

The Pending Collapse of the ‘Rules-based International Order’ Is an Existential Threat to the United States

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For decades, America styled itself the ‘indispensable nation’ that led the world & it’s now seeking to sustain that role by emphasizing a new Cold War-style battle against ‘authoritarianism’. But it’s a dangerous fantasy.

It seems a week cannot go by without US Secretary of State Antony Blinken bringing up the specter of the ‘rules-based international order’ as an excuse for meddling in the affairs of another state or region.

The most recent crisis revolves around allegations that [China](#) has dispatched a fleet of more than 200 ships, part of a so-called ‘maritime militia’, into waters of the South China Sea claimed by the Philippines. China says that these vessels are simply fishing boats seeking shelter from a storm. The Philippines has responded by dispatching military ships and aircraft to investigate. Enter Antony Blinken, stage right:

“The United States stands with our ally, the Philippines, in the face of the PRC’s maritime militia amassing at Whitsun Reef,” Blinken [tweeted](#). “We will always stand by our allies and stand up for the rules-based international order.”

Blinken’s message came a mere 18 hours after he tweeted about his meeting in Brussels with NATO.

“Our alliances were created to defend shared values,” he [wrote](#). “Renewing our commitment requires reaffirming those values and the foundation of international relations we vow to protect: a free and open rules-based order.”

Our rules, our order

What this actually means, of course, is that the order is rules-based so long as it is the nation called America that sets these rules and is accepted as the world’s undisputed leader.

Blinken's fervent embrace of the 'rules-based international order' puts action behind the words set forth in the recently published 'Interim National Security Strategy Guidance', a White House [document](#) which outlines President Joe Biden's vision *"for how America will engage with the world."*

While the specific term 'rules-based international order' does not appear in the body of the document, the precepts it represents are spelled out in considerable detail, and conform with the five pillars of the *"liberal international order"* as set forth by the noted international relations scholars, [Daniel Duedney](#) and [G. John Ikenberry](#), in their ground-breaking [essay](#), 'The nature and sources of liberal international order', published by the Review of International Studies in 1999.

The origins of this *"liberal international order"* can be traced back to the end of the Second World War and the onset of a Cold War between Western liberal democracies, helmed by the United States, and the communist bloc nations, led by the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. The purpose of this order was simple – to maintain a balance of power between the US-led liberal democracies and their communist adversaries, and to maintain and sustain US hegemony over its liberal democratic allies. This was accomplished through five basic policy 'pillars': Security co-binding; the embrace of US hegemony; self-limitation on the part of US allies; the politicization of global economic institutions for the gain of liberal democracies; and Western *"civil identity."*

All five are emphasized in Biden's interim guidance, in which the president openly advocates for *"a stable and open international system."* It notes that *"the alliances, institutions, agreements, and norms underwriting the international order the United States helped to establish are being tested."*

The faltering empire's flaws and inequities

Biden also observed that the restoration of this international order *"rests on a core strategic proposition: The United States must renew its enduring advantages so that we can meet today's challenges from a position of strength. We will build back better our economic foundations; reclaim our place in international institutions; lift up our values at home and speak out to defend them around the world; modernize our military capabilities, while leading first with diplomacy; and revitalize America's unmatched network of alliances and partnerships."*

All five of Duedney's and Ikenberry's policy 'pillars' can be found embedded in these – and other – statements contained in the guidance.

There is a defensive tone to Biden's guidance, which notes that *"rapid change and mounting crisis"* have exposed *"flaws and inequities"* in the US-dominated international system which *"have caused many around the world – including many Americans – to question its continued relevance."*

Here Biden runs into the fundamental problem of trying to justify and sustain a model of economic-based global hegemony which was founded at a time when the existence of a Western liberal democratic *"order"* could be justified as a counter to the Soviet-led communist bloc. The Cold War ended in 1990. The 'international rules-based order' that was created at the behest of the US to prevail in this conflict continued, however. It seems that the US wasn't simply satisfied with preventing the spread of communism; its *raison d'être*

instead transitioned from being the leader of an alliance of liberal democracies, to being the global hegemon, using the very system devised to confront communism to instead install and sustain the US as the undisputed dominant power in the world.

This trend began in the immediate aftermath of the end of the Cold War, where the US had the opportunity to pass the baton of global leadership to the United Nations, an act that would have given legitimacy to the notion of an 'international order'.

This, however, proved a bridge too far for the neo-liberal tendencies of the administration of President Bill Clinton, who continued the Cold War-era practice of using the UN as a vehicle to promote US policy prerogatives at the expense of the international 'order'. Clinton's Secretary of State Madeleine Albright helped coin the term "*indispensable nation*" when defining America's post-Cold War role in the world (it is notable that Blinken recently praised Albright in a [tweet](#), noting that "*her tenacity & effectiveness left the US stronger & more respected globally,*" and adding "*she's a role model for me & so many of our diplomats.*")

The arrogance and hubris contained in any notion of a single nation being "*indispensable*" to the global order is mind-boggling and is reflective of a disconnect with both reality and history on the part of those embracing it.

The myth of indispensability

The unsustainability of the premise of American 'indispensability' was demonstrated by both the events of September 11, 2001, and the inability of the US to deal with its aftermath. Had the US embraced and acted on President George H. W. Bush's notion of a "*new world order*" in the aftermath of the Cold War, it would have found itself as a vital world leader working in concert with a global community of nations to confront the scourge of Islamic fundamentalist-based terrorism. But this was not to be.

Instead, the 'indispensable nation' was exposed as a fraud, with many in the world recognizing the US not as a power worthy of emulation, but rather as the source of global angst. This [rejection](#) of America's self-anointed role as global savior extended to many Americans too, who were tired of the costs associated with serving as the world's police force.

Indeed, this exhaustion with global intervention, and the costs accrued, helped create the foundation of electoral support for Donald Trump's rejection of the "*rules-based international order*" in favor of a more distinct "*America first*" approach to global governance. What gave Trump's policy so much "*punch*" was the fact that not only did many American citizens reject the "*rules-based international order,*" but so did much of the rest of the world.

Repairing the damage done by four years of Trump has become the number one priority of the Biden administration. To do this, both Biden and Blinken recognize that they simply cannot return to the policy formulations that existed before Trump took office; that ship has sailed, and trying to sell the American people and the rest of the world on what many viewed as a failed policy construct (i.e., unilateral, uncontested American hegemony) was seen as an impossible task.

Instead, the Biden administration is seeking to reinvent the original premise of the 'rules-based international order' by substituting Russian and Chinese 'authoritarianism' in place of

Soviet-led communism as a threat which liberal democracies around the world willingly and enthusiastically rally around the US to confront.

“Authoritarianism is on the global march,” Biden’s guidance observed, “and we must join with like minded allies and partners to revitalize democracy the world over. We will work alongside fellow democracies across the globe to deter and defend against aggression from hostile adversaries. We will stand with our allies and partners to combat new threats aimed at our democracies” and which “undermine the rules and values at the heart of an open and stable international system.”

Biden concluded his essay in dramatic fashion. “This moment is an inflection point,” he noted. “We are in the midst of a fundamental debate about the future direction of our world. No nation is better positioned to navigate this future than America. Doing so requires us to embrace and reclaim our enduring advantages, and to approach the world from a position of confidence and strength. If we do this, working with our democratic partners, we will meet every challenge and outpace every challenger. Together, we can and will build back better.”

No longer the world’s undisputed No.1

While postulated as a statement of American strength, Biden’s concluding remarks actually project not only the inherent insecurity of the US today, but also its root causes. The fact that the US needs to “*reclaim our enduring advantages*” implies that we lost them, and illustrates that these so-called advantages are not nearly as enduring as Biden would like to think. “*Building back better*” is an admission of weakness, a recognition that the notion of an ‘indispensable nation’ is an artificial construct; most nations no longer accept America as the world leader.

The reality is that the US is one of the most powerful nations in the world. That position, however, is no longer uncontested; China has emerged as the equal of the US in many metrics used to measure global power and influence, and superior in some. Moreover, China operates effectively in a multi-polar global reality, recognizing that the era of the American singularity is over. Russia, India, Brazil, and the European collective all represent polar realities whose existence and influence exists independent of the US.

The US, however, cannot function in such a world. While there is a growing recognition among American politicians that the post-Cold War notion of the US being the sole-remaining superpower has run its course, the only alternative these politicians can offer is the attempt to return to a bi-polar world which has the US at the head of its liberal democratic ‘partners’, facing off against the forces of ‘authoritarianism’. This vision, however, is unrealistic, if for no other reason that the world no longer views Western liberal democracy as ‘good’, and authoritarianism as ‘evil’.

This reality is evident to much of the rest of the world. Why, then, would US policy makers embrace a formulation doomed to fail? The answer is simple – the US, as it exists today, needs the ‘rules-based international order’ to remain relevant. Relevant, as used here, means globally dominant.

US politicians who operate on the national level cannot get elected on platforms that reject the ‘indispensable’ role of the country, even if many Americans and most of the world have.

US economic dominance is in large part sustained by the very systems that underpin the 'rules-based international order' – the World Trade Organization and the World Bank. US geopolitical relevance is sustained by Cold War-era military alliances.

An unviable, unsustainable future

An American retreat from being the 'indispensable' power, and a corresponding embrace of a leadership role based upon a more collegial notion of shared authorities, would not mean the physical demise of the US – the nation would continue to exist as a sovereign entity. But it would mean an end to the psychological reality of America as we know it today – a quasi-imperial power whose relevance is founded on compelled global hegemony. This model is no longer viable. The fact that the Biden administration has chosen to define its administration through an ardent embrace of this failed system is proof positive that the survival of post-Cold War American is existentially connected to its ability to function as the world's 'indispensable nation'.

American exceptionalism is a narcotic that fuels the country's domestic politics more than global geo-political reality. The 'rules-based international order' that underpins this fantasy is unsustainable in the modern era and makes the collapse of the "exceptional" United States inevitable.

Watching the Biden administration throw its weight behind a US-dominated 'rules-based international order' is like watching the Titanic set sail; it is big, bold, and beautiful, and its fate pre-ordained.

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*Featured image: Tony Blinken At His Confirmation Hearing, Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Jan. 19, 2021. Screenshot.
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