

Beyond the Rhetoric: A Globally Credible US Role for a “Rules-Based Order”

It's hard to find a major Biden administration speech or policy document that doesn't invoke the “rules-based order.” To name just a few examples, “RBO” and variations thereof get used 50 times in the 2022 National Security Strategy, 13 in the 2022 National Defense Strategy, 10 in Secretary of State Antony Blinken's February 2023 interview with Jeffrey Goldberg in *The Atlantic*, and 18 in the May 2023 G7 Hiroshima Communiqué.¹ Some of these invocations have been deployed to accentuate Russia's profoundly rule-breaking invasion of Ukraine. Some of them, especially when put in terms of a “free and open” order, have been aimed at China (over issues like Hong Kong, the South China Sea, and COVID secrecy). All have sought to position the United States as the defender of the rules-based order.

Such a claim, though, raises three critical questions. First, has the US abided by the rules-based order as much as it claims? Back-at-you propaganda from Russia and China aside, the US foreign policy record shows ample rules abuse. Second, has the order being defended, usually labeled the Liberal International Order, been as effective as claimed? While LIO institutions and policies have had their strengths, they also have had substantial shortcomings. Third, how can the US play a leadership role for a 21st century rules-based order that is

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not just self-acclaiming but more credible globally? An initial section contextualizes just what a rules-based order is with historical examples. The sections that follow offer answers to these three main questions.

What Is a Rules-Based Order?

Rules-based does not mean fully rules-determined

According to scholar Amitav Acharya, a rules-based order is one in which rules and norms have sufficient strength and reach to “help to limit conflict, induce cooperation and stability, and expand legitimacy through representation and participation.”² Emphasis on “help”: power politics surely matter as well. Rules-based does not mean fully rules-determined. It does, though, mean that not all in the global order follows the Thucydidean maxim that “the strong do what they have the power to do, and the weak accept what they have to accept.”³ Putting this in international

relations paradigmatic terms, it entails more impact for rules, norms and institutions than realists acknowledge, but less than liberal internationalists claim.

For much of history, to the extent that there were any rules, they were made by, of and for the great powers of the day. The 1494 Treaty of Tordesillas laid down rules about which parts of the New World were for Spain to colonize and which for Portugal, each getting its own territory with little broader claims of legitimacy. The 1814-1815 Congress of Vienna and the Concert of Europe established agreed-upon spheres of influence among the powers of the day (Austria, Prussia, Russia and the United Kingdom) and a system for regular consultations to work out tensions and band together against shared enemies. The 1884-1885 Berlin Conference set Tordesillas-like rules for the European carving up of those parts of Africa not yet colonized. Even the post-World War I Versailles Treaty and League of Nations balked at genuinely universalizing norms like Wilsonian democracy and self-determination, confining their application to the European peoples of the defeated Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires, but not to the colonies still retained by Britain and France—or to US neocolonial military occupations of numerous Latin American countries.⁴

The post-World War II Liberal International Order, while established by and of the major powers—the Bretton Woods international economic system largely by the United States and United Kingdom, with the United Nations also including the Soviet Union and (pre-Communist) China as part of the design and 50 nations as founding signees—did make more of a claim to being designed for the

broader international community. It too, though, was not totally rules-based. With the onset of the Cold War, the United States found itself acting as both a principal LIO author with interests in abiding by it, and as a great power competitor with interests better served by not doing so.

US: Abider, and Abuser, of the Rules

After World War II, the United States did show, as John Ikenberry has long emphasized, “strategic restraint” in promoting multilateral mutuality.⁵ This contributed to the legitimacy the system garnered. It also proved power-enhancing for the US when it could claim to be acting consistent with the UN Charter and other systemic rules and norms, such as in making the Korean War a US-led UN Command, and during Operation Desert Storm, when the Security Council authorized a 42-nation coalition to repel the 1990-1991 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. So too in the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, with the dramatic venue the UN Security Council provided for American Ambassador Adlai Stevenson to confront Soviet Ambassador Valerian Zorin with his “yes or no” question as to whether the Soviets had based nuclear missiles in Cuba, and being prepared “to wait for [his] answer until hell freezes over.”⁶

But when international rules and processes have been seen as encroaching on prerogatives to take actions deemed in the national interest, the US has not felt bound to abide by them. The 1919 rejection of the League of Nations on the grounds that it was a supranational government was very much about prerogative-encroachment. A similar dynamic drove refusals to ratify treaties such as the Genocide Convention at the outset of the UN. The 1972 Byrd amendment authorizing Rhodesian chrome imports, in part rationalized by Cold War weapons needs and in part by segregationist sympathy for the white regime, breached one of the first sets of major UN economic sanctions.⁷ A bevy of treaties rejected in the 1990s—the International Criminal Court, Kyoto Climate Change, the Land Mines ban—manifested a waning US need for multilateralism amidst that moment of unipolarity as well as domestic politics constraining even a supportive president (Bill Clinton). Perhaps most obviously, the 2003 invasion of Iraq contrasts with Iraq-Kuwait 1990-1991 in using force without Security Council authorization.

The US also engaged in numerous military interventions—e.g., Lebanon in 1957, the Cuban Bay of Pigs in 1961, the Dominican Republic in 1965, Grenada in 1983. All were unilaterally determined, with stretched—at best—claims to the right of self-defense. Nor did American interventionism end with the Cold War: there were as many military interventions in the 30 post-Cold War years (1990-2020) as in the 45 Cold War years.⁸ Add to that over 60

covert interventions including leader assassinations, support for military coups overthrowing democratically-elected governments, and other actions which, whatever their ostensible *realpolitik* basis, were not exactly rules-abiding.⁹

In terms of the international economy, while also benefiting others, the openness did reinforce American economic hegemony. For all the growth in global trade, the American trade balance stayed in surplus through 1970. In 1971, when the combination of increasing international competition and domestic stagflation threatened America's dominant economic position, the Nixon administration acted unilaterally to preserve American economic dominance by devaluing the dollar, suspending its convertibility to gold, and imposing a 10 percent special tariff on imports. (As Nixon's Treasury Secretary John Connally bluntly put it, "Foreigners are out to screw us, and it's our job to screw them first").¹⁰ Later that decade, despite its own International Trade Commission ruling that the surge in Japanese auto imports was mostly due to the uncompetitive policies of the then-Big Three (General Motors, Ford, Chrysler), the US leveraged Japan's security dependence to get it to agree to "voluntary" export restraints.

US support for democracy and human rights has been strongest when geopolitical interests, not just global rules and norms, have also been served. Both Republican and Democratic administrations stood up for Soviet dissidents like Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Andrei Sakharov, as well as for Soviet bloc political prisoners like Vaclav Havel (who, once freed and elected president of a democratic Czechoslovakia, would go on to quote Thomas Jefferson). But when power and principles were in tension, the US supported an all too long list of brutal Cold War military regimes and repressive dictators who at most fit an "ABC"—anything but communism—definition of democracy. The one President who put principles over power, Jimmy Carter, was lambasted for doing so. Post-9/11, the power over principles prioritization meant support for "ABT"—anybody but terrorist—regimes. One doesn't have to be so naïve as to expect the US to only support regimes good at heart and pure in practice. But the discrepancy between principles affirmed and policies pursued leaves the US with a relative hypocrisy problem: being judged by the standards and leadership it claims more than in comparison to other major powers.

Trumpian America First went even further—beyond abusing the rules to ridiculing them. "From this day forward," Trump declared in his 2017 inaugural address, "America First and only America First."¹¹ Take that UN, NATO, Paris Climate Accord, Iran Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), World Trade Organization (WTO), etc. Trump's message: the untethered US would do what it wanted, when it wanted, how it wanted.

Biden's RBO-heavy rhetoric has been very much about reputational rescue. But only a few actual RBO re-abiding steps have been taken. The administration signed back on to the Paris Climate Accord. It rejoined the World Health

Organization (WHO) and UN Human Rights Council. But while praising the ICC's arrest warrant for Vladimir Putin, it hasn't taken any steps to actually join the ICC. So too with pushing China to comply with the Hague-based Permanent Court on Arbitration ruling that Beijing had violated the UN Law of the Sea treaty, even as the US itself is still not a treaty signatory. In late 2022, after the WTO ruled against steel and aluminum tariffs imposed by Trump but kept in place by Biden, an administration spokesman framed the decision not to comply as the US refusing to "cede decision-making over its essential security to WTO panels."¹² It is in this context that, as international relations scholar Matias Spektor puts it, while most Global South countries "know that Russia's behavior in Ukraine has been barbaric and inhumane," despite food shortages and other negative impacts on their own interests, they "find it difficult to accept Western claims of a 'rules-based order' when the United States and its allies frequently violate the rules."¹³

Biden's "rules-based order" rhetoric has been very much about reputational rescue

Underperformance of the Liberal International Order

Along with questions about US rule-abiding, questions arise about the LIO's overall record. Historian Niall Ferguson's "neither liberal, nor international, nor very orderly" critique goes too far, ignoring the achievements the LIO does have.¹⁴ The UN has won 14 Nobel Peace Prizes. 1930s-style trade wars have been avoided. Global GDP (inflation-adjusted) has increased over 600 percent, and extreme global poverty has been brought down from about 60 percent of the world population to about 10 percent.¹⁵ Nuclear proliferation has been kept well below President John F. Kennedy's feared number of 15-25 nuclear weapons states by the 1970s. The World Health Organization led a successful global campaign to eradicate smallpox. Telecommunications, travel, and other trans-governmental and transnational sinews of everyday life constitute unsung yet vital and vibrant global governance.¹⁶

Getting a sense of the ways the LIO has underperformed is crucial for going forward

But while in these and other ways the LIO's record is more positive than some critics portray, it has not been the culmination of global peace and prosperity that ardent proponents claim. Getting a sense of the ways in which it has underperformed is crucial for drawing lessons and implications going forward.

Major Powers' Wars

While post-1945, there has not been a war between major powers, there have been plenty of wars involving major powers (including proxy wars). These have been much more about each of the major powers' particular interests than as envisioned in FDR's "Five Policeman" conception of collective action for shared global security and the UN Charter's provision that "armed force shall not be used, save in the common interest." The long list of US interventions has already been addressed. The Soviet Union's includes invasions of Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968, and Afghanistan in 1979, and now post-Soviet Russia's blatant trampling of Ukraine's territorial integrity and national sovereignty, indiscriminate targeting of civilians, and numerous other war crimes. Some encouragement can be taken from Russia's subjection to unusually tough measures for a UNSC P-5 member, including the ICC indictment of President Putin and critical UN reports as well as statements issued by Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, the High Commissioner on Human Rights, the Special Rapporteur on Torture, and the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine. But only some. The ICC indictment has not been enforced. The critical reports and statements bounce off the Kremlin's walls. When in July 2023 Russia broke the grain export deal, which the UN had helped negotiate the year before, concerns were once again expressed but grain nevertheless stopped flowing.

Mass Atrocities

For all of the post-Holocaust "never again" pledges, the reality has been yet again, and again, and again. Some incidents have met the international law criteria for genocide, others were "just" ethnic cleansings, mass atrocities, deadly conflicts, humanitarian emergencies, and the like. Millions have been killed, raped, maimed, and otherwise victimized while the international community—the UN, US, European Union and others—have too often done too little, too late. This both reflects international rules and norms being even less firm for intra-state conflicts than for interstate ones, and the low prioritization of such conflicts. Even in conflicts in which violence has not reached the level of mass atrocities, the peace operations record has been mixed pretty much across the board.¹⁷ Efforts to affirm a conception of sovereignty balancing the rights of states to not be intervened in with "the responsibility to protect its people from killing and other grave harm [as] the most basic and fundamental of all the responsibilities that sovereignty imposes" have yet to take hold.¹⁸ Consequently, with civil wars getting internationalized, failed states becoming terrorist safe havens, and massive refugee exoduses feeding right-wing populist politics, internal mass violence has continued to spread throughout the international system.

Bretton Woods Backlash

The Bretton Woods international economic system did what it was initially intended to do. It avoided reversion to 1930s-style beggar-thy-neighbor protectionism. Trade barriers came down. Overall global prosperity flourished, with global GDP rising from \$9 trillion in 1950 to \$108 trillion in 2015, and GDP per capita from \$459 in 1960 to \$12,235 in 2023.¹⁹ This was the proverbial rising tide. But not all boats have been lifted equally. While overall poverty in the Global South decreased, Global North-South economic inequality increased. Concerns about declining terms of trade working against developing countries heavily reliant on raw material and commodity exports go back to the 1960s.²⁰ In recent years, the downward pressures have gotten even worse, as evident in the number of Global South countries spending more on debt than education—increasing from 9 to 21 (2012-2014)—or on health, increasing from 34 to 62 (2019-2021).²¹ Other “boats” have been swamped, with globalization widening the winners-losers gap within the West as reflected in measures of income inequality (Gini coefficients) increasing in 17 of 22 OECD countries.²² While hard data show that technology has eliminated more jobs than low-wage trade competition, this is often not the popular perception in affected countries, especially when fed by xenophobic populist rhetoric. Still other “boats” have crashed into each other, with the economic interdependence which was intended to be a force for peace and stability increasingly weaponized by states coercively manipulating what scholars call “global economic networks to achieve geostrategic objectives.”²³ Treating economic sanctions as a “Swiss army knife with a ready attachment just right for any foreign policy challenge,” the US is the principal interdependence weaponizer. Despite its longstanding criticism of sanctions as a violation of sovereignty and manifestation of imperialism, China too has been lengthening its own list of countries against which it wields sanctions and other economic coercion.²⁴

Climate Change Incrementalism

All sorts of threats get dubbed “existential.” Most do not warrant it; climate change does. Over 400,000 deaths annually are already directly attributable to climate change—over 5 million when indirect effects such as health consequences from burning fossil fuels are taken into account.²⁵ Swiss Re, the giant global insurance company, projects global economic output shrinking by 11-14 percent by 2050, amounting to as much as \$23 trillion in reduced annual global economic output.²⁶ One hottest year on record has followed another. Then, summer 2023 rolled around, with heat indexes “nearly at the limit of human survival” and headlines like “Around the Globe, Searing Heat with No Relief.”²⁷ It’s a basic rule of policy that while problems can only rarely be rectified

in one fell swoop, headway has to outpace exacerbation. Yet even dating from the 1992 UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, never mind from 1973 when the first major international conference on the environment was held, climate change policy incrementalism has not kept pace. The 2015 Paris Climate Accord, hailed as “historic, durable and ambitious,” has been anything but.²⁸ At the time, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) warned that, even if all nations met their pledges, it would amount to less than half of what is needed to meet the limit of a 1.5 degree rise in average global Celsius temperatures. With the Paris pledges left nonbinding and subject to national determination, even their fulfillment fell prey to each country’s domestic politics. Despite reaffirmations and strengthening at the annual Conferences of Parties (COPs), not a single country is on track to meet its pledges.²⁹ In January 2023, when the “Doomsday Clock” was moved to 90 seconds before midnight, the closest it’s ever been, it wasn’t just because of WMD (weapons of mass destruction); “EMD” (environmental mass destruction) was also a factor.³⁰

Pandemic Prevention

The world failed. Close to seven million deaths globally; global economic devastation beyond anything in modern times; disruptions of daily life like no other. There’s plenty of blame to go around: China for not sharing critical information in a timely manner. The United States for politics trumping science to such an extent that, as Francis Fukuyama put it, “its current highly polarized society and incompetent leader blocked the state from functioning effectively.”³¹ A bevy of countries for vaccine nationalism. The World Health Organization (WHO) for ineffective crisis management. COVAX (the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access Facility) for lofty goals undelivered on. There were “weak links at every point in the chain,” as the Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response concluded.³² Perhaps it did not result in a “PMD” (pandemic mass destruction) but with the next pandemic more “when” than if, as the Panel put it, “the world needs a new international system for pandemic preparedness and response, and it needs one fast.”³³

Keys to a Globally Credible US 21st-Century RBO Role

Like prior rules-based orders, a 21st century RBO would at most “*help* to limit conflict, induce cooperation and stability, and expand legitimacy through representation and participation.” Plenty will still be determined by realpolitik calculations by which various states—great powers of course, and others as well—see their interests served more by rule-breaking than rule-abiding. Still,

given the agenda the world faces and the array of factors and forces at work, help from as strong and robust a set of global rules and norms as possible is essential.

Whether this is possible is by no means just up to the United States. A 21st century rules-based order won't just be made in Washington. It won't just be an LIO carryover. But it does need the United States to play a leading role. Not-as-bad-as-Russia-and-China whataboutism won't suffice. The US needs to show greater awareness of its own mixed record and take its own actions to make its role more globally credible. Four actions are particularly important.

A 21st century rules-based order won't just be made in Washington, but it needs the US to lead

Re-Equilibrating Domestic Politics

It's fair to say that much of the world, at least the part that benefits overall from American leadership and is interested in a rules-based order, was relieved that Joe Biden won the 2020 presidential election. It's also fair to say that those peoples and countries hope that Trump or some other America-Firster does not win in 2024. But even if that's the case, the world will still have concerns about the deep-seated disequilibrium in American democracy and the consequent intermittent reliability of American leadership.

Foreign currency exchange rates provide a helpful analogy for these domestic politics dynamics. Financial market analysts know that exchange rates naturally fluctuate, and only get concerned when those fluctuations push outside an equilibrium zone. So too are fluctuations a normal part of democratic politics. But over the last 25+ years, American politics have been repeatedly lurching outside their political equilibrium zone. There have been three efforts to impeach Presidents (1998, 2019, 2021 and possibly a fourth in 2023-24), a presidential election that required the Supreme Court to intervene (2000), and a violent insurrection seeking to overturn the 2020 election results.

Plenty of other Western democracies have intense political issues at present, but nothing like this fundamental political institutional instability. The Reichstag hasn't been burnt and the Bastille hasn't been stormed the way the US Capitol was. No other Western democracy has had the spouse of their legislative leader murderously attacked. Nor an attempted kidnapping of a governor or comparable regional official. Nor so many local-level election officials harassed into hiding, school board officials having bricks thrown through their home windows, librarians personally threatened.³⁴ Nor their own intelligence agencies deeming domestic violent extremists one of the greatest threats to the country.³⁵ Unless the US can re-equilibrate its politics to stay within that political fluctuation

zone, it will be understandably hard for other countries to have sufficient confidence in the reliability of US positions taken and commitments made to follow its lead.

US politics have to be re-equilibrated to stay within a “political fluctuation zone” of democracy

Of course this could be end-of-discussion for most any aspect of American global leadership. It has worried Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. It has been tempering the road ahead coming out of the August 2023 Camp David US-Japan-South Korea Trilateral Leaders Summit. But there are some green shoots within the domestic politics weeds. Despite prevalent gridlock, Congress did pass three pieces of legislation—the 2021 Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill, 2022 CHIPS and

Science Act, and 2022 Inflation Reduction Act—as sweeping as any passed in decades. Party lines (cultural ones as well) are being sufficiently crossed on some polarizing issues like abortion in states like Kansas and Montana to find some common ground. Younger generation initiatives like the Listen First Project and its 500 coalition partners are having some impact bridging divides and facilitating social cohesion.³⁶ Early 20th century progressivism, the New Deal, 1950s-1960s civil rights ... American history provides a mix of solace and encouragement in examples of major sociopolitical changes. The quote from Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* about bankruptcy coming “gradually, then suddenly,” while often invoked for its negative trajectory, can also be flipped to refer to major political change being barely noticeable until it becomes more prevalent.³⁷ Caveating policy strategies such as 21st century RBO leadership while still developing them avoids Pollyanna-ism on the one hand and paralyzing cynicism on the other.

Less Discretionary US Use of Military Force

Major powers’ uses of military force have been and will continue to be the least RBO-regulatable. No new Kellogg-Briand Pact (officially the 1928 Geneva Treaty for the Renunciation of War as an Instrument of National Policy) is in the wind, let alone any US unilateral non-use of force declaration. Still, as noted earlier and as data compiled by scholars Monica Duffy Toft and Sidita Kushi even more comprehensively show, the US has resorted to military force more often than any other country. While Toft and Kushi go too far in their “addicted to military intervention” characterization, they are far from the only scholars whose analysis supports their warning that continued frequent resorting to military force risks “permanent damage to vital interests.”³⁸ More US restraint

on the unilateral use of military force thus would doubly serve US interests, both avoiding the costs and consequences that so often have ended up being borne and speaking to an issue long central to global audiences' assessments of US rules-abidingness.

Iran looms as a test case. The Biden administration continues to maintain that military force remains on the table if diplomacy fails to sufficiently restrict Iran's nuclear weapons program. But even if Iran violates non-weaponization understandings with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the US were to resort to military force, claims of rule-enforcing against Iranian rule-breaking would be unlikely to carry the day given the US' highly mixed rule-abiding, rule-abusing record.

The "soft-on" domestic political push to use force is not as strong as it once was. If military action against Iran didn't stay limited to a single or a few attacks, patterns in public opinion on the use of force indicate that any initial rally-round-the-flag effect would very likely wane.³⁹ Even if the military operation was successful, the political payoff is likely to be limited: George H.W. Bush lost the 1992 election not long after the heralded Operation Desert Storm victory. More generally, we are seeing a left-right quasi-coalition against foreign policy hawkishness. As one indicator, in a number of recent presidential elections—1992, Bill Clinton over Bush; 2000, George W. Bush over Al Gore; 2008, Barack Obama over John McCain; 2016, Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton—the candidate with the stronger foreign policy credentials lost.

From "My Way" to "Our Way" Multilateralism

Overall, the US record is much stronger on "my way" multilateralism—making others get on board with what the US has decided needs to be done—than "our way" multilateralism—being party to institutions and agreements in which decision-making and policy-setting is more shared. The US has grown very accustomed to making the rules and setting norms while reserving its own right to make exceptions and break some rules outright. This won't fly anymore. The US can't keep refusing to join treaties and taking self-exempting controverting actions, while in the same breath telling others to be rules-abiding.

As a recent high-level UN panel stressed, if multilateralism is to be effective it must "draw its strength and legitimacy from greater inclusion and offer representative majorities meaningful opportunities to shape global decision-making."⁴⁰ Greater US support for institutional leadership expansions, such as adding more UNSC permanent seats, would be a step in this direction.⁴¹ The US can't make this happen on its own: China is the main opponent to Japan and regional aspirants are opposed by regional rivals (e.g., Brazil is opposed by Argentina, India by Pakistan, and no regional consensus exists on who should be seated

from Africa or the Middle East). Going beyond the cursory support it typically has stuck to would enhance reputational credibility and also position Washington to influence any new configuration to work for, rather than against, greater UNSC effectiveness. The same goes for other proposed international institutional leadership broadenings such as the World Bank: even though its new President Ajay Banga (who is Indian-born but an American) has gotten off to a good start, going forward the requirement that the President must be an American should be dropped.

Even with the trade-offs that ceding some leadership prerogatives carry, the strategic balance for the US would be a net positive. The nature of the current era is such that, even acknowledging international institutional inefficiencies, the freedom of action given up can be outweighed by the capacity gained to achieve shared objectives. Part of the gain lies in a political version of the international trade principle of comparative advantage, whereby different nations as well as relevant international institutions and NGOs bring to bear their own capacities and expertise based on their own historical experiences, traditional relationships, factor endowments, and issue area specializations. Part of it is burden sharing in terms of costs as well as responsibilities. Part of it is also the legitimizing inclusiveness that greater “our-wayness” brings—what Joseph Nye calls “positive sum power”—calculating less “in terms of American power *over* others” and more “in terms of power to accomplish joint goals, which involves power *with* others.”⁴²

Our-way multilateralism favorably juxtaposes with the damage China has been doing to its claim to global solidarity. President Xi Jinping’s ostensible “Community of Common Destiny for Mankind” flies in the face of China’s having rejected the World Court South China Sea ruling, abrogated the treaty governing Hong Kong’s future, and one Belt and Road (BRI) case after another revealed to be neo-imperialist exploitation.⁴³ Whatever Sino-American bilateral tensions continue, the US could more credibly claim to be doing its part to avoid making, in CIA Director William Burns’ terms, “cooperation on shared global problems ... the victim of strategic competition.” This approach is also in sync with broader geopolitically pluralist dynamics in which few states see their national interests best served by being on just one team or the other—or, as Bill Burns also put it, “little benefit and lots of risk in monogamous geopolitical relationships.”⁴⁴

Even so, domestic political outcry at such an approach is predictable. Trumpian America First wants “no-way” multilateralism. Conservative internationalists resist ceding prerogatives, and to a certain extent so do liberal internationalists. Public opinion poll data, though, shows that greater multilateralism is not the third rail American conventional political wisdom holds it to be. Pew Research Center 2022 polling found US public support for the UN up to 61 percent. A 2020 Chicago Council on Global Affairs poll asking the American

public whether the US should be the dominant world leader, part of a shared leadership coalition, or have no global leadership role, found that 68 percent of respondents favored the shared role (even Republicans alone were at 51 percent support). These and other political indicators show some public pragmatism to work with when making the case that greater multilateralism is in the US self-interest, not altruism.⁴⁵

Ante-In Leadership on Common Challenges

In NATO, the US contributes close to double the 2 percent GDP standard, whether the other allies meet it or not. “Ante-ing” in is part of being a leader. This is what we have been long doing. We are doing it because it is in our interest to do so. We expect others also to make their commitments, and we push them to do so, but we don’t make ours contingent on theirs because our interests are being served. The US needs to provide comparable “ante-in” leadership on climate change and pandemic prevention.

To its credit, the Biden administration has close to doubled the original US Paris Climate Accord emissions reduction commitment. But as historically the largest emitter and current consumer of 20 percent of world oil as well as having the highest per capita carbon pollution, the US needs to do even more. To be sure, it’s not only on the US to get the world to adopt policies commensurate in scope and speed to the climate threat. China is currently the world’s biggest emitter, consuming more coal than the rest of the world combined. Were India to meet its goal of net zero emissions goal by 2070—enormously challenging but achievable—it alone would reduce warming by 0.2 degrees Celsius.⁴⁶ Others have their own work to do as well.

But when major American insurance companies stop issuing homeowners policies because of climate change risks—as State Farm recently did in California and Farmers did in Florida, California, and other high-risk states—the US self-interest to act is evident.⁴⁷ Even before the scorching summer of 2023, reduced productivity and other effects of extreme heat were costing the American economy close to \$100 billion, with double that loss projected by 2030.⁴⁸ With the costs of solar, wind, and other renewables falling dramatically, Wall Street projects that the renewables investment markets will be valued at as

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much as \$2 trillion over just the next few years.⁴⁹ In these and other ways, the old zero-sum calculation that policy could be green only economically *or* environmentally no longer holds.

Here too, benefits carry over to US-China competition. China dominates the world in clean energy investment (\$546 billion in 2022, close to half of global clean energy spending), wind turbine manufacturing (60 percent of global capacity and half of global trade), solar energy sector jobs (over 60 percent of the global total), EV batteries and supply chains (a “10-15 year head start on the rest of the world,” according to an industry analyst), and other green technologies.⁵⁰ Narrowing this gap reduces vulnerability to Chinese embargoes and other economic coercion, and by strengthening US capacity to achieve ambitious climate change mitigation goals, better positions the US to bring others along.

Here, American domestic politics are also workable. While partisan splits still come through in the polling data, there are some encouraging signs. Pew polls find 67 percent support for federal prioritizing development of renewable energy sources, 62 percent saying they already feel climate change consequences in their local communities, 62 percent agreeing that climate change is human-caused, and higher percentages supporting increased federal spending on climate change than on health care, defense and anti-terrorism. Republicans still come out less supportive; e.g, 58 percent feel that climate change should not be a major priority, and only 35 percent agree that the extreme heat of summer 2023 was due to climate change.⁵¹ But some signs show Republican opposition softening. In August 2022, the National Association of Evangelicals issued a powerful report on the “biblical basis” for environmental activism.⁵² Red states are already being hit especially hard by climate change’s economic effects, with even more severe ones on the way.⁵³ And while no Republicans voted for the Inflation Reduction Act, close to 80 percent of clean energy investments are going into Republican House districts.⁵⁴

Omicron and pandemic prevention presents another possibility for America to ante-in its leadership. Just when US COVID-19 cases had fallen from their January 2021 peak of about 250,000 per day to about 73,000, the Omicron variant, which originated in South Africa, spiked the US January 2022 daily case count to 810,000. Global interconnectedness could not be better defined. Here too, US self-interest demands global leadership.

Three initiatives are key. The first is for the US to rebuild its own pandemic-related public health capacity. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) needs to be restored to the “gold standard” it had been. And domestic politics need to be managed to break out of the polarization which left the US with lower COVID vaccination rates and higher death rates than most other large high-income countries.⁵⁵

The second is support for vaccine and other capacity building in low- and middle-income countries, such as the mRNA Vaccine Technology Transfer Hub which includes 15 countries in the Global South. The Biden administration has taken on initiatives such as the USAID COVID-19 Global Response and Recovery Framework and the Initiative for Global Vaccine Access, and has been a lead funder of the new World Bank Pandemic Fund. But big PhRMA lobbying against the Hub's prioritization of technology sharing over restrictive private sector patenting has been keeping the US from joining Canada, France, and the European Commission in providing funding.⁵⁶ This initiative is important both directly for Global South capacity building and because it showcases the kind of willingness to take on domestic interest groups that broader claims of global leadership depend on.

Third, the US should support key WHO strengthening measures. One is tighter International Health Regulations (IHR) closing existing loopholes and making the early reporting of infectious disease outbreak obligatory. Another is the new Pandemic Accord currently under negotiation, which will provide a "blueprint" for more effective prevention, preparedness and response. The Biden administration has been playing an active role on these proposals, balancing pushing its own ideas with openness to those of other countries.⁵⁷ If the Pandemic Accord is drafted as planned by May 2024, getting US Congressional approval will pose a telling test.

Difficult but Necessary

Forging a 21st century rules-based order is even more difficult than in prior eras. We are all too aware of the differences among the great powers. But even if they could be brought together, that would not suffice. Power is sufficiently diffused globally and interests diversified that rule-setting can no longer be by, of and for just the biggest players. Yet, given the scope and severity of the threats and challenges faced, some of that "help" which rules and norms provide is necessary. For the US to play the role that both its own interests and those of the international community require, it needs to back its rules-based order rhetoric with policies and politics that, in light of its own mixed record, strengthen its claim to global credibility going forward.

Notes

1. Working with my research assistant Laurel Holley we used the search terms "rules-based order", "rules-based international order", and "liberal international order" going through Biden administration speeches, documents, joint statements with other countries, and

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