

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Enemies of My Enemy

How Fear of China Is Forging a New World Order

By [Michael Beckley](#)

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The international order is falling apart, and everyone seems to know how to fix it. According to some, the United States just needs to rededicate itself to leading the liberal order it helped found some 75 years ago. Others argue that the world's great powers should form a concert to guide the international community into a new age of multipolar cooperation. Still others call for a grand bargain that divides the globe into stable spheres of influence. What these and other visions of international order have in common is an assumption that global governance can be designed and imposed from the top down. With wise statesmanship and ample summitry, the international jungle can be tamed and cultivated. Conflicts of interest and historical hatreds can be negotiated away and replaced with win-win cooperation.

The history of international order, however, provides little reason for confidence in top-down, cooperative solutions. The strongest orders in modern history—from Westphalia in the seventeenth century to the liberal international order in the twentieth—were not inclusive organizations working for the greater good of humanity. Rather, they were alliances built by great powers to wage security competition against their main rivals. Fear and loathing of a shared enemy, not enlightened calls to make the world a better place, brought these orders together. Progress on transnational issues, when achieved, emerged largely as a byproduct of hardheaded security cooperation. That cooperation usually lasted only as long as a common threat remained both present and manageable. When that threat dissipated or grew too large, the orders collapsed. Today, the liberal order is fraying for many reasons, but the underlying cause is that the threat it was originally designed to defeat—Soviet communism—disappeared three decades ago. None of the proposed replacements to the current order have stuck because there hasn't been a threat scary or vivid enough to compel sustained cooperation among the key players.

Until now. Through a surge of repression and aggression, China has frightened countries near and far. It is acting belligerently in East Asia, trying to carve out exclusive economic zones in the global economy, and exporting digital systems that make authoritarianism more effective than ever. For the first time since the Cold War, a critical mass of countries face serious threats to their security, welfare, and ways of life—all emanating from a single source.

This moment of clarity has triggered a flurry of responses. China's neighbors are arming themselves and aligning with outside powers to secure their territory and sea-lanes. Many of the world's largest economies are collectively developing new trade, investment, and technology standards that implicitly

discriminate against China. Democracies are gathering to devise strategies for combating authoritarianism at home and abroad, and new international organizations are popping up to coordinate the battle. Seen in real time, these efforts look scattershot. Step back from the day-to-day commotion, however, and a fuller picture emerges: for better or worse, competition with China is forging a new international order.

ORDERS OF EXCLUSION

The modern liberal mind associates international order with peace and harmony. Historically, however, international orders have been more about keeping rivals down than bringing everyone together. As the international relations theorist Kyle Lascuertes has argued, the major orders of the past four centuries were “orders of exclusion,” designed by dominant powers to ostracize and outcompete rivals. Order building wasn’t a restraint on geopolitical conflict; it was power politics by other means, a cost-effective way to contain adversaries short of war.

Fear of an enemy, not faith in friends, formed the bedrock of each era’s order, and members developed a common set of norms by defining themselves in opposition to that enemy. In doing so, they tapped into humanity’s most primordial driver of collective action. Sociologists call it “the in-group/out-group dynamic.” Philosophers call it “Sallust’s theorem,” after the ancient historian who argued that fear of Carthage held the Roman Republic together. In political science, the analogous concept is negative partisanship, the tendency for voters to become intensely loyal to one political party mainly because they despise its rival.

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This negative dynamic pervades the history of order building. In 1648, the kingdoms that won the Thirty Years’ War enshrined rules of sovereign statehood in the Peace of Westphalia to undermine the authority of the Catholic Church and the Holy Roman Empire. Great Britain and its allies designed the 1713 Treaty of Utrecht to contain France by delegitimizing territorial expansion through royal marriages and the assertion of dynastic ties, Louis XIV’s preferred method of amassing power. The Concert of Europe, the post-Napoleonic peace established in Vienna in 1815, was used by conservative monarchies to forestall the rise of liberal revolutionary regimes. The victors of World War I built the interwar order to hold Germany and Bolshevik Russia in check. After World War II, the Allies initially designed a global order, centered on the United Nations, to prevent a return of Nazi-style fascism and mercantilism. When the onset of the Cold War quickly hamstrung that global order, however, the West created a separate order to exclude and outcompete Soviet communism. For the duration of the Cold War, the world was divided into two orders: the dominant one led by Washington, and a poorer one centered on Moscow.

The main features of today’s liberal order are direct descendants of the United States’ Cold War alliance. After the Soviets decided not to join the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (gatt), these institutions were repurposed as agents of capitalist

expansion—first, to rebuild capitalist economies and, later, to promote globalization. The Marshall Plan laid the foundation for the European Community by lavishing U.S. aid on governments that agreed to expel communists from their ranks and work toward an economic federation. NATO created a united front against the Red Army. The chain of U.S. alliances ringing East Asia was constructed to contain communist expansion there, especially from China and North Korea. U.S. engagement with China, which lasted from the 1970s to the 2010s, was a gambit to exploit the Sino-Soviet split.

Each of these initiatives was an element of an order designed first and foremost to defeat the Soviet Union. In the absence of the Cold War threat, Japan and West Germany would not have tolerated prolonged U.S. military occupations on their soil. The British, the French, and the Germans would not have pooled their industrial resources. The United States—which had spent the previous two centuries ducking international commitments and shielding its economy with tariffs—would not have thrown its weight behind international institutions. Nor would it have provided security guarantees, massive aid, and easy market access to dozens of countries, including the former Axis powers. Only the threat of a nuclear-armed, communist superpower could compel so many countries to set aside their conflicting interests and long-standing rivalries and build the strongest security community and free-trade regime in history.

BUCKLING UNDER THE PRESSURE

For decades, the United States and its allies knew what they stood for and who the enemy was. But then the Soviet Union collapsed, and a single overarching threat gave way to a kaleidoscope of minor ones. In the new and uncertain post-Cold War environment, the Western allies sought refuge in past sources of success. Instead of building a new order, they doubled down on the existing one. Their enemy may have disintegrated, but their mission, they believed, remained the same: to enlarge the community of free-market democracies. For the next three decades, they worked to expand the Western liberal order into a global one. NATO membership nearly doubled. The European Community morphed into the EU, a full-blown economic union with more than twice as many member countries. The Gatt was transformed into the World Trade Organization (WTO) and welcomed dozens of new members, unleashing an unprecedented period of hyperglobalization.

But it couldn't last. The liberal order, like all international orders, is a form of organized hypocrisy that contains the seeds of its own demise. To forge a cohesive community, order builders have to exclude hostile nations, outlaw uncooperative behaviors, and squelch domestic opposition to international rule-making. These inherently repressive acts eventually trigger a backlash. In the mid-nineteenth century, it came in the form of a wave of liberal revolutions, which eroded the unity and ideological coherence of the monarchical Concert of Europe. During the 1930s, aggrieved fascist powers demolished the liberal interwar order that stood in the way of their imperial ambitions. By the late 1940s, the Soviet Union had spurned the global order it had helped negotiate just a few years prior, having gobbled up territory in Eastern Europe in contravention of the UN Charter. The Soviet representative at the UN derided the Bretton Woods institutions as “branches of Wall Street.” Exclusionary by nature, international orders inevitably incite opposition.

Many in the West had long assumed that the liberal order would be an exception to the historical pattern. The system's commitment to openness and nondiscrimination supposedly made it “hard to

overturn and easy to join,” as the political scientist G. John Ikenberry argued in these pages in 2008. Any country, large or small, could plug and play in the globalized economy. Liberal institutions could accommodate all manner of members—even illiberal ones, which would gradually be reformed by the system into responsible stakeholders. As more countries joined, a virtuous cycle would play out: free trade would generate prosperity, which would spread democracy, which would enhance international cooperation, which would lead to more trade. Most important, the order faced no major opposition, because it had already defeated its main enemy. The demise of Soviet communism had sent a clear message to all that there was no viable alternative to democratic capitalism.

Through a surge of repression and aggression, China has frightened countries near and far.

These assumptions turned out to be wrong. The liberal order is, in fact, deeply exclusionary. By promoting free markets, open borders, democracy, supranational institutions, and the use of reason to solve problems, the order challenges traditional beliefs and institutions that have united communities for centuries: state sovereignty, nationalism, religion, race, tribe, family. These enduring ties to blood and soil were bottled up during the Cold War, when the United States and its allies had to maintain a united front to contain the Soviet Union. But they have reemerged over the course of the post–Cold War era. “We are going to do a terrible thing to you,” the Soviet official Georgi Arbatov told a U.S. audience in 1988. “We are going to deprive you of an enemy.” The warning proved prescient. By slaying its main adversary, the liberal order unleashed all sorts of nationalist, populist, religious, and authoritarian opposition.

Many of the order’s pillars are buckling under the pressure. NATO is riven by disputes over burden sharing. The EU nearly broke apart during the eurozone crisis, and in the years since, it has lost the United Kingdom and has been threatened by the rise of xenophobic right-wing parties across the continent. The WTO’s latest round of multilateral trade talks has dragged on for 20 years without an agreement, and the United States is crippling the institution’s core feature—the Appellate Court, where countries adjudicate their disputes—for failing to regulate Chinese nontariff barriers. On the whole, the liberal order looks ill equipped to handle pressing global problems such as climate change, financial crises, pandemics, digital disinformation, refugee influxes, and political extremism, many of which are arguably a direct consequence of an open system that promotes the unfettered flow of money, goods, information, and people across borders.

Policymakers have long recognized these problems. Yet none of their ideas for revamping the system has gained traction because order building is costly. It requires leaders to divert time and political capital away from advancing their agendas to hash out international rules and sell them to skeptical publics, and it requires countries to subordinate their national interests to collective objectives and trust that other countries will do likewise. These actions do not come naturally, which is why order building usually needs a common enemy. For 30 years, that unifying force has been absent, and the liberal order has unraveled as a result.

ENTER THE DRAGON

There has never been any doubt about what China wants, because Chinese leaders have declared the same objectives for decades: to keep the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in power, reabsorb Taiwan, control the East China and South China Seas, and return China to its rightful place as the dominant power in Asia and the most powerful country in the world. For most of the past four decades, the country took a relatively patient and peaceful approach to achieving these aims. Focused on economic growth and fearful of being shunned by the international community, China adopted a “peaceful rise” strategy, relying primarily on economic clout to advance its interests and generally following a maxim of the Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping: “Hide your strength, bide your time.”

In recent years, however, China has expanded aggressively on multiple fronts. “Wolf Warrior” diplomacy has replaced friendship diplomacy. Perceived slights from foreigners, no matter how small, are met with North Korean–style condemnation. A combative attitude has seeped into every part of China’s foreign policy, and it is confronting many countries with their gravest threat in generations.



Police officers in Shanghai, January 2022

This threat is most apparent in maritime East Asia, where China is moving aggressively to cement its vast territorial claims. Beijing is churning out warships faster than any country has since World War II, and it has flooded Asian sea-lanes with Chinese coast guard and fishing vessels. It has strung military outposts across the South China Sea and dramatically increased its use of ship ramming and aerial interceptions to shove neighbors out of disputed areas. In the Taiwan Strait, Chinese military patrols, some involving a dozen warships and more than 50 combat aircraft, prowl the sea almost daily and simulate attacks on Taiwanese and U.S. targets. Chinese officials have told Western analysts that calls for an invasion of

Taiwan are proliferating within the CCP. Pentagon officials worry that such an assault could be imminent.

China has gone on the economic offensive, too. Its latest five-year plan calls for dominating what Chinese officials call “chokepoints”—goods and services that other countries can’t live without—and then using that dominance, plus the lure of China’s domestic market, to browbeat countries into concessions. Toward that end, China has become the dominant dispenser of overseas loans, loading up more than 150 countries with over \$1 trillion of debt. It has massively subsidized strategic industries to gain a monopoly on hundreds of vital products, and it has installed the hardware for digital networks in dozens of countries. Armed with economic leverage, it has used coercion against more than a dozen countries over the last few years. In many cases, the punishment has been disproportionate to the supposed crime—for example, slapping tariffs on many of Australia’s exports after that country requested an international investigation into the origins of COVID-19.

China has also become a potent antidemocratic force, selling advanced tools of tyranny around the world. By combining surveillance cameras with social media monitoring, artificial intelligence, biometrics, and speech and facial recognition technologies, the Chinese government has pioneered a system that allows dictators to watch citizens constantly and punish them instantly by blocking their access to finance, education, employment, telecommunications, or travel. The apparatus is a despot’s dream, and Chinese companies are already selling and operating aspects of it in more than 80 countries.

ACTION AND REACTION

As China burns down what remains of the liberal order, it is sparking an international backlash. Negative views of the country have soared around the world to highs not seen since the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. A 2021 survey by the Pew Research Center found that roughly 75 percent of people in the United States, Europe, and Asia held unfavorable views of China and had no confidence that President Xi Jinping would behave responsibly in world affairs or respect human rights. Another survey, a 2020 poll by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, revealed that about 75 percent of foreign policy elites in those same places thought that the best way to deal with China was to form coalitions of like-minded countries against it. In the United States, both political parties now support a tough policy toward China. The EU has officially declared China to be a “systemic rival.” In Asia, Beijing faces openly hostile governments in every direction, from Japan to Australia to Vietnam to India. Even people in countries that trade heavily with China are souring on it. Surveys show that South Koreans, for example, now dislike China more than they dislike Japan, their former colonial overlord.

Anti-Chinese sentiment is starting to congeal into concrete pushback. The resistance remains embryonic and patchy, mainly because so many countries are still hooked on Chinese trade. But the overall trend is clear: disparate actors are starting to join forces to roll back Beijing’s power. In the process, they are reordering the world.

The Chinese threat could usher in the most consequential changes to global governance in a generation.

The emerging anti-Chinese order departs fundamentally from the liberal order, because it is directed at a different threat. In particular, the new order flips the relative emphasis placed on capitalism versus democracy. During the Cold War, the old liberal order promoted capitalism first and democracy a distant second. The United States and its allies pushed free markets as far as their power could reach, but when forced to choose, they almost always supported right-wing autocrats over left-wing democrats. The so-called free world was mainly an economic construct. Even after the Cold War, when democracy promotion became a cottage industry in Western capitals, the United States and its allies often shelved human rights concerns to gain market access, as they did most notably by ushering China into the WTO.

But now economic openness has become a liability for the United States and its allies, because China is ensconced in virtually every aspect of the liberal order. Far from being put out of business by globalization, China's authoritarian capitalist system seems almost perfectly designed to milk free markets for mercantilist gain. Beijing uses subsidies and espionage to help its firms dominate global markets and protects its domestic market with nontariff barriers. It censors foreign ideas and companies on its own internet and freely accesses the global Internet to steal intellectual property and spread CCP propaganda. It assumes leadership positions in liberal international institutions, such as the UN Human Rights Council, and then bends them in an illiberal direction. It enjoys secure shipping around the globe for its export machine, courtesy of the U.S. Navy, and uses its own military to assert control over large swaths of the East China and South China Seas.

The United States and its allies have awoken to the danger: the liberal order and, in particular, the globalized economy at its heart are empowering a dangerous adversary. In response, they are trying to build a new order that excludes China by making democracy a requirement for full membership. When U.S. President Joe Biden gave his first press conference, in March 2021, and described the U.S.-Chinese rivalry as part of a broader competition between democracy and autocracy, it wasn't a rhetorical flourish. He was drawing a battle line based on a widely shared belief that authoritarian capitalism poses a mortal threat to the democratic world, one that can't be contained by the liberal order. Instead of reforming existing rules, rich democracies are starting to impose new ones by banding together, adopting progressive standards and practices, and threatening to exclude countries that don't follow them. Democracies aren't merely balancing against China—increasing their defense spending and forming military alliances—they are also reordering the world around it.

UNDER CONSTRUCTION

The architecture of the new order remains a work in progress. Yet two key features are already discernible. The first is a loose economic bloc anchored by the G-7, the group of democratic allies that controls more than half of the world's wealth. These leading powers, along with a rotating cast of like-minded states, are collaborating to prevent China from monopolizing the global economy. History has shown that whichever power dominates the strategic goods and services of an era dominates that era. In the nineteenth century, the United Kingdom was able to build an empire on which the sun never set in part because it mastered iron, steam, and the telegraph faster than its competitors. In the twentieth century, the United States surged ahead of other countries by harnessing steel, chemicals, electronics, aerospace, and information technologies. Now, China hopes to dominate modern strategic sectors—

including artificial intelligence, biotechnology, semiconductors, and telecommunications—and relegate other economies to subservient status. In a 2017 meeting in Beijing, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang told H. R. McMaster, then the U.S. national security adviser, how he envisioned the United States and other countries fitting into the global economy in the future: their role, McMaster recalled Li saying, “would merely be to provide China with raw materials, agricultural products, and energy to fuel its production of the world’s cutting-edge industrial and consumer products.”

To avoid becoming a cog in a Chinese economic empire, leading democracies have started forming exclusive trade and investment networks designed to speed up their progress in critical sectors and slow down China’s. Some of these collaborations, such as the U.S.-Japan Competitiveness and Resilience Partnership, announced in 2021, create joint R & D projects to help members outpace Chinese innovation. Other schemes focus on blunting China’s economic leverage by developing alternatives to Chinese products and funding. The G-7’s Build Back Better World initiative and the EU’s Global Gateway, for example, will provide poor countries with infrastructure financing as an alternative to China’s Belt and Road Initiative. Australia, India, and Japan joined forces to start the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative, which offers incentives for their companies to move their operations out of China. And at the behest of the United States, countries composing more than 60 percent of the world’s cellular-equipment market have enacted or are considering restrictions against Huawei, China’s main 5G telecommunications provider.

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Meanwhile, democratic coalitions are constraining China’s access to advanced technologies. The Netherlands, South Korea, Taiwan, and the United States, for example, have colluded to cut China off from advanced semiconductors and from the machines that make them. New institutions are laying the groundwork for a full-scale multilateral export control regime. The U.S.-EU Trade and Technology Council creates common transatlantic standards for screening exports to China and investment there in artificial intelligence and other cutting-edge technologies. The Export Controls and Human Rights Initiative, a joint project of Australia, Canada, Denmark, France, the Netherlands, Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States that was unveiled in late 2021, is intended to do the same for technologies that could support digital authoritarianism, such as speech and facial recognition tools. The United States and its democratic allies are also negotiating trade and investment deals to discriminate against China, putting in place labor, environmental, and governance standards that Beijing will never meet. In October 2021, for example, the United States and the EU agreed to create a new arrangement that will impose tariffs on aluminum and steel producers that engage in dumping or carbon-intensive production, a measure that will hit no country harder than China.

The second feature of the emerging order is a double military barrier to contain China. The inside layer consists of rivals bordering the East China and South China Seas. Many of them—including Indonesia, Japan, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam—are loading up on mobile missile launchers and mines. The goal is to turn themselves into prickly porcupines capable of denying China sea and air control near their shores. Those efforts are now being bolstered by an outside layer of democratic powers—mainly

Australia, India, the United Kingdom, and the United States. These democracies are providing aid, arms, and intelligence to China's neighbors; training together so they can conduct long-range missile strikes on Chinese forces and blockade China's oil imports; and organizing multinational freedom-of-navigation exercises throughout the region, especially near Chinese-held rocks, reefs, and islands in disputed areas.

This security cooperation is becoming stronger and more institutionalized. Witness the reemergence of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or Quad—a coalition made up of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States that had gone dormant shortly after its founding in 2007. Or look at the creation of new pacts, most notably AUKUS, an alliance linking Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The overarching goal of all this activity is to maintain the territorial status quo in East Asia. But a more explicit aim is to save Taiwan, the frontline democracy most at risk of Chinese conquest. Japan and the United States have developed a joint battle plan for defending the island, and in November 2021, Peter Dutton, Australia's defense minister, said it was "inconceivable" that his country would not also join the fight. The European Parliament, for its part, has adopted a comprehensive plan to boost Taiwan's economic resilience and international recognition.



Running a Chinese military drill in the South China Sea, April 2018

Viewed individually, these efforts look haphazard and reactive. Collectively, however, they betray a positive vision for a democratic order, one that differs fundamentally from China's mercantilist model and also from the old international order, with neoliberal orthodoxy at its core. By infusing labor and human rights standards into economic agreements, the new vision prioritizes people over corporate profits and state power. It also elevates the global environment from a mere commodity to a shared and

jointly protected commons. By linking democratic governments together in an exclusive network, the new order attempts to force countries to make a series of value judgments and imposes real penalties for illiberal behavior. Want to make carbon-intensive steel with slave labor? Prepare to be hit with tariffs by the world's richest countries. Considering annexing international waters? Expect a visit from a multinational armada.

If China continues to scare democracies into collective action, then it could usher in the most consequential changes to global governance in a generation or more. By containing Chinese naval expansion, for example, the maritime security system in East Asia could become a powerful enforcement mechanism for the law of the sea. By inserting carbon tariffs into trade deals to discriminate against China, the United States and its allies could force producers to reduce their emissions, inadvertently creating the basis for a de facto international carbon tax. The Quad's success in providing one billion doses of COVID-19 vaccines to Southeast Asia, an effort to win hearts and minds away from Beijing, has provided a blueprint for combating future pandemics. Allied efforts to prevent the spread of digital authoritarianism could inspire new international regulations on digital flows and data privacy, and the imperative of competing with China could fuel an unprecedented surge in R & D and infrastructure spending around the world.

Like the orders of the past, the emerging one is an order of exclusion, sustained by fear and enforced through coercion. Unlike most past orders, however, it is directed toward progressive ends.

THE CLASH OF SYSTEMS

The history of international order building is one of savage competition between clashing systems, not of harmonious cooperation. In the best of times, that competition took the form of a cold war, with each side jockeying for advantage and probing each other with every measure short of military force. In many cases, however, the competition eventually boiled over into a shooting war and ended with one side crushing the other. The victorious order then ruled until it was destroyed by a new competitor—or until it simply crumbled without an external threat to hold it together.

Today, a growing number of policymakers and pundits are calling for a new concert of powers to sort out the world's problems and divide the globe into spheres of influence. But the idea of an inclusive order in which no one power's vision prevails is a fantasy that can exist only in the imaginations of world-government idealists and academic theorists. There are only two orders under construction right now—a Chinese-led one and a U.S.-led one—and the contest between the two is rapidly becoming a clash between autocracy and democracy, as both countries define themselves against each other and try to infuse their respective coalitions with ideological purpose. China is positioning itself as the world's defender of hierarchy and tradition against a decadent and disorderly West; the United States is belatedly summoning a new alliance to check Chinese power and make the world safe for democracy.

Disparate actors are starting to join forces to roll back Beijing's power. In the process, they are reordering the world.

This clash of systems will define the twenty-first century and divide the world. China will view the emerging democratic order as a containment strategy designed to strangle its economy and topple its regime. In response, it will seek to protect itself by asserting greater military control over its vital sea-

lanes, carving out exclusive economic zones for its firms, and propping up autocratic allies as it sows chaos in democracies. The upsurge of Chinese repression and aggression, in turn, will further impel the United States and its allies to shun Beijing and build a democratic order. For a tiny glimpse of what this vicious cycle might look like, consider what happened in March 2021, when Canada, the United Kingdom, the United States, and the EU sanctioned four Chinese officials for human rights abuses in Xinjiang. The sanctions amounted to a slap on the wrist, but Beijing interpreted them as an assault on its sovereignty and unleashed a diplomatic tirade and a slew of economic sanctions. The EU returned fire by freezing its proposed EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment.

In the coming years, the trade and technology wars between China and the United States that began during the Trump administration will rage on as both sides try to expand their respective spheres. Other countries will find it increasingly difficult to hedge their bets by maintaining links to both blocs. Instead, China and the United States will push their partners to pick sides, compelling them to reroute their supply chains and adopt wholesale the ecosystem of technologies and standards of one side's order. The Internet will be split in two. When people journey from one order to the other—if they can even get a visa—they will enter a different digital realm. Their phones won't work, nor will their favorite websites, their email accounts, or their precious social media apps. Political warfare between the two systems will intensify, as each tries to undermine the domestic legitimacy and international appeal of its competitor. East Asian sea-lanes will grow clogged with warships, and rival forces will experience frequent close encounters.

The clash of systems between China and the United States will define the twenty-first century and divide the world.

The standoff will end only when one side defeats or exhausts the other. As of now, the smart money is on the U.S. side, which has far more wealth and military assets than China does and better prospects for future growth. By the early 2030s, Xi, an obese smoker with a stressful job, will be in his 80s, if he is still alive. China's demographic crisis will be kicking into high gear, with the country projected to lose roughly 70 million working-age adults and gain 130 million senior citizens between now and then. Hundreds of billions of dollars in overseas Chinese loans will be due, and many of China's foreign partners won't be able to pay them back. It is hard to see how a country facing so many challenges could long sustain its own international order, especially in the face of determined opposition from the world's wealthiest countries.

Yet it is also far from guaranteed that the U.S.-led democratic order will hold together. The United States could suffer a constitutional crisis in the 2024 presidential election and collapse into civil strife. Even if that doesn't happen, the United States and its allies might be rent by their own divides. The democratic world is suffering its greatest crisis of confidence and unity since the 1930s. Nationalism, populism, and opposition to globalism are rising, making collective action difficult. The East Asian democracies have ongoing territorial disputes with one another. Many Europeans view China as more of an economic opportunity than a strategic threat and seriously doubt the United States' reliability as an ally, having endured four years of tariffs and scorn from President Donald Trump, who could soon be back in power. Europeans also hold different views from Americans on data security and privacy, and

European governments fear U.S. technology dominance almost as much as they do Chinese digital hegemony. India may not be ready to abandon its traditional policy of nonalignment and back a democratic order, especially when it is becoming more repressive at home, and an order built around democracy will struggle to form productive partnerships with autocracies that would be important partners in any alliance against China, such as Singapore and Vietnam. Fear of China is a powerful force, but it might not be potent enough to paper over the many cracks that exist within the emerging anti-Chinese coalition.

If that coalition fails to solidify its international order, then the world will steadily slide back into anarchy, a struggle among rogue powers and regional blocs in which the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must. Some scholars assume—or hope—that an unordered world will sort itself out on its own, that great powers will carve out stable spheres of influence and avoid conflict or that the spread of international commerce and enlightened ideas will naturally maintain global peace and prosperity. But peace and prosperity are unnatural. When achieved, they are the result of sustained cooperation among great powers—that is, of an international order.

DOUBLING DOWN ON DEMOCRACY

History shows that eras of fluid multipolarity typically end in disaster, regardless of the bright ideas or advanced technologies circulating at the time. The late eighteenth century witnessed the pinnacle of the Enlightenment in Europe, before the continent descended into the hell of the Napoleonic Wars. At the start of the twentieth century, the world's sharpest minds predicted an end to great-power conflict as railways, telegraph cables, and steamships linked countries closer together. The worst war in history up to that point quickly followed. The sad and paradoxical reality is that international orders are vital to avert chaos, yet they typically emerge only during periods of great-power rivalry. Competing with China will be fraught with risk for the United States and its allies, but it might be the only way to avoid even greater dangers.

To build a better future, the United States and its allies will need to take a more enlightened view of their interests than they did even during the Cold War. Back then, their economic interests dovetailed nicely with their geopolitical interests. Simple greed, if nothing else, could compel capitalist states to band together to protect private property against a communist onslaught. Now, however, the choice is not so simple, because standing up to China will entail significant economic costs, especially in the short term. Those costs might pale in comparison to the long-term costs of business as usual with Beijing—Chinese espionage has been estimated to deprive the United States alone of somewhere between \$200 billion and \$600 billion annually—to say nothing of the moral quandaries and geopolitical risks of cooperating with a brutal totalitarian regime with revanchist ambitions. Yet the ability to make such an enlightened calculation in favor of confronting China may be beyond the capacities of any nation, especially ones as polarized as the United States and many of its democratic allies.

If there is any hope, it lies in a renewed commitment to democratic values. The United States and its allies share a common aspiration for an international order based on democratic principles and enshrined in international agreements and laws. The core of such an order is being forged in the crucible of competition with China and could be built out into the most enlightened order the world has ever

seen—a genuine free world. But to get there, the United States and its allies will have to embrace competition with China and march forward together through another long twilight struggle.

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