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# U.S. Power and the Future of International Politics

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By: Gideon Rose

Human brains are hardwired to see things in patterns. This is true of our visual systems, which is why websites use images of streetlamps or crosswalks for the captcha tests that allow us to say—for now, at least— “I am not a robot." And it’s true of our cognitive structures more generally, which is why we naturally think about the world in terms of stories. Postmodernists make a good case that history is actually like a Jackson Pollock painting, a giant mess of endless dots and lines with lots of connections running every which way. But even if that were true, people would resist that conclusion and impose order on the chaos, as they do in Rorschach tests. We make sense of the world through the narratives we tell about it and are in turn guided by the narratives we tell.
Over the past generation, three different stories about world history have captured the collective American imagination: the march of liberalism, the clash of civilizations, and great power conflict. Each seemed to explain everything, until suddenly it didn’t.

In the 1990s, the conventional wisdom about international politics was the liberal story, featuring individuals and institutions. It's a story that Americans are familiar with. Underneath some cultural peculiarities, people are pretty much the same everywhere. They are basically rational and self-interested, although they can interpret that self-interest in more or less enlightened ways. What matters in history, therefore, are the contexts in which these rational, self-interested individuals find themselves. Political and economic structures either liberate human nature and allow it to be productive, or they frustrate it and channel it into negative impulses.

The liberal story of world politics is one about how changes in institutional structures over time take a common human nature and enable it to flourish or fester. In the liberal narrative of history, a particular set of institutions has evolved over time in the West to allow groups of people to live together peacefully, achieving the benefits of stability, order, and prosperity without the oppression of a powerful, centralized state. The system allows possibilities for growth and renewal, driven by the pulling and hauling of democratic politics and the invisible hand of free markets, both of which harness the self-interest of liberal individuals for collective benefit. The United States and its fellow liberal democracies, in this view, are both the result of a particular trajectory of historical development and are the avatars of a universal modern future in which free societies, free economies, and free political institutions aggregate and channel human preferences into ever more mutually beneficial outcomes at ever larger scales.

A generation ago, this story was more plausible than it might appear today. In fact, it seemed to be playing out steadily, both in the United States and the world at large. Free markets, free politics, and free societies appeared to reinforce each other, drawing ever larger parts of the planet together in an

ever-denser web of liberal institutions at multiple levels. According to many objective indicators of human well-being—from life expectancy, to poverty rates, to technological progress, to political development, to the decline of international conflict—history was progressing, and it seemed logical that the progress would be recognized, appreciated, and reinforced. The trends would continue as peaceful democracies cooperated with one another, globalized markets delivered more benefits, and ever more individuals fulfilled their human potential in ever greater ways.

But then the 9/11 attacks shattered American complacency. In the aftermath, the liberal story was replaced by a very different narrative, the civilization story. This view did not posit individuals and institutions as the drivers of history, but rather groups and culture. Humans are communal creatures, it argued, and what matters are the distinctive cultures of their communities, which drive them in different directions to different endpoints. The rise of a cosmopolitan liberal international order, from this perspective, was not a universal story but a Western civilization story, one that pitted an expanded and evolved modern Christendom that was now confronting a backward, alien Muslim world trapped in cultural dysfunction.

In the 1990s, Francis Fukuyama's "end of History" thesis on liberalism's triumph became conventional wisdom. In the 2000s, it was displaced by Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" response. Suicidal religious terrorism didn't fit well into the liberal model, except perhaps as an ugly atavism. The times seemed better suited to a cultural approach, one that not only explained the present danger but held out the prospect of eliminating it by culturally remodeling vast swathes of the globe. And so, a new story led to new policies, including preventive war and institutionalized torture.

As time ground on, however, the flaws and inadequacies of the civilization view became more apparent. The cultural remodeling failed, the Middle East receded in significance, and conflicts with Russia and China came to the fore. This led to the emergence of yet another story in the 2010s, featuring the resurgence of great power competition. John Mearsheimer replaced Fukuyama and Huntington as the theorist of the day, as traditional realism became the newest conventional wisdom. The realist story ignores both individuals and groups and institutions and culture. Instead, it features states and power. Realism sees not change in history, but continuity—states jockeying for dominance in the international system just like they always have, eternally competitive, eternally Machiavellian, eternally grasping for relative advantage.

Great power competition emerged as a contemporary policy paradigm during the Trump administration, which might not be all that surprising, but it has carried over into the Biden administration, undergirding a bleak view of possibilities for American foreign policy. The idea of Russia and China as potential liberal democracies now seems far-fetched, and anyone who holds it seems

naïve. The idea of them as rival cultural champions, meanwhile, seems a bit unhinged, like Putin's or Xi's own fulminations on the subject. But viewing Russia and China as traditional great power rivals challenging a declining American hegemon seems to make sense of today's papers, and the perspective has been widely adopted among both hawkish nationalists eager for confrontation and dovish restrainers eager to avoid it.

Still, the very fact that we have had three different conventional wisdoms within a generation, each gaining widespread support both among intellectuals, policymakers, and the public at large, should teach us humility. The latest take is unlikely to be the last word on things, any more than its predecessors. Instead of being confident that we finally know how the world works, in other words, we should be epistemologically modest and prepared to think differently yet again further down the road.

None of these three stories, moreover, is actually new. Each has a long history and intellectual tradition behind it. It's as if foreign policy is stuck in a theoretical Groundhog Day, doomed to replaying debates that have gone on for hundreds if not thousands of years. And in that sense, the three stories are all part of a fourth, larger story, about how people in the West have thought about progress in history more generally.

## From the Ancients to the Moderns

The vast majority of human history has been lived inside the Malthusian Trap, with economic growth too slow to overcome the pressures of population growth. Until the 18th century, therefore, the progress of humanity was extensive rather than intensive—gradually growing populations with an average standard of living barely improved since the Stone Age.

The classical world, economically stagnant and without much sustainable political progress, took a very realist view of history. It was captured well by the great Roman emperor and Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius, who says in his Meditations, "Look at the past, empire succeeding empire, and from that, extrapolate the future. No escape from the rhythm of events, which is why observing life for 40 years is as good as a thousand. Would you really see anything new?" This is the source material for the great power competition camp—in both the West and, interestingly, in China, where centuries of early multipolar warfare produced a homegrown realist strategic culture.

Eventually, however, religious thinkers came along and said that the future could be better. Compared to their pagan predecessors, Christians gave human life a second act, but located it off stage, in heaven. The Catholic Church argued that believers' conditions would improve, but only in the next life, not this one. For a thousand years, people in the West lived in a static, seamless web of authority, stretching

from the father in the household, to the feudal lord, to the king above that, to the pope above that, and to God in his heaven ruling above everything. The supposedly stable macrocosm in the celestial sphere was thought to be reflected in the stable microcosm down on earth.

This worldview was challenged during the Renaissance and the Reformation. Protestants offered a new vision. There would indeed be a future world where things might be better, but one's predestined fate there could be foretold by how one fared here. The result was frenzied activity, lots of self-discipline, work, and even political activism. The early Protestants were not quiescent; they were actively engaged and constantly in motion.

From there, it was only one step to the Enlightenment view of progress, which built on the scientific revolution and took God out of the picture entirely, seeing people's efforts as not just revealing a new world but creating it for themselves. The future that was destined to occur was now seen as being open and shaped by human actions, with no transcendental interference or direction required.

Instead of viewing human nature as irredeemably corrupted by the fall, Enlightenment thinkers saw it as essentially good, or as improvable, or at the least as capable of being aggregated into systems that could channel its defects into constructive outcomes. Greed could be converted into growth through the operation of markets. Ambition could be converted into stability through a separation of powers at home and a balance of power abroad. If the ancients' mindset created the pattern for contemporary realism, the Enlightenment mindset was the original version of contemporary liberalism—put people in proper institutional contexts, it says, and you'll eventually get progress.

This view took off in the 18th and 19th centuries, leading to the industrial revolution, modernization, and the gradual destruction of traditional modes of life everywhere. But human affairs did not arrive at the perfection that optimists such as Condorcet and Comte had predicted. The Enlightenment vision ended up producing technological progress, economic growth, and some political liberalization, but it proved largely unsatisfying emotionally, especially to the vast numbers of people whose lives were upended by the constant changes and creative destruction that liberalism unleashed.

So, the wheel of intellectual history turned yet again, and ideological challengers to liberalism emerged. Socialism saw nineteenth-century turmoil as a sign of a dynamic, dialectical process moving history forward through economic progress and class struggle. Nationalism found meaning in human communities and saw history moving forward through a different kind of struggle, among demographic and cultural units. This laid the foundation for today's civilizational perspective, especially once nationalism was married to social Darwinism, empires, and scientific racism.

During the first half of the twentieth century, offshoots of these movements evolved into the modern secular religions of communism and fascism, filling the psychological void created by the demise of the traditional religions the Enlightenment had undermined. They ended up clashing with liberal democracy in the Second World War, a globe-spanning cataclysm that destroyed the pretensions to progress of all the modern ideologies together.

In 1755, an earthquake in Lisbon killed hundreds of innocent people, including many small children. Philosophes such as Voltaire used it as an example to mock how anybody could think that this was the best of all possible worlds, with some benign deity ruling over it. Two centuries later, the death camps, the gulag, and the bomb put paid to the notion that secular human management could do much better. By the mid twentieth century, therefore, after decades of war and economic crises, what emerged was a tentative victory of the mixed economy and welfare-state liberalism, along with an existentialist, postmodern view that nothing matters, there was no overarching story, no progress, just various kinds of chaos.

Had Fukuyama published his famous article and his book in the 1970s, he would have been laughed out of town, because it seemed that humans didn't know how to run anything. The world appeared stuck rather than progressing steadily toward some better stage. But then history lurched forward. The stagflation of the 1970s gave way to the growth of the 1980s and the rise of the new economy in the 1990s. The United States got stronger, the Soviet Union collapsed, and the Cold War ended peacefully, with Western victory.

Now the liberal story of free markets and free politics and free societies joining together in an integrated whole seemed to be working out, just like the philosophes had hoped. By the Clinton presidency, the United States was stronger than ever and the world seemed to be moving from contestation to cooperation, from grumbling to growth. The liberal Western order got a new lease on life and extended itself ever more widely around the world. And then, of course, in the twenty-first century, the wheel turned yet again.

Amazingly, for all the endless debates, none of the grand narratives have been wholly confirmed or discredited. Walk around any decent sized city in America today and you'll be able to find to find Stoics, Catholics, Protestants, liberals, socialists, nationalists, postmodernists, and more, all still believing their preferred interpretation of the world is bound to play out eventually. History has rendered a frustratingly Scottish verdict on all of their cases: unproven.

## The Wisdom of Hedging

So where does all this leave us when it comes to the practicalities of American grand strategy today? With two challenges, one intellectual and the other operational.

Foreign policy inevitably rests on some sort of broad view about how the world works,

some underlying theory of international relations. To give policy any kind of intellectual coherence, to make it something more than just personal whim or pure domestic politics, you have to fit it into a theoretical picture of the world and its history. But what does one do if there is no good reason to think any of the theories captures all of reality, all of the time?

After all, the world today tells more than one story. Every major power center has big problems of one kind or another, from political turmoil to economic slowdown to strategic incompetence to uncertain succession. There are collective challenges such as pandemics and climate change to worry about, individual geopolitical ones, and mixed-motive games such as trade that benefit everybody but some more than others. America has declined while China has risen, but both have a lot farther to go. Exposure to markets boosts growth but increases vulnerability. Democracies are struggling, but so are autocracies.

Facing this complex, multi-faceted reality, the most logical theoretical approach is not to gamble but to hedge. Rather than choosing just one theory and hoping it fits all situations, it seems more sensible to find a way to draw on many of them—to opt for syncretism, recognizing that the key variables in each theory matter, but none to the exclusion of everything else.

Sometimes the peculiarities of individual leaders matter a lot, for example. Some people in power are so distinctive that they take their countries down paths others would have avoided. But at other times, leaders are generic, responding to the cues from their environment in relatively obvious and predictable ways. Meanwhile, sometimes political and economic institutions matter, but even then, they are never completely determinative. Sometimes culture matters. There do seem to be persistent patterns in various places that seem affected by certain kinds of cultural attributes—but there are obviously vastly more exceptions than there are regularities.

And much of the time, power obviously matters a lot. Yet there are different kinds of power, and no one particular form is dominant in all circumstances. Nor does self-interest always manifest itself in the ways realism claims it will. There have been changes in the international system that weren't supposed to happen, for example, such as the European Union. In a realist world, groups simply do not pool their sovereignty to come together in a collective unit.

Foreign policy decision-makers, accordingly, should accept that lots of variables can matter and look carefully at the situation facing them to see which are important. The proper kind of “ist” to be, in other words, is a pragmatist and an empiricist, developing a plausible multilayered story explaining the reality one sees, trading off a bit of intellectual parsimony for greater analytical fit.

This leads directly to the operational challenge, however: How can such a loose, fuzzy, indeterminate approach to the world

be turned into practice? What guidance for policymakers can pragmatism provide?

One recommendation is to be open to others' opinions since their views may contain useful information. An old adage says that if three people tell you you're drunk, you should go and lie down. It's a sensible approach for countries as well as people because it's easy for policymakers to fall prey to groupthink, emotions, and cognitive biases. Others may see things more clearly, and so listening to their views can be helpful. Take Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom—three close, long-standing, Anglosphere allies. If the United States wants to do something in foreign policy and it can't convince those three to come onboard, there's almost certainly a good reason why, and the policy should be reconsidered. Not because Ottawa, Canberra, and London deserve a veto over Washington, or because multilateralism is inherently better than unilateralism, but because when three good friends tell you you're drunk, you should listen.

Another recommendation is to hedge practically as well as intellectually, creating a diversified portfolio of power rather than a narrowly concentrated one. Because the world is complex and international challenges come in many varieties, it makes sense to accumulate power of many different kinds—hard & soft, long term & short term, military & economic, and diplomatic & reputational.

Short-term hard power is simple: the ability, say, to send Ukraine whatever military and economic aid it needs to defeat Russia. And to give Taiwan enough to deter China. And to maintain a powerful military ourselves that could win a major conflict if we ever had to fight one. This is clearly an important and valuable kind of power to have, and it brings a country many advantages. It comes from having a strong economic base, the ability and will to convert some of that into military tools, and the will and skill to deploy those tools effectively as necessary.

Long-term hard power involves the potential to produce impressive military forces not now but in the future. This is a function of economic growth and dynamism, the ability to sponsor and take advantage of technological progress, and to mobilize the work potential of a country's population at large.

Soft power works by attraction rather than coercion and rests on qualities that make other countries want to cooperate. In the short term, a reputation for honesty, decency, credibility, and success in one's endeavors can act as multipliers for hard power, improving one's position by making it easier to gain allies and supporters.

Long-term soft power, finally, rests on the attractiveness of a country's society and its reputation for responsible and effective international leadership on behalf of the system at large. This authority comes from acting in such a way that other countries trust you, want to coordinate their behavior with you, and feel like they benefit from doing so.

It makes sense to amass all these forms of power simultaneously, to mix hard with soft and short-term with long-term. And skeptics who question whether that can actually be done need only look to the war in Ukraine.

## Ukraine and American Power

The material support supplied to Ukraine is a clear demonstration of short-term, Western, hard power and is helping Kyiv achieve impressive results on the battlefield. But there is not enough materiel available to defend Ukraine, Taiwan, and NATO comfortably at the same time because in recent decades the West allowed its defense industrial base to wither. To remedy this problem, Washington needs to reform its sclerotic institutions and inefficient procurement practices and allocate sufficient long-term funds to restore multiple production lines of multiple kinds of military equipment.

As for long-term hard power, the U.S. economy has shown amazing resilience in recent decades, continuing to outpace other industrialized competitors and extend its lead. But maintaining economic vigor, innovation, and productive capacity is a constant challenge and will require continued investment, self-discipline, and sensible economic management, none of which can be taken for granted.

The first two decades of the twenty-first century were a disaster for American soft power, as wars throughout the greater Middle East made the country seem not just a brutal bully but also an incompetent and ineffective one. But Ukraine presents a different narrative, one in which Washington can restore its credulity (by providing accurate intelligence about Russian intentions and the war's progress), regain its honor (by helping to prevent war crimes rather than committing them), and accumulate power and respect (by strangling the Russian economy while its partner crushes the Russian military).

Support for Ukraine is also providing a recipe for the maintenance of soft power over the long term. The greatest problem with an "America First" mindset is that it fosters comparable self-interested attitudes in other countries and breaks down the trust, relationships, and solidarity on which rest American alliances and the entire structure of post-World War II global order. If Washington is purely self-dealing, others will be too, and the result will be a self-fulfilling prophecy—a return to the realist world not out of necessity but out of choice. In Ukraine, however, the United States is acting differently. It is not unilaterally imposing its will on other countries but leading a broad coalition to restore international order. It is not acting as the world's policeman or an international predator but as the arsenal of democracy.

In fact, support for Ukraine stands out as a model for what post-hegemonic U.S. leadership should like, a pragmatic response to contemporary international reality. The United States tried to avoid the war, then helped Ukraine defend itself when

attacked. It has anchored a strong Western response, but worked through consensus rather than command, on behalf of collective goals shared by the team. If carried to a successful conclusion, with Russian aggression repulsed, a free Ukraine stabilized and secured, and other conflicts avoided, it has the potential to change conventional wisdom yet again, supporting a narrative about the liberal order's unexpected revival. All one can say is, stranger things have happened.

## Gideon Rose

Gideon Rose is the Mary and David Boies distinguished fellow in U.S. foreign policy at the Council on Foreign Relations. Previously, he was Editor of Foreign Affairs from 2010 to 2021, prior to which he was Managing Editor from 2000 to 2010. He has also served as Associate Director for Near East and South Asian Affairs on the staff of the National Security Council and Deputy Director of National Security Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, and has taught American foreign policy at Princeton and Columbia. He is the author of How Wars End (Simon & Schuster, October 2010).

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