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A Free World, If You Can Keep It: Ukraine and American Interests

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Before February 24, 2022, most Americans agreed that the United States had no vital interests at stake in Ukraine. “If there is somebody in this town that would claim that we would consider going to war with Russia over Crimea and eastern Ukraine,” U.S. President Barack Obama said in an interview with *The Atlantic* in 2016, “they should speak up.” Few did.

Yet the consensus shifted when Russia invaded Ukraine. Suddenly, Ukraine’s fate was important enough to justify spending billions of dollars in resources and enduring rising gas prices; enough to expand security commitments in Europe, including bringing Finland and Sweden into NATO; enough to make the United States a virtual co-belligerent in the war against Russia, with consequences yet to be seen. All these steps have so far enjoyed substantial support in both political parties and among the public. A poll in August last year found that four in ten Americans support sending U.S. troops to help defend Ukraine if necessary, although the Biden administration insists it has no intention of doing so.

Russia’s invasion has changed Americans’ views not only of Ukraine but also of the world in general and the United States’ role in it. For more than a dozen years before Russia’s invasion and under two different presidents, the country sought to pare its overseas commitments, including in Europe. A majority of Americans believed that the United States should “mind its own business internationally and let other countries get along the best they can on their own,” according to the Pew Research Center. As pollster Andrew Kohut put it, the American public felt “little responsibility and inclination to deal with international problems that are not seen as direct threats to the national interest.” Yet today, Americans are dealing with two international disputes that do not pose a direct threat to the “national interest” as commonly understood. The United States has joined a war against an aggressive great power in Europe and promised to defend another small democratic nation against an autocratic great power in East Asia. U.S. President Joe Biden’s commitments to defend Taiwan if it is attacked—in “another action similar to what happened in Ukraine,” as Biden described it—have grown starker since Russia’s invasion. Americans now see the world as a more dangerous place. In

response, defense budgets are climbing (marginally); economic sanctions and limits on technology transfer are increasing; and alliances are being shored up and expanded.

HISTORY REPEATS

The war in Ukraine has exposed the gap between the way Americans think and talk about their national interests and the way they actually behave in times of perceived crisis. It is not the first time that Americans' perceptions of their interests have changed in response to events. For more than a century, the country has oscillated in this way, from periods of restraint, retrenchment, indifference, and disillusion to periods of almost panicked global engagement and interventionism. Americans were determined to stay out of the European crisis after war broke out in August 1914, only to dispatch millions of troops to fight in World War I three years later. They were determined to stay out of the burgeoning crisis in Europe in the 1930s, only to send many millions to fight in the next world war after December 1941.

Then as now, Americans acted not because they faced an immediate threat to their security but to defend the liberal world beyond their shores. Imperial Germany had neither the capacity nor the intention of attacking the United States. Even Americans' intervention in World War II was not a response to a direct threat to the homeland. In the late 1930s and right up to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, military experts, strategic thinkers, and self-described "realists" agreed that the United States was invulnerable to foreign invasion, no matter what happened in Europe and Asia. Before France's shocking collapse in June 1940, no one believed the German military could defeat the French, much less the British with their powerful navy, and the defeat of both was necessary before any attack on the United States could even be imagined. As the realist political scientist Nicholas Spykman argued, with Europe "three thousand miles away" and the Atlantic Ocean "reassuringly" in between, the United States' "frontiers" were secure.

These assessments are ridiculed today, but the historical evidence suggests that the Germans and the Japanese did not intend to invade the United States, not in 1941 and most likely not ever. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor was a preemptive effort to prevent or delay an American attack on Japan; it was not a prelude to an invasion of the United States, for which the Japanese had no capacity. Adolf Hitler mused about an eventual German confrontation with the United States, but such thoughts were shelved once he became bogged down in the war with the Soviet Union after June 1941. Even if Germany and Japan ultimately triumphed in their respective regions, there is reason to doubt, as the anti-interventionists did at the time, that either would be able to consolidate control over vast new conquests any time soon, giving Americans time to

build the necessary forces and defenses to deter a future invasion. Even Henry Luce, a leading interventionist, admitted that “as a pure matter of defense—defense of our homeland,” the United States “could make itself such a tough nut to crack that not all the tyrants in the world would dare to come against us.”

President Franklin Roosevelt’s interventionist policies from 1937 on were not a response to an increasing threat to American security. What worried Roosevelt was the potential destruction of the broader liberal world beyond American shores. Long before either the Germans or the Japanese were in a position to harm the United States, Roosevelt began arming their opponents and declaring ideological solidarity with the democracies against the “bandit nations.” He declared the United States the “arsenal of democracy.” He deployed the U.S. Navy against Germany in the Atlantic while in the Pacific he gradually cut off Japan’s access to oil and other military necessities.

In January 1939, months before Germany invaded Poland, Roosevelt warned Americans that “there comes a time in the affairs of men when they must prepare to defend, not their homes alone, but the tenets of faith and humanity on which their churches, their governments, and their very civilization are founded.” In the summer of 1940, he warned not of invasion but of the United States becoming a “lone island” in a world dominated by the “philosophy of force,” “a people lodged in prison, handcuffed, hungry, and fed through the bars from day to day by the contemptuous, unpitiful masters of other continents.” It was these concerns, the desire to defend a liberal world, that led the United States into confrontation with the two autocratic great powers well before either posed any threat to what Americans had traditionally understood as their interests. The United States, in short, was not just minding its own business when Japan decided to attack the U.S. Pacific Fleet and Hitler decided to declare war in 1941. As Herbert Hoover put it at the time, if the United States insisted on “putting pins in rattlesnakes,” it should expect to get bitten.

DUTY CALLS

The traditional understanding of what makes up a country’s national interests cannot explain the actions the United States took in the 1940s or what it is doing today in Ukraine. Interests are supposed to be about territorial security and sovereignty, not about the defense of beliefs and ideologies. The West’s modern discourse on interests can be traced to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when first Machiavelli and then seventeenth-century Enlightenment thinkers, responding to the abuses of ruthless popes and to the horrors of interreligious conflict in the Thirty Years’ War, looked to excise religion and belief from the conduct of international relations. According to their theories, which still dominate our thinking today, all states share a common set of

primary interests in survival and sovereignty. A just and stable peace requires that states set aside their beliefs in the conduct of international relations, respect religious or ideological differences, forbear from meddling in each other's internal affairs, and accept a balance of power among states that alone can ensure international peace. This way of thinking about interests is often called "realism" or "neorealism," and it suffuses all discussions of international relations.

For the first century of their country's existence, most Americans largely followed this way of thinking about the world. Although they were a highly ideological people whose beliefs were the foundation of their nationalism, Americans were foreign policy realists for much of the nineteenth century, seeing danger in meddling in the affairs of Europe. They were conquering the continent, expanding their commerce, and as a weaker power in a world of imperial superpowers, they focused on the security of the homeland. Americans could not have supported liberalism abroad even if they had wanted to, and many did not want to. For one thing, there was no liberal world out there to support before the middle of the nineteenth century. For another, as citizens of a half-democracy and half-totalitarian-dictatorship until the Civil War, Americans could not even agree that liberalism was a good thing at home, much less in the world at large.

Then, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, when the United States became unified as a more coherent liberal nation and amassed the necessary wealth and influence to have an impact on the wider world, there was no apparent need to do so. From the mid-1800s on, western Europe, especially France and the United Kingdom, became increasingly liberal, and the combination of British naval hegemony and the relatively stable balance of power on the continent provided a liberal political and economic peace from which Americans benefited more than any other people. Yet they bore none of the costs or responsibilities of preserving this order. It was an idyllic existence, and although some "internationalists" believed that with growing power should come growing responsibility, most Americans preferred to remain free riders in someone else's liberal order. Long before modern international relations theory entered the discussion, a view of the national interest as defense of the homeland made sense for a people who wanted and needed nothing more than to be left alone.

Everything changed when the British-led liberal order began to collapse in the early twentieth century. The outbreak of World War I in August 1914 revealed a dramatic shift in the global distribution of power. The United Kingdom could no longer sustain its naval hegemony against the rising power of Japan and the United States, along with its traditional imperial rivals, France and Russia. The balance of power in Europe collapsed with the rise of a unified Germany, and by the end of 1915, it became clear that not even the combined power of France, Russia, and the United Kingdom would be sufficient to

defeat the German industrial and military machine. A balance of global power that had favored liberalism was shifting toward antiliberal forces.

The result was that the liberal world that Americans had enjoyed virtually without cost would be overrun unless the United States intervened to shift the balance of power back in favor of liberalism. It suddenly fell to the United States to defend the liberal world order that the United Kingdom could no longer sustain. And it fell to President Woodrow Wilson, who, after struggling to stay out of the war and remain neutral in traditional fashion, finally concluded that the United States had no choice but to enter the war or see liberalism in Europe crushed. American aloofness from the world was no longer “feasible” or “desirable” when world peace was at stake and when democracies were threatened by “autocratic governments backed by organized force,” he said in his war declaration to Congress in 1917. Americans agreed and supported the war to “make the world safe for democracy,” by which Wilson did not mean spreading democracy everywhere but meant defending liberalism where it already existed.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

Americans have ever since struggled to reconcile these contradictory interpretations of their interests—one focused on security of the homeland and one focused on defense of the liberal world beyond the United States’ shores. The first conforms to Americans’ preference to be left alone and avoid the costs, responsibilities, and moral burdens of exercising power abroad. The second reflects their anxieties as a liberal people about becoming a “lone island” in a sea of militarist dictatorships. The oscillation between these two perspectives has produced the recurring whiplash in U.S. foreign policy over the past century.

Which is more right, more moral? Which is the better description of the world, the better guide to American policy? Realists and most international theorists have consistently attacked the more expansive definition of U.S. interests as lacking in restraint and therefore likely both to exceed American capacities and to risk a horrific conflict with nuclear-armed great powers. These fears have never yet proved justified—Americans’ aggressive prosecution of the Cold War did not lead to nuclear war with the Soviet Union, and even the wars in Vietnam and Iraq did not fatally undermine American power. But the core of the realist critique, ironically, has always been moral rather than practical.

In the 1920s and 1930s, critics of the broader definition of interests focused not only on the costs to the United States in terms of lives and treasure but also on what they regarded as the hegemonism and imperialism inherent in the project. What gave

Americans the right to insist on the security of the liberal world abroad if their own security was not threatened? It was an imposition of American preferences, by force. However objectionable the actions of Germany and Japan might have seemed to the liberal powers, they, and Benito Mussolini's Italy, were trying to change an Anglo-American world order that had left them as "have not" nations. The settlement reached at Versailles after World War I and the international treaties negotiated by the United States in East Asia denied Germany and Japan the empires and even the spheres of influence that the victorious powers got to enjoy. Americans and other liberals may have viewed German and Japanese aggression as immoral and destructive of "world order," but it was, after all, a system that had been imposed on them by superior power. How else were they to change it except by wielding power of their own?

As the British realist thinker E. H. Carr argued in the late 1930s, if dissatisfied powers such as Germany were bent on changing a system that disadvantaged them, then "the responsibility for seeing that these changes take place . . . in an orderly way" rested on the upholders of the existing order. The growing power of the dissatisfied nations should be accommodated, not resisted. And that meant the sovereignty and independence of some small countries had to be sacrificed. The growth of German power, Carr argued, made it "inevitable that Czechoslovakia should lose part of its territory and eventually its independence." George Kennan, then serving as a senior U.S. diplomat in Prague, agreed that Czechoslovakia was "after all, a central European state" and that its "fortunes must in the long run lie with—and not against—the dominant forces in this area." The anti-interventionists warned that "German imperialism" was simply being replaced by "Anglo-American imperialism."

Critics of American support for Ukraine have made the same arguments. Obama frequently emphasized that Ukraine was more important to Russia than to the United States, and the same could certainly be said of Taiwan and China. Critics on the left and the right have accused the United States of engaging in imperialism for refusing to rule out Ukraine's possible future accession to NATO and encouraging Ukrainians in their desire to join the liberal world.

There is much truth in these charges. Whether or not U.S. actions deserve to be called "imperialism," during World War I and then in the eight decades from World War II until today, the United States has used its power and influence to defend and support the hegemony of liberalism. The defense of Ukraine is a defense of the liberal hegemony. When Republican Senator Mitch McConnell and others say that the United States has a vital interest in Ukraine, they do not mean that the United States will be directly threatened if Ukraine falls. They mean that the liberal world order will be threatened if Ukraine falls.

THE RULEMAKER

Americans are fixated on the supposed moral distinction between “wars of necessity” and “wars of choice.” In their rendering of their own history, Americans remember the country being attacked on December 7, 1941, and Hitler’s declaration of war four days later but forget the American policies that led the Japanese to attack Pearl Harbor and led Hitler to declare war. In the Cold War confrontation with the Soviet Union, Americans could see the communists’ aggression and their country’s attempts to defend the “free world,” but they did not recognize that their government’s insistence on stopping communism everywhere was a form of hegemonism. Equating the defense of the “free world” with defense of their own security, Americans regarded every action they took as an act of necessity.

Only when wars have gone badly, as in Vietnam and Iraq, or ended unsatisfactorily, as in World War I, have Americans decided, retrospectively, that those wars were not necessary, that American security was not directly at risk. They forget the way the world looked to them when they first supported those wars—72 percent of Americans polled in March 2003 agreed with the decision to go to war in Iraq. They forget the fears and sense of insecurity they felt at the time and decide that they were led astray by some nefarious conspiracy.

The irony of both the war in Afghanistan and the war in Iraq is that although in later years they were depicted as plots to promote democracy and therefore as prime examples of the dangers of the more expansive definition of U.S. interests, Americans at the time were not thinking about the liberal world order at all. They were thinking only about security. In the post-9/11 environment of fear and danger, Americans believed that both Afghanistan and Iraq posed a direct threat to American security because their governments either harbored terrorists or had weapons of mass destruction that might have ended up in terrorists’ hands. Rightly or wrongly, that was why Americans initially supported what they would later deride as the “forever wars.” As with Vietnam, it was not until the fighting dragged on with no victory in sight that Americans decided that their perceived wars of necessity were in fact wars of choice.

But all of the United States’ wars have been wars of choice, the “good” wars and the “bad” wars, the wars won and the wars lost. Not one was necessary to defend the United States’ direct security; all in one way or another were about shaping the international environment. The Gulf War in 1990–91 and the interventions in the Balkans in the 1990s and in Libya in 2011 were all about managing and defending the liberal world and enforcing its rules.

American leaders often talk about defending the rules-based international order, but Americans do not acknowledge the hegemonism inherent in such a policy. They do not realize that, as Reinhold Niebuhr once observed, the rules themselves are a form of hegemony. They are not neutral but are designed to sustain the international status quo, which for eight decades has been dominated by the American-backed liberal world. The rules-based order is an adjunct to that hegemony. If dissatisfied great powers such as Russia and China abided by these rules for as long as they did, it was not because they were converts to liberalism or because they were content with the world as it was or had inherent respect for the rules. It was because the United States and its allies wielded superior power on behalf of their vision of a desirable world order, and the dissatisfied powers had no safe choice other than acquiescence.

REALITY SETS IN

The long period of great-power peace that followed the Cold War presented a misleadingly comforting picture of the world. In times of peace, the world can appear as international theorists describe it. The leaders of China and Russia can be dealt with diplomatically at conferences of equals, enlisted in sustaining a peaceful balance of power, because, according to the reigning theory of interests, the goals of other great powers cannot be fundamentally different from the United States' goals. All seek to maximize their security and preserve their sovereignty. All accept the rules of the imagined international order. All spurn ideology as a guide to policy.

The presumption behind all these arguments is that however objectionable Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping might be as rulers, as state actors they can be expected to behave as all leaders have always allegedly behaved. They have legitimate grievances about the way the post-Cold War peace was settled by the United States and its allies, just as Germany and Japan had legitimate grievances about the postwar settlement in 1919. The further presumption is that a reasonable effort to accommodate their legitimate grievances would lead to a more stable peace, just as the accommodation of France after Napoleon helped preserve the peace of the early nineteenth century. In this view, the alternative to the American-backed liberal hegemony is not war, autocracy, and chaos but a more civilized and equitable peace.

Americans have often convinced themselves that other states will follow their preferred rules voluntarily—in the 1920s, when Americans hailed the Kellogg-Briand Pact “outlawing” war; in the immediate aftermath of World War II, when many Americans hoped that the United Nations would take over the burden of preserving the peace; and again in the decades after the Cold War, when the world was presumed to be moving

ineluctably toward both peaceful cooperation and the triumph of liberalism. The added benefit, perhaps even the motive, for such beliefs was that if they were true, the United States could cease playing the role of the world's liberal enforcer and be relieved of all the material and moral costs that entailed.

Yet this comforting picture of the world has periodically been exploded by the brutal realities of international existence. Putin was treated as a crafty statesman, a realist, seeking only to repair the injustice done to Russia by the post-Cold War settlement and with some reasonable arguments on his side—until he launched the invasion of Ukraine, which proved not only his willingness to use force against a weaker neighbor but, in the course of the war, to use all the methods at his disposal to wreak destruction on Ukraine's civilian population without the slightest scruple. As in the late 1930s, events have forced Americans to see the world for what it is, and it is not the neat and rational place that the theorists have posited. None of the great powers behave as the realists suggest, guided by rational judgments about maximizing security. Like great powers in the past, they act out of beliefs and passions, angers and resentments. There are no separate "state" interests, only the interests and beliefs of the people who inhabit and rule states.

Consider China. Beijing's evident willingness to risk war for Taiwan makes little sense in terms of security. No reasoned assessment of the international situation should cause Beijing's leaders to conclude that Taiwan's independence would pose any threat of attack on the mainland. Far from maximizing Chinese security, Beijing's policies toward Taiwan increase the possibility of a catastrophic conflict with the United States. Were China to declare tomorrow that it no longer demanded unification with Taiwan, the Taiwanese and their American backers would cease trying to arm the island to the teeth. Taiwan might even disarm considerably, just as Canada remains disarmed along its border with the United States. But such straightforward material and security considerations are not the driving force behind Chinese policies. Matters of pride, honor, and nationalism, along with the justifiable paranoia of an autocracy trying to maintain power in an age of liberal hegemony—these are the engines of Chinese policies on Taiwan and on many other issues.

Few nations have benefited more than China from the U.S.-backed international order, which has provided markets for Chinese goods, as well as the financing and the information that have allowed the Chinese to recover from the weakness and poverty of the last century. Modern China has enjoyed remarkable security during the past few decades, which was why, until a couple of decades ago, China spent little on defense. Yet this is the world China aims to upend.

Similarly, Putin's serial invasions of neighboring states have not been driven by a desire to maximize Russia's security. Russia never enjoyed greater security on its western frontier than during the three decades after the end of the Cold War. Russia was invaded from the west three times in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, once by France and twice by Germany, and it had to prepare for the possibility of a western invasion throughout the Cold War. But at no time since the fall of the Berlin Wall has anyone in Moscow had reason to believe that Russia faced the possibility of attack by the West.

That the nations of eastern Europe wished to seek the security and prosperity of membership in the West after the Cold War may have been a blow to Moscow's pride and a sign of Russia's post-Cold War weakness. But it did not increase the risk to Russian security. Putin opposed the expansion of NATO not because he feared an attack on Russia but because that expansion would make it increasingly difficult for him to restore Russian control in eastern Europe. Today, as in the past, the United States is an obstacle to Russian and Chinese hegemony. It is not a threat to Russia's and China's existence.

Far from maximizing Russian security, Putin has damaged it—and this would have been so even if his invasion had succeeded as planned. He has done so not for reasons having to do with security or economics or any material gains but to overcome the humiliation of lost greatness, to satisfy his sense of his place in Russian history, and perhaps to defend a certain set of beliefs. Putin despises liberalism much as Stalin and Alexander I and most autocrats throughout history despised it—as a pitiful, weak, even sick ideology devoted to nothing but the petty pleasures of the individual when it is the glory of the state and the nation that should have the people's devotion and for which they should sacrifice.

BREAKING THE CYCLE

That most Americans should regard such actors as threatening to liberalism is a sensible reading of the situation, just as it was sensible to be wary of Hitler even before he had committed any act of aggression or begun the extermination of the Jews. When great powers with a record of hostility to liberalism use armed force to achieve their aims, Americans have generally roused themselves from their inertia, abandoned their narrow definitions of interest, and adopted this broader view of what is worth their sacrifice.

This is a truer realism. Instead of treating the world as made up of impersonal states operating according to their own logic, it understands basic human motivations. It understands that every nation has a unique set of interests peculiar to its history, its geography, its experiences, and its beliefs. Nor are all interests permanent. Americans did not have the same interests in 1822 that they have two centuries later. And the day

must come when the United States can no longer contain the challengers to the liberal world order. Technology may eventually make oceans and distances irrelevant. Even the United States itself could change and cease being a liberal nation.

But that day has not yet arrived. Despite frequent assertions to the contrary, the circumstances that made the United States the determining factor in world affairs a century ago persist. Just as two world wars and the Cold War confirmed that would-be autocratic hegemons could not achieve their ambitions as long as the United States was a player, so Putin has discovered the difficulty of accomplishing his goals as long as his weaker neighbors can look for virtually unlimited support from the United States and its allies. There may be reason to hope that Xi also feels the time is not right to challenge the liberal order directly and militarily.

The bigger question, however, has to do with what Americans want. Today, they have been roused again to defend the liberal world. It would be better if they had been roused earlier. Putin spent years probing to see what the Americans would tolerate, first in Georgia in 2008, then in Crimea in 2014, all the while building up his military capacity (not well, as it turns out). The cautious American reaction to both military operations, as well as to Russian military actions in Syria, convinced him to press forward. Are we better off today for not having taken the risks then?

“Know thyself” was the advice of the ancient philosophers. Some critics complain that Americans have not seriously debated and discussed their policies toward either Ukraine or Taiwan, that panic and outrage have drowned out dissenting voices. The critics are right. Americans should have a frank and open debate about what role they want the United States to play in the world.

The first step, however, is to recognize the stakes. The natural trajectory of history in the absence of American leadership has been perfectly apparent: it has not been toward a liberal peace, a stable balance of power, or the development of international laws and institutions. Instead, it leads to the spread of dictatorship and continual great-power conflict. That is where the world was heading in 1917 and 1941. Should the United States reduce its involvement in the world today, the consequences for Europe and Asia are not hard to predict. Great-power conflict and dictatorship have been the norm throughout human history, the liberal peace a brief aberration. Only American power can keep the natural forces of history at bay.

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