et al. (2014), see footnote 12.

18. The authors thank Peter Behr for raising this issue.
20. Personal communication, Gen (Ret.) Brent Scowcroft (August 7, 2014).
29. For a discussion of America’s unique assets, see Elbridge Colby and Paul Lettow, “Have We Hit Peak America? The Sources of US Power and the Path to National Renaissance,” Foreign Policy (July/August 2014): 54–63.