

The Autonomy Rule

The end of Western dominance means a new foreign policy principle is needed to advance international order.

In August 1941, Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill held a series of secret meetings on the *USS Augusta* and the *HMS Prince of Wales*, both of which were anchored in a secure Newfoundland bay. Although the United States had not yet entered World War II, Roosevelt and Churchill drew up a blueprint for the post-war order. The Atlantic Charter that they crafted arguably marked the birth of the West—not only did the Atlantic democracies prevail in World War II, but the West, under American leadership, went on to dominate global politics for the next seven decades, capitalizing on its primacy to put in place an international order anchored by liberal democracy and open markets.

The era that opened with the promulgation of the Atlantic Charter may

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well be drawing to a close. The West is steadily losing its sway. Shifts in the international balance of power; the global economic crisis; the growing assertiveness of China, Russia, and other non-democratic powers; the strength of political Islam—these developments call into question the durability of the international order erected during America’s watch. As the National Intelligence Council recently concluded, “although the United States is likely to remain the single most powerful actor, the United States’ relative strength—even in the military realm—will decline and U.S. leverage will become more constrained . . . The U.S. will find itself as one of a number of important actors on the world stage.”

Many American strategists recognize the inevitability of a more level global playing field, but they have arrived at an illusory response: that the United States and its democratic allies should dedicate the twilight hours of their primacy to universalizing the Western order. According to G. John Ikenberry, a political scientist at Princeton University, “The United States’ global position may be weakening, but the international system the United States leads can remain the dominant order of the twenty-first century.” The West should “sink the roots of this order as deeply as possible” to ensure that the world continues to play by its rules even as its material preponderance wanes. Such confidence in the universality of the Western order is, however, based on wishful thinking about the likely trajectory of ascending powers, which throughout history have sought to adjust the prevailing order in ways that favor their own interests. Presuming that rising states will readily take their seats at the West’s table is unrealistic and even dangerous, promising to alienate emerging powers that will be pivotal to global stability in the years ahead.

Instead, the West will have to make room for the competing visions of rising powers and prepare for an international system in which its principles no longer serve as the primary anchor. Sinking the roots of the West, founding a “league of democracies,” and turning NATO into a global alliance of democratic states would be admirable visions in a politically homogeneous world. But the Western model does not command widespread acceptance. If the next international system is to be characterized by norm-governed order rather than competitive anarchy, it will have to be based on great-power consensus and toleration of political diversity rather than Western primacy and the single-minded pursuit of universal democracy.

To that end, the United States should take the lead in fashioning a more diverse and inclusive global order. Call it the “Autonomy Rule”: the terms of the next order should be negotiated among all states, be they democratic or not, that provide responsible governance and broadly promote the autonomy and

welfare of their citizens. The West will have to give as much as it gets in shaping the world that comes next.

This approach does not constitute acquiescence to illiberalism, but rather a more progressive understanding of America's liberal tradition. Just as it does at home, the United States should welcome diversity abroad, accepting that liberal democracy must compete respectfully in the marketplace of ideas with other types of regimes. Indeed, toleration of reasonably just alternative political systems will promote U.S. interests far more effectively than the hubris of neoconservatism or the narrow idealism of the current liberal consensus. Respect for responsible governments, toleration of political and cultural diversity, balance between global governance and devolution to regional authorities, and a more modest brand of globalization—these are the principles around which the next order is most likely to take shape.

The Inevitability of Political Diversity

The Princeton Project on National Security envisages a world of “liberty under law” in which the spread of democracy and open markets combines with the reform of international institutions to globalize the Western order. This vision is an attractive one. And it may well be that China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and other influential non-democracies will follow the West's model of development and sign up to its notion of international order. As their middle classes grow in size and wealth, their material affluence could well prompt them to demand a greater political voice. But even if this is the case, the transition to liberal democracy will be a gradual one. For now, these countries are succeeding in consolidating capable authoritarian systems which, while not democratic, do enjoy considerable popular support. A poll conducted last year, for example, revealed that over 80 percent of China's citizens are content with their county's direction.

According to both neoconservative and liberal proponents of a league of democracies—such as Robert Kagan and Ivo Daalder—autocracies should be effectively sidelined until they embrace democracy and take their place in the current international order. But the global distribution of power is changing far more quickly than the nature of governance in rising non-democracies. Economic, demographic, and military trends favor ascending authoritarian states, and these trends provide their leaders few incentives to gamble on political liberalization. The global financial crisis notwithstanding, growth rates in China should outpace those of mature democracies for years to come. And despite the recent drop in oil prices, Russia, the Persian Gulf sheikdoms, Iran, and other states rich in oil and gas reserves will continue to use their energy revenues to

strengthen their domestic control and underwrite their challenge to the West's vision of international order.

As rising states seek influence commensurate with their wealth and power, they will recast, rather than embrace, the Western order. Maintaining a consensus on the terms of order is difficult enough among great powers that share a commitment to democracy at home. Manmohan Singh, Prime Minister of a democratic India, recently called for “new global ‘rules of the game’” and the “reform and revitalization” of international institutions. Discord exists even within the West; the United States and many of its European allies have of late parted ways over the role of international institutions, issues of international justice, and the rules determining when the use of force is necessary and legitimate. Such differences will be muted, but by no means eliminated, by new leadership in Washington. Divergent approaches to the conduct of statecraft tend to be even more pronounced among great powers that part company on matters of domestic governance. Washington and Moscow have locked horns of late over a long list of issues, including the enlargement of NATO, missile defense, the independence of Kosovo, and the conflict in Georgia. These differences stem not just from narrow conflicts of interest, but from contrasting conceptions of sovereignty, security, and other institutions of order.

Political diversity among the world's major players does not mean that a stable international order will prove unattainable. But it does mean that if a stable order is to emerge, its terms will have to be the product of consensus, not Western fiat. As Henry Kissinger cautions, “America will have to learn that world order depends on a structure that participants support because they helped bring it about.” Policymakers in Washington will have to rethink the foundations of U.S. statecraft and generate principles that can ground a more diverse, tolerant, and sustainable order.

States in Good Standing: The Autonomy Rule

The starting point for formulating the foundational principles of the next order is to select appropriate criteria for determining which are those states in good standing—and thus stakeholders in the new order. Membership in the “community of nations” should require that a state in good standing seek to improve the lives of its citizens in a manner consistent with their preferences, and in so doing, promote the autonomy of those citizens to pursue their aspirations. In a liberal polity, the state allows its citizens to pursue their aspirations individually and privately. However, other types of responsible polities put less emphasis on individual liberties and instead promote the welfare of their citizens through more collective and paternalistic means. The

Autonomy Rule acknowledges that health, prosperity, security, and dignity represent the universal desires of all peoples, but it simultaneously recognizes that liberal democracy does not represent the only vehicle for furthering these objectives.

The idea that government should be dedicated to improving the lives of its citizens is hardly foreign to the American experiment. Indeed, the Founding Fathers made clear that one of the defining purposes of union was to enable the state to enhance the welfare of its citizens. The American solution to attaining these ends was the compound republic. By endowing federal institutions with the power to govern while also limiting their authority through checks and balances, the citizenry could be protected against threats from without and from tyranny within. The compound republic would provide for the security and material needs of its citizens while leaving the states considerable discretion over social policy and the individual broad latitude for privacy and personal aspiration.

Even within the West, however, there is disagreement about how best to construe this liberal tradition. Classical liberals, such as Friedrich Hayek, maintain that autonomy is best ensured by freedom from government action. This school of thought manifests itself in a strong libertarian tradition, which holds that minimal government most effectively allows citizens to determine their own destiny. In contrast, left-leaning liberals like Karl Polanyi and Amartya Sen recognize that deprivation in the material capabilities of people represents a major constraint on autonomy. Sen, for example, sees education, social welfare, and other government-sponsored programs as the best way to encourage autonomy; poverty represents a form of un-freedom that is at least as oppressive as tyranny. In short, there is no single political formula for promoting human autonomy.

Clearing the way for a more inclusive global order entails recognizing that America's brand of liberal democracy does not exhaust the modes of governance that satisfy the Autonomy Rule. Just as there is no universal form of democracy, there is no universal form of responsible government. Peoples with communitarian political cultures or a past of economic deprivation may prefer social democracy to a laissez-faire economy that risks again exposing them to instability, inequality, and poverty. A deeply religious society may view a separated church and state as alien, and deem secular education by itself insufficient to instill in children the values that community holds dear. A patrimonial culture may privilege clan or familial ties over individual rights.

Put simply, the requirements of human autonomy vary for different peoples, and the threats to autonomy vary by circumstance. In some cases, personal

autonomy requires negative protection—for example, against coercion—while in others it requires positive public effort—against privation, for instance. To acknowledge that autonomy takes different forms in different societies is to respect diversity; to push a certain form of government on other societies would be to impose a type of un-freedom. All societies have winners and losers, and minority populations often fare less well than the majority. But as long as a government acts to promote the general welfare of its citizens in a way broadly commensurate with their aspirations, respecting the Autonomy Rule means treating that country as a member of international society in good standing.

Of course, any country that perpetrates or tolerates genocide, enables or allows the systematic persecution and physical abuse of minorities, or exposes its citizens to widespread privation and disease will fall well short of meeting the Autonomy Rule. But beyond such obvious prohibitions, societies should have considerable latitude in how they organize their institutions of government. Implementation of the Autonomy Rule admittedly means including some states that, though they govern responsibly, do not safeguard the full political rights of all their citizens. However, such a rights-based approach to governance is unique to liberal democracies. Countries such as Singapore, China, and Russia maintain that forgoing full individual rights allows for alternative means of national progress and enhances personal welfare for the greatest number of their citizens. To treat these countries as states in good standing is not to condone such infringements on individual rights. It is instead to acknowledge the reality of political diversity and to recognize that no country or system has a monopoly on providing good governance.

The Autonomy Rule applies to foreign as well as domestic affairs: States in good standing are expected to honor not only the autonomy of their own citizens but also, through their statecraft, the citizens of other countries. Respect for the political decisions of foreign citizens is part of this requirement, but so is prohibition of policies that threaten the security and well-being of other states and their populations. Accordingly, countries that commit aggression or engage in coercive policies that are dangerously destabilizing should not be considered in good standing and should be denied the rights that accrue to responsible states.

The Autonomy Rule stipulates that a state is in good standing when it seeks to improve the lives of its citizens in a manner consistent with their preferences.

Employing these minimal and consistent standards for inclusion would not only increase the number of stakeholders in the international system, but also allow for a clear delineation of those states that do not deserve the rights of good standing. Washington would be able to take a resolute and principled stand against the few remaining predatory regimes—such as Sudan, North Korea, Myanmar, and Zimbabwe—that evince no apparent concern for the welfare of their citizens and expose them to brutality, famine, illiteracy, and systematic repression. The United States would also be able to isolate any state or non-state actor whose breach of international norms endangers regional or global security. Moreover, having affirmed the rights of all responsible states, Washington would be more likely to enjoy the backing of many of the world’s states—democracies and non-democracies alike—in confronting such predators. With membership in the community of nations well-defined, a great-power consensus might well emerge on how best to deal with predatory states, making humanitarian and preventive intervention a more realistic prospect. Honoring the Autonomy Rule would therefore legitimate a new and more inclusive order while de-legitimizing and isolating the world’s most dangerous actors.

Far from representing an abandonment of American ideals, this approach draws heavily on the foundational principles of America’s own experience to shape the parameters of a new international order. John Gaddis, a Yale historian, agrees that the United States should focus on eradicating tyranny rather than spreading democracy, observing that “the objective of ending tyranny...is as deeply rooted in American history as it is possible to imagine... Spreading democracy suggests knowing the answer to how people should live their lives. Ending tyranny suggests freeing them to find their own answers.” Moreover, as citizens in a pluralist society, Americans have a tradition of valuing the preservation of intellectual, cultural, racial, and religious difference. Celebrating pluralism not only ensures that the uniqueness of the individual will be valued; such tolerance also produces a vibrant society capable of bringing multiple perspectives to bear on common problems.

These principles are equally applicable to international politics: There can be no good justification for the United States to celebrate pluralism at home but fail to do so abroad. Just as pluralism and tolerance help resolve some of the most difficult challenges of domestic governance, they should do the same for matters of international politics. As long as other countries adhere to the Autonomy Rule, the United States should respect their political preferences as a matter of national discretion and a reflection of the diversity that is intrinsic to political life.

America’s adherence to the Autonomy Rule by no means precludes the promotion of democracy as an objective of U.S. statecraft. Americans have every

reason to remain confident that liberal democracy represents the best form of government, both morally and materially. Accordingly, the United States should continue to use political and economic incentives to encourage democratization. However, the spread of democracy should remain one component of a long-term vision, and not serve as a central objective defining America's approach to international governance. If Americans are right about the merits of liberal democracy, it will spread of its own accord as a consequence of its superior attributes and performance. In the meantime, observation of the Autonomy Rule, humility about the strengths and weaknesses of the Western way, and respect for alternative systems of government offer the most promise of providing the favorable international conditions in which democracy will be able to demonstrate its virtues.

Building on Autonomy: Norms for the Next Order

An order that welcomes political diversity would constitute a stark departure from the norms and practices that have governed international politics since World War II. Western norms would no longer enjoy pride of place; authority would not be concentrated in Washington, nor legitimacy derived solely from a transatlantic consensus. Instead, Western concepts of legitimacy would combine with those of other countries and cultures, distributing responsibility to a wider array of states. By casting the net widely, a more inclusive order would encourage stability by broadening consensus, producing new stakeholders, and further marginalizing states that are predatory at home or abroad.

If recalibrating the standards that determine which states are in good standing is the first step toward constructing a new order, the second entails renegotiating the norms governing international behavior. Among the key issues that will need to be addressed if a new consensus is to emerge, three are of particular salience: sovereignty and intervention, reform of international institutions, and principles of commerce.

SOVEREIGNTY AND INTERVENTION

A series of major developments—the Cold War's end, the rising threat of international terrorism, heightened concern about failed states, and globalization—has produced growing enthusiasm among Western democracies for a formal attenuation of national sovereignty. Kofi Annan, while serving as U.N. secretary general, was a strong proponent of a collective “responsibility to protect,” a new norm maintaining that the international community has not only the right, but also the obligation, to intervene to alleviate human suffering. Still more ambitious proposals would widen further the circumstances warranting the abrogation

of sovereignty—for example, to disarm states or engage in regime change in the service of democratization.

Inasmuch as the Autonomy Rule would subject predatory states to isolation and sanction, it is entirely consistent with the “responsibility to protect.” However, a broader dilution of sovereignty would compromise the principle of state autonomy. Russia and China fear that repeal of one nation’s sovereignty sets a precedent that could work to the detriment of the sovereignty of all nations. Along with many others, these countries suspect that more expansive efforts to circumscribe sovereignty represent veiled attempts to give the Western democracies the authority to act as they see fit. Moscow and Beijing perceive these proposals not as advances in the normative and institutional underpinnings of international order, but as threats to the principles most fundamental to international stability and the integrity of the state system.

Addressing many of today’s challenges depends on global cooperation, not just teamwork among democracies.

Accordingly, the next order will have to dial back such ambitious proposals and affirm a more traditional notion of sovereignty for all states that meet the Autonomy Rule. As long as states govern so as to advance the welfare of their citizens and do not com-

mit acts of aggression against other states, they should be assured of full rights of territorial sovereignty. Of course, this norm must be revised to keep pace with the times: The illicit export of weapons of mass destruction and sponsorship of terrorism must join territorial aggression as flagrant violations. But those acts that warrant the denial of a state’s right to sovereignty and its exposure to isolation or intervention must be carefully considered, lest a more expansive definition of what constitutes misconduct unravels an international order that for the foreseeable future will rest on respect of national sovereignty.

For those states that meet the Autonomy Rule domestically but not in the conduct of their foreign policy, isolation or intervention might in certain circumstances be an unproductive response. To the end of achieving a world in which all states meet the Autonomy Rule willingly, a strategy of firm engagement from a broadened great-power concert might prove more effective than a strategy that rests solely on coercion. Stopping Iran’s nuclear program and its support of terrorism, for example, may be more readily attainable by offering the country a credible prospect of enjoying the rights of good standing rather than confronting it only with threats of isolation and intervention. Embrace of a traditional notion of sovereignty for countries in good standing thus promises

to facilitate both great-power consensus about the terms of the next order and more effective action against threatening regimes.

INSTITUTIONAL REFORM

The diffusion of global power ultimately necessitates the devolution of international responsibility from a handful of liberal democracies clustered in North America and Europe to states in good standing around the globe. The need for a more inclusive order stems not only from the diffusion of power, but also from recognition that addressing many of today's challenges depends on global cooperation, not just teamwork among democracies. Stopping nuclear proliferation, fighting terrorism, curbing global warming, stabilizing financial markets—these tasks require a broad multilateralism that cuts across region and regime type. Institutions like NATO and the EU have the resources, but membership is limited to democracies located around the North Atlantic. An institution like the UN has the global reach, but falls short on efficacy.

The institutional structures that assume and allocate international responsibility should reflect both the diffusion of power and the practical need for widespread international cooperation. Rather than envisaging the worldwide extension of the West's prerogative through a global NATO or a league of democracies, Western institutions should remain regional in scope and at the same time provide a model for governance elsewhere. By encouraging the independence and capacity of regional bodies beyond the North Atlantic, the Western democracies can purposefully devolve international responsibility to competent and committed actors in other quarters of the globe. Just as NATO and the European Union have fostered collective security, good governance, and economic integration among their members, institutions such as ASEAN, the Gulf Cooperation Council, the African Union, and the defense union taking shape in South America can promote the same objectives in their regions. As these and other organizations mature, they should focus not only on security, but also on collective approaches to managing development, health, water, and the environment.

Regional devolution has a number of distinct advantages. First, in many crises a swift and effective response is most likely to come from parties that, due to proximity, have a direct interest in the matter. Second, regional bodies should enjoy more support from relevant local actors than Atlantic institutions, which are often seen as instruments of Western power. Third, interventions by regional bodies are likely to proceed according to local values and principles, making the solution more legitimate and durable. Lastly, with the West overstretched by ongoing missions in Iraq and Afghanistan and taxed by the economic

downturn, regional devolution offers the Atlantic democracies a welcome form of burden-sharing.

Although the global diffusion of power necessitates greater devolution to regional actors, the challenges facing the international community require global coordination. Fighting terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, arresting climate change, combating malaria and HIV-AIDS, promoting universal education—even if regional and local actors implement policy, planning and resource allocation will have to occur at the global level.

Although groupings such as the G-8 and the G-20 have demonstrated their value as consultative bodies, the U.N., as the main global institution, must be refurbished as the primary venue for coordination. If so, it will have to command a broader legitimacy than its current structure allows. In particular, the composition of the UN Security Council, which is still based on the strategic realities of 1945, needs to be made more reflective of a new distribution of global power. Brazil, Germany, India, and Japan should have seats at the table, as should major powers representing the Islamic world and Africa. Top candidates include Indonesia, Egypt, Nigeria, and South Africa. Such additions would not only lend enhanced credibility to the U.N., but they would also encourage new members to invest greater political capital and resources in collective action.

Sensible proposals for U.N. reform have been circulating for years, but the U.S. leadership needed to drive the process to completion has been missing. In this respect, the Obama Administration should make U.N. reform a priority. Doing so holds out promise of not only bringing about needed change, but also reclaiming international respect for U.S. diplomacy by demonstrating the new administration's commitment to revitalizing the U.N.

THE TERMS OF TRADE

Guided by the conviction that free trade and globalization both maximize wealth and promote the spread of democracy and stability, the United States at the close of World War II oversaw the construction of a liberal economic order. The prosperity it has produced is one of the greatest legacies of the era of Western primacy. A more pluralist international system will, however, challenge this order; it will include states that pursue a wide array of approaches to the management of their economies. Nonetheless, the consensual renovation of the rules that guide the global economy need not undermine the fundamentals of a liberal approach to international trade and finance. But to preserve these fundamentals, the next order will have to embrace more modest goals for the liberalization of the international economy, tolerate more state intervention in enabling markets to meet the needs of citizens, and focus on making globalization more equitable.

The global financial crisis, the economic ascendance of rising states, and contraction and job losses across different sectors of the U.S. economy make it likely that the United States will no longer be the dominant force behind the continued liberalization of the global economy. As America's ability and willingness to be the steward of global commerce diminishes, it will be necessary to guard against the protectionist impulses that usually arise when an economic hegemon loses its capacity to enforce free markets and underwrite stability.

Accordingly, the trade agenda should put more emphasis on forestalling the return of economic nationalism and barriers to trade than on the advance of liberalization. Indeed, at the G-20 summit in Washington last November, the world's major economies did just that, pledging not to implement protectionist measures for at least a year. Worryingly, some of the participants, including Indonesia, Russia, and India, have already violated their pledges. The danger ahead is not that global liberalization will slow. Rather, it is a repeat of the 1930s, when states responded to a global downturn by embracing beggar-thy-neighbor policies.

Just as there is no universal form of democracy, there is no universal form of responsible government.

The global downturn has also led to widespread recognition of the need for greater regulation of financial markets. Contrary to the initial supposition that globalization would most advantage laissez-faire economies, it now appears that the speed and scope of today's financial markets necessitate a more hands-on approach. European governments are calling for a new Bretton Woods system to update the rules of the road. Even in the United States, government intervention in the market is taking place on a scale unimaginable even one year ago.

As states play a more prominent role in managing markets, they must work to rectify structural imbalances in the global economy. The U.S. economy must depend less on consumption and imports of goods and capital, instead relying more on investment, exports, and the reduction of deficits. Meanwhile, countries like Germany, Japan, and China need to move in the other direction, stimulating domestic demand and balancing export-led growth with imports of goods and services. These state-led, domestic-level adjustments would help offset the global imbalances that have contributed to the current economic slump.

Finally, the next order should seek to ensure that the benefits of globalization are shared as widely as possible. Both within and among countries, globalization has dramatically widened income inequalities. Addressing the dislocations of the American worker is important to sustaining political support for economic

openness, as is creating new opportunities for laborers in the developing world. The two goals are admittedly in tension. Cutting agricultural subsidies and textile tariffs in the developed world would represent a major step toward a more equitable globalization. But doing so will entail investing in education, retraining, and additional programs to further the interests of workers in the United States and other advanced economies.

A liberal international economy has been instrumental to global growth. And the global economy must continue to expand if prosperity and interdependence are to increase and the world's destitute are to be lifted out of poverty. But with the current downturn having called into question the terms of the Western economic order, it cannot remain intact as a more pluralistic world takes shape. Although greater state intervention and a more modest and equitable brand of globalization entail a rebalancing of the priorities of the liberal trading order erected by the West, these amendments offer considerable promise of preserving its foundational principles.

Mutual Respect

Critics from the right will see this call for toleration of political diversity as moral relativism, while critics on the left will label it as abandonment of a progressive agenda. For neoconservatives, non-democracies must be defeated; for liberals, they must be seduced. Both believe that Western values should be universal values—and that their dispersal represents the most important form of progress.

Policies of impatient democratization, however, will do much more to impede than impel history's advance. From the Balkans to Iraq to the Palestinian territories, a rush to the ballot box has undercut moderates and stoked sectarian and ideological cleavages, not furthered the cause of political stability. Washington should continue to promote democracy by example and incentive. But if the United States insists on universal adherence to the Western order it oversees, it will only compromise its persuasive appeal and its ability to help ensure that liberal democracy ultimately wins the long struggle against alternative systems of government.

Instead, the United States should take the lead in constructing a more pluralist international order. Were Washington to orchestrate the arrival of this next order, it would not denigrate the accomplishments of democracy, but rather demonstrate an abiding confidence in the values the West holds dear and in the ability of liberal forms of government to outperform and ultimately prevail against authoritarian alternatives. Cultivating new stakeholders, carefully devolving international responsibility to regional actors, and placing the international economy on a more stable footing will also allow

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the United States the respite needed to focus on rebuilding the foundations of its own prosperity.

The United States will be better off if it gets ahead of the curve and helps craft a new order that is sustainable than if it fights a losing battle against tectonic shifts in global politics. As Kissinger observes, “America needs to learn to discipline itself into a strategy of gradualism that seeks greatness in the accumulation of the attainable.” The United States can steward the onset of this more diverse and inclusive world in a manner that remains consonant with the deepest American values. Doing so would help restore America’s moral authority as a leading member of the community of nations, in the end making it more likely that other nations would be as respectful of America’s preferences as America should be of theirs. **■**