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THE JUNGLE GROWS BACK: AMERICA AND OUR IMPERILED WORLD

By: Robert Kagan

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The liberal world order established by the United States after World War II is collapsing. This long period of prosperity, widespread democracy, and great power peace was an historical anomaly. The dramatic change of course after 1945 was not due to some sudden triumph of our better angels or embrace of Enlightenment principles. Instead, liberal ideals triumphed because, for the first time, they had power behind them.

A new international player had arisen in the United States. America possessed a unique and advantageous geography, a large, productive population, unprecedented economic and military power, and a national ideology based on liberal principles. After the Second World War, it was willing to wield this power to establish and sustain a global order roughly consistent with those principles. That liberal world order—based in mutually reinforcing security, economic, and political components—has created a geographical and geopolitical space in which liberalism has taken root, spread, and evolved.

At the heart of this order was a grand bargain: The other liberal powers ceded strategic hegemony to the United States, but in return the U.S. would not use that hegemony to constrain their economic growth. It could not insist on winning every transaction. There had to be a relatively level playing field—at times even one that favored the other liberal powers.

Within the confines of that system, normal geopolitical competition all but ceased. Nations within the order, in Western Europe and East Asia, did not compete with each for military superiority, form strategic alliances against one another, or claim spheres of influence. Since no balance of power was necessary to preserve the peace among them, as it always had been in the past, they could shift substantial resources and energy from military to economic and social purposes.

However, that world was always artificial and tenuous, challenged from within and without by natural forces—the always potent anti-liberal aspects of human nature and the competitive and anarchic tendencies of geopolitics. Like a garden, it can last only so long as it is tended and protected. The architects of the new order

were not utopian idealists. They had stared into the abyss of war. They knew the world they created would be flawed and costly to defend, but they believed an imperfect liberal order was better than none at all.

Across the U.S. political spectrum, American foreign policy since the end of the Cold War is seen as a series of disasters. This is said to include not just the Iraq and Afghan wars but also a range of longstanding strategies and attitudes: supporting democracy overseas, expanding NATO and regarding the U.S., hubristically, as the world's "indispensable nation." Even before Donald Trump, a new "realism" came into vogue, calling for

"The forces of history and powerful elements of human nature are bringing us back to where we were before the U.S. took responsibility for global peace and the preservation of liberalism."

paring back global commitments to adopt a policy of strategic "restraint." While this sounds sensible, the problem is that, after decades of living within the protective bubble of the liberal world order, Americans have forgotten what the world "as it is" looks like. Perhaps our biggest failure is our unwillingness to imagine that things could look again as they did in the first half of the 20th century.

Today's realist consensus is that the U.S. has been doing too much. But what if we have been doing too little? It is a fiction that we can do less in the world and get more out of it. The real choice is between maintaining the liberal order, with all its costs, or letting it collapse and preparing for the catastrophes likely to follow.

Nothing is determined, not the triumph of liberalism or its defeat. But make no mistake: The liberal order is as precarious as it is precious. It needs constant tending lest the jungle grow back and engulf us all.



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