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Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 U.S. presidential election heralded nothing less than certain catastrophe. At least, that was and remains the firm belief of "the Blob"—what Ben Rhodes, a foreign policy adviser in the Obama administration, called those from both parties in the mainstream media and the foreign policy establishment who, driven by habitual ideas and no small amount of piety and false wisdom, worry about the decline of the U.S.-led order. "We are very probably looking at a global recession, with no end in sight," the *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman forecast after Trump's victory. Others prophesied that Trump would resign by the end of his first year (Tony Schwartz, the co-author of *Trump: The Art of the Deal*), that he would be holed up in the Ecuadorian embassy in six months (the liberal commentator John Aravosis), or that the United States might be headed down the same path that Germany took from the Weimar Republic to the Third Reich. That last warning came from former U.S. President Barack Obama last December at the Economic Club of Chicago, where he invoked the specter of Nazi Germany. "We have to tend to this garden of democracy or else things could fall apart quickly," he said. "Sixty million people died, so you've got to pay attention—and vote."

So far, the world has not come to an end, far from it. A year into Trump's first term, the Islamic State, or ISIS—a fascist organization, by the way—had been virtually defeated in Syria and eliminated from all its havens in Iraq, thanks to the Trump administration's decision to equip the largely Kurdish militia fighting ISIS in Syria and give U.S.

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ground commanders greater latitude to direct operations. All the while, Trump has continued the Obama doctrine of avoiding large-scale conventional wars in the Middle East and has succeeded where his predecessor failed in enforcing a real redline against Bashar al-Assad's use of nerve gas in Syria by launching targeted air strikes in response. In North Korea, Trump's strategy of "maximum pressure" has cut the country's international payments by half, forcing Kim Jong Un to realize that his only choice is to negotiate.

On the domestic front, the unemployment rate fell to 3.8 percent in May, a level not seen since the heady days of the dot-com boom—with unemployment at an all-time low among African Americans; at or near multidecade lows among Hispanics, teenagers, and those with less than a high school education; and at a 65-year low among women in the labor force. Meanwhile, on Trump's watch, the stock market and consumer confidence have hit all-time highs, the number of mortgage applications for new homes has reached a seven-year high, and gas prices have fallen to a 12-year low. Finally, with Trump pledging to bring to an end the era in which "our politicians seem more interested in defending the borders of foreign countries than their own," illegal immigration was reduced by 38 percent from November 2016 to November 2017, and in April 2017, the U.S. Border Patrol recorded 15,766 apprehensions at the southwestern border—the lowest in at least 17 years.

As his critics charge, Trump does reject many of the core tenets of the liberal international order, the sprawling and multifaceted system that the United States and its allies built and have supported for seven decades. Questioning the very fabric of international cooperation, he has assaulted the world trading system, reduced funding for the UN, denounced NATO, threatened to end multilateral trade agreements, called for Russia's readmission to the G-7, and scoffed at attempts to address global challenges such as climate change. But despite what the crowd of globalists at Davos might say, these policies should be welcomed, not feared. Trump's transactional approach to foreign relations marks a United States less interested in managing its long-term relationships than in making gains on short-term deals. Trump has sent the message that the United States will now look after its own interests, narrowly defined, not the interests of the so-called global community, even at the expense of long-standing allies.

This worldview is fundamentally realist in nature. On the campaign trail and in office, Trump has argued that the United States needs its

He didn't start the fire: Trump at a NATO summit in Brussels, Belgium, July 2018

allies to share responsibility for their own defense. He has also called for better trade deals to level a playing field tilted against American businesses and workers and to protect domestic manufacturing industries from currency manipulation. He is an economic nationalist at heart. He believes that political factors should determine economic relations, that globalization does not foster harmony among states, and that economic interdependence increases national vulnerability. He has also argued that the state should intervene when the interests of domestic actors diverge from its own—for example, when he called for a boycott against Apple until the company helped the FBI break into the iPhone of one of the terrorists who carried out the 2015 attack in San Bernardino, California.

This realist worldview is not only legitimate but also resonates with American voters, who rightly recognize that the United States is no longer inhabiting the unipolar world it did since the end of the Cold War; instead, it is living in a more multipolar one, with greater competition. Trump is merely shedding shibboleths and seeing international politics for what it is and has always been: a highly competitive realm populated by self-interested states concerned with their own security and economic welfare. Trump's "America first" agenda is radical only in the sense that it seeks to promote the interests of the United States above all.

REINHARD KRAUSE / REUTERS

NO MORE UNCLE SUGAR

A key part of Trump's agenda is to rebalance the United States' trade accounts with the rest of the world. The goal is to correct systematic and excessive trade imbalances with wealthy East Asia and Europe, while protecting industries vital to U.S. national security. The balance of trade is the difference between the value of a country's exports and the value of its imports. When a country imports more than it exports, it is running a trade deficit, which means that it must rely on foreign direct investment or borrow money to make up the difference. In the long run, persistent trade deficits lower the total demand for goods and services in a country, reducing growth and employment. In 2017, the U.S. trade deficit in goods and services grew by 12 percent, to $566 billion, the biggest gap since 2008. Given this imbalance in trade, it is odd that Trump is the one being branded by the United States' supposed friends and allies as a protectionist, hell-bent on destroying the liberal economic order. To these ingrates, the Trump administration has sent a straightforward message: you will no longer be allowed to play the United States for a sucker. In other words, no more Uncle Sugar.

The Blob worries that the policies enacted by the Trump administration signal a major reduction in the United States' willingness to promote global trade and investment, but Trump's threats of tariffs and other protectionist measures are better seen as bargaining chips designed to open other countries' markets. They also represent attempts to elevate trade diplomacy to greater strategic prominence, using sanctions and other forms of economic statecraft to pressure states to do things that Washington wants but that they otherwise wouldn't do. After all, the United States remains the world's leading market for exports, which gives the country massive bargaining leverage in trade negotiations. But it has traditionally failed to exploit that leverage, since any attempt to do so draws jeers from defenders of the liberal international order. Trump has chosen a different path.

With China, the United States' only potential peer competitor, Trump has used trade diplomacy to press Beijing to make a number of valuable concessions. The U.S. trade deficit with China now stands at $375 billion; during talks in May, news outlets reported that Chinese officials had committed to reducing it by $200 billion by 2020. The Trump administration continues to press the Chinese government to end what Washington considers unfair subsidies and

other aid to Chinese firms. For years, Chinese state enterprises have been buying up their U.S. competitors in high-tech sectors, while U.S. firms are prohibited from making equivalent purchases in China, but now, the White House is wisely looking to subject China to similar investment hurdles. As *The New York Times* reported in March, it "is preparing to limit Chinese investment in sensitive American technology, ranging from microchips to 5G wireless technology."

Trump's words have a distinctly realist ring to them.

In a step toward correcting the imbalance in U.S.-Chinese economic relations, the Trump administration has imposed antidumping duties on large Chinese washing machines and solar energy equipment, and it has levied tariffs on steel and aluminum for reasons of national security. In April, the administration threatened to slap stiff tariffs on some $50 billion in Chinese imports across 1,300 categories of products, unveiling the most aggressive challenge in decades to Beijing's trade practices. China responded by offering to purchase some $70 billion in U.S. exports if the Trump administration called off the threatened tariffs. And in May, China reduced its tariff on foreign automobiles from 25 percent to 15 percent. (The United States' stands at 2.5 percent.)

Trump has made clear that even the United States' neighbors and closest allies are not exempt from U.S. tariffs. In late May, he made good on a key campaign promise when he moved forward with a 25 percent tariff on steel imports and a ten percent tariff on aluminum imports from Canada, Mexico, and the EU. As justification, the administration cited national security, invoking the Commerce Department's conclusion that imported metal degrades the American industrial base. Canada announced retaliatory steps, and it and every other member of the G-7 besides the United States issued a joint statement conveying their "unanimous concern and disappointment" with the U.S. decision.

Global outrage aside, Trump's justification for the tariffs is little more than Realism 101. As the political scientist Jonathan Kirshner has observed, in an anarchic world, "states will strive for national self-sufficiency, in order to assure the ability to produce the means to fight, as well as to reduce vulnerabilities that would result from the disruption of peacetime patterns of international economic flows." In-

deed, in his signal foreign policy speech during the campaign, Trump himself articulated just such a view: "No country has ever prospered that failed to put its own interests first. Both our friends and our enemies put their countries above ours, and we, while being fair to them, must start doing the same. We will no longer surrender this country or its people to the false song of globalism. The nation-state remains the true foundation for happiness and harmony." Trump's words have a distinctly realist ring to them.

NO MORE MULTILATERALISM

Another plank of Trump's foreign policy platform is that the United States should work with its international partners on a bilateral basis whenever possible, rather than through multilateral arrangements and commitments. Along these lines, the administration has withdrawn from the Iran nuclear deal, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and the Paris agreement on climate change. At the UN, it has proposed reducing U.S. contributions to the organization by 40 percent, forced the General Assembly to cut $600 million from the peacekeeping budget, announced its intention to withdraw from UNESCO and the UN Human Rights Council, and abandoned talks on migration. Trump has also threatened to end the North American Free Trade Agreement and instead strike separate bilateral agreements with Canada and Mexico, which he contends are easier to enforce than multilateral arrangements.

Multilateralism, in Trump's view, "reduces our ability to control our own affairs." Even defenders of the liberal international order should concede that he is right, since this is precisely what a rules-based order is designed to achieve: to place limits on the returns to, and the capricious exercise of, outsize power in the conduct of international relations. In fact, those who champion such an order seek nothing less than a revolutionary transformation of world politics, hoping to replace the anarchic international system driven by brute force with one governed by the rule of law. For these proponents, the trick has always been to convince weak and secondary states—that is, everyone but the United States—that institutional restraints and multilateral commitments will limit the hegemon's freedom of action. For such an order to work, it must be autonomous, able to enforce its rules independent of the hegemon's wishes. Otherwise, there is no reason for other countries to believe that the order will ever limit the hegemon's power.

Well, the jig is up. Trump has given the lie to the notion that many of the institutions of the postwar order actually bind the United States, and he has walked away from them accordingly. The weakness of the order should come as no surprise: ever since the end of World War II, international institutions and norms have rested on U.S. power and so cannot be used to hold back the United States. To the extent that the United States has been restrained, it has been the result of self-restraint—a characteristic that few have accused Trump of exhibiting. The United States' leaders and foreign policy elites have been championing multilateralism, international institutions, and the rule of law as values in themselves, regardless of how they affected U.S. national interests.

NO MORE FREE-RIDING

The final piece of Trump's foreign policy is his insistence that U.S. allies pay their fair share of the costs of their defense. NATO itself concedes that the United States accounts for 73 percent of the alliance's defense spending—a rather large amount for an organization with 29 member states and that is focused on European security. Nonetheless, commentators in this magazine and elsewhere have routinely derided Trump for mocking U.S. allies as free riders. So, they might have added, did Obama. "Free riders aggravate me," he complained in a 2016 interview with *The Atlantic*. His list of partners not pulling their weight included the United Kingdom, and he warned that the country would no longer be able to claim a "special relationship" with the United States unless it spent at least two percent of its GDP on defense.

For decades, U.S. presidents have complained about allies' free-riding, but when push came to shove, they failed to do much about the problem. During the Cold War, the United States and its allies confronted a shared Soviet threat, making it at least understandable that Washington would allow the problem to persist. Now that the dragon has been slain—many, many years ago—and at a time when the U.S. government is considering huge cuts in social spending to restore fiscal health, there is no justification whatsoever for the United States to continue subsidizing European countries' security. As the political scientist Barry Posen has put it in this magazine, "This is welfare for the rich." Trump's attacks on NATO seem to be getting results. Defense spending among the alliance's European members has hit its highest point since 2010.

According to the Blob, however, Trump is not merely trying to get allies to pay their fair share; he is actively plotting to destroy NATO. In a column in June, David Leonhardt of *The New York Times* wrote, "If a president of the United States were to sketch out a secret, detailed plan to break up the Atlantic alliance, that plan would bear a striking resemblance to Trump's behavior." What Leonhardt appears to have forgotten is that the greatest enemy of an alliance is victory. When the West won the Cold War, NATO lost its raison d'être. In an increasingly multipolar world, alliances are less fixed: today's friend may be tomorrow's enemy (or, at a minimum, competitor), and vice versa. Trump accepts this. He is operating according to the realpolitik principle that former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger once summarized: "America has no permanent friends or enemies, only interests."

Trump's realist instincts are on display most clearly in his approach to Russia. Just as every president before him, Trump has met with the leader of the Kremlin in search of cooperation on a range of security issues (in this case, particularly on Iran and Syria) and, at a most basic and existential level, to avoid war between the two nuclear superpowers. Those yelling the loudest that Russia is a mortal enemy of the United States and that Trump is Russian President Vladimir Putin's puppet are the very same people who woefully mismanaged U.S. foreign policy over the past quarter century.

Blinded by their distaste for Trump, elites have lost sight of the structural forces that propelled him to power.

The bottom line is that Trump is not the primary reason NATO's ties are fraying; the international structure is. Indeed, this was also true for his predecessor. Much of what annoyed the foreign policy elite about Obama's minimalist strategic goals—his talk of hitting "singles and doubles," for example—was structural in nature. During the Cold War, in the words of the political scientist G. John Ikenberry, "America needed allies and allies needed America," a codependence that "created incentives for cooperation in areas outside of national security." That changed with the end of the shared Soviet threat. The United States became less constrained in its foreign policy, but so did its allies. They have had less need for a superpower patron, and so Washington has less leverage over them than it once did.

In 1993, the realist international relations theorist Kenneth Waltz wisely observed, "The Soviet Union created NATO, and the demise of the Soviet threat 'freed' Europe, West as well as East. But freedom entails self-reliance." Writing of European countries, Waltz concluded, "In the not-very-long run, they will have to learn to take care of themselves or suffer the consequences." A quarter century later, the "not-very-long run" has finally arrived. Trump did not create that reality; he has merely recognized it.

IT'S THE STRUCTURE, STUPID

To be fair, not all has gone well under the Trump administration. After denouncing nation building and calling the war in Afghanistan a "complete waste," the president was persuaded by his top advisers to forgo a hasty withdrawal from the country, which they claimed would create a vacuum for ISIS and al Qaeda to fill, and to support instead a small infusion of U.S. troops to beat back a resurgent Taliban. "My original instinct was to pull out, and historically, I like following my instincts," Trump said as he announced the new strategy. "But all my life, I've heard that decisions are much different when you sit behind the desk in the Oval Office." He should have followed his gut instead of embracing the ludicrous notion that a few thousand U.S. troops would be able to accomplish what 100,000 previously could not: break the stalemate in the longest war in American history.

But what Trump recognizes is that the liberal international order is sick. This illness, as the columnist Martin Wolf has argued, is a function of, at the global level, "the declining relevance of the west as a security community after the end of the cold war, together with its diminishing economic weight, especially in relation to China." At the domestic level, the problems stem from the feeling among many in rich countries that they have not benefited from the liberal world order. "It is generating, instead, the sense of lost opportunities, incomes and respect." Many Americans rightly feel that globalization, by bringing cheap consumer goods into the country and outsourcing jobs to lower-paid workers overseas, has ruined U.S. manufacturing, increasing unemployment and depressing wages. No wonder Trump's complaints about unfair trade deals resonated with so many voters, especially those in the industrial Midwest.

Blinded by their distaste for the man, foreign policy elites have lost sight of the larger international structural forces that propelled Trump

to power. To see these driving forces at work, one must return to the end of the Cold War. As the lone superpower, the United States remained deeply engaged with the world, but the purpose of this engagement had changed. During the Cold War, the goal was to contain the Soviet Union; the United States was acting out of defense and wished to maintain the status quo. But afterward, the United States embraced revisionism in the guise of liberalism. As the unchallenged hegemon, it endeavored to remold large swaths of the world to fit its image of international order. Washington not only aligned itself with democracy, human rights, and justice but also actively promoted these liberal values abroad. Doing so marked the end of Cold War pragmatism and the advent of a crusading style of U.S. foreign policy. In the dreams of U.S. foreign policy elites, all countries, including authoritarian great powers such as China and Russia, would now become supplicants in a U.S.-dominated world order.

Then came the Great Recession, which, coupled with the rise of China and a resurgent Russia, cast doubt on the United States' relative power. The result is that the unipolar era, if not already over, is beginning to wind down. Declining powers under conditions of low vulnerability tend to reduce their peripheral commitments and look inward (as the United Kingdom did after World War I, for example). It should come as no surprise, then, that so many Americans have finally begun to question their country's long-standing grand strategy of playing the world's policeman and voted for the candidate who vowed to put America first. With the American era nearing an end, Washington must pursue a new grand strategy to deal with the new situation. Trump's brand of realism offers just such a strategy.