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Article

The American Tributary System Revisited

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Abstract

This article revisits my essay on the American Tributary System (ATS), published by the *Chinese Journal of International Politics* (CJIP) in 2013. In that essay, I argued that the United States (US) resembled Ming and Qing China in important and interesting ways in the conduct of its foreign relations. I portrayed the US as the hub of a Chinese-like tributary system, and identified two tributes that it sought, in return for its global exertions: first, to be recognized as the number one power in the world; and second, to have others adopt its political ideas and forms (i.e. liberal democracy). More than a decade has passed, America has changed; so, has China, not to mention the power distribution in Asia. Given these changes—especially the rise of Trump and his Make America Great Again (MAGA) base—it is timely to revisit my thesis for this special issue of the CJIP. This article argues that the ATS is waning; it is deeply contested from within and without. From without, China's rise and its closing in on the US in comprehensive power terms have ended the era of unipolarity. Together with countries such as North Korea, Russia, Brazil, and South Africa, China is challenging American hegemony and leadership in Asia and beyond. Recognition of, and assent to, US hegemony—the first tribute demanded by the US—are thus harder to come by. Even more damaging to the ATS is what is happening within: a deeply divided US, characterized by internecine warfare between Republicans and Democrats and democratic backsliding verging on autocratic rule under Trump 2.0, have severely dented the "City on the Hill" image of America. Given the state of American democracy and the political dysfunction associated with it, even if Trump had wanted to promote democracy abroad, it will be a difficult sell.

Introduction

Back in 2013, CJIP published my essay on the American Tributary System (ATS). In that essay, I argued that the United States (US) resembled Ming and Qing China in important and interesting ways in the conduct of its foreign relations. I portrayed the US as the hub of a Chinese-like tributary system, and identified two tributes that it sought, in return for its global exertions: first, to be recognized as the number one power in the world; and second, to have others adopt

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its political ideas and forms (i.e. liberal democracy). I also suggested that the US system—in operation since 1898—was more successful than the Chinese system in terms of reach (which was global), although one has to withhold judgment when it comes to longevity. I ended my analysis by contrasting the fates of the two systems, pointing to how China's sense of its place in the world shrank from "tianxia" (all under heaven) to "guojia" (a state) after the mid-nineteenth century, i.e. the Chinese world became a China in the world, whereas, the US, in the course of the 20th century transited from being "guojia" (a state) to "tianxia."[1]

More than a decade has passed, America has changed; so, has China, not to mention the power distribution in Asia. Given these changes—especially the rise of Trump, his Make America Great Again (MAGA) base, and its "America First" policies—it is timely to revisit my thesis for this special issue of the CJIP. In this article, I argue that the ATS is waning; it is deeply contested from within and without. From without, China's rise and its closing in on the US in comprehensive power terms have ended the era of unipolarity and ushered in bipolarity in Asia: this structural change goes a long way toward explaining the intensification of China-US rivalry in the last decade. China, together with countries such as North Korea, Russia, Brazil, and South Africa, is, in its own ways, challenging American hegemony and leadership in Asia and beyond. Recognition of, and assent to, US hegemony—the first tribute demanded by the US—is thus harder to come by. In recent years, the US has resorted increasingly to threats and coercion to get what it wants. This may work in the short term, but it is a self-defeating strategy for the long term.[2] Even more damaging to the ATS is what is happening within: a deeply divided US, characterized by internecine warfare between Republicans and Democrats, and democratic backsliding verging on autocratic rule under Trump 2.0, has severely dented the "City on the Hill" image of America. In both his first and second terms, Donald Trump seems intent on defenestrating democracy within—doing away with checks and balances, using the law to go after his political opponents—and rejecting promoting democracy abroad. Given the state of American democracy and the political dysfunction associated with it, even if Trump had wanted to promote democracy abroad, it would have been a difficult sell.

The ATS as the America-led Hegemonic Order

My earlier article summarized the key characteristics of the ATS in the following way:

> As the hub or epicenter of the most extensive network of formal and informal alliances ever built, the US offers its *allies and partners*—or tributaries—*military protection as well as economic access to its.*
> *markets.* Through an equally impressive array of *international institutions.*
> *and organizations*, many of which it created, the US transmits and.
> imposes its values and its preferred rules of the game on the international system.
> The ensuing economic and politico-military "orders" are construed as.
> *"Public goods" provided by a benign American hegemony*. In return for all its.
> exertions, the tribute America seeks is straightforward: first, that it be recognized.
> as *the power or hegemon, and second, that others emulate its political.*
> *forms and ideas*. With both tributes in hand, the US finds equanimity.
> it and the world are safe, at least from the US' point of view.[3]

[1] Yuen Foong Khong, "The American Tributary System," *Chinese Journal of International Politics,* Vol. 6, No. 1 (2013), p. 47.

[2] See Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (Public Affairs, 2005) on the indispensability of soft power—making others do what you would like them to do through persuasion and attraction to your attributes instead of coercion—in enabling great powers to thrive and lead.

[3] Khong, "The American Tributary System," p. 2, italics added.

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International relations scholars will notice that my description of the ATS is very similar to what mainstream IR theory has labeled as the liberal international order, or what John Ikenberry has called the "American-led liberal hegemonic order." The key elements of Ikenberry's liberal order are "American hegemony authority, open markets, cooperative security, multilateral institutions, social bargains, and democratic community,"[4] which are very similar to central features of the ATS. The italicized segments of the passage cited above bring out the similarities between the American-led liberal order and the ATS vividly.

The major difference between Ikenberry's (or mainstream US IR) and my conception lies in the ATS's portrayal of the seamier side of hegemony (American or otherwise). The ATS, I argued:

> casts hegemony in a less positive light, emphasizing the hierarchical and.
> unequal nature of the relationship. Mainstream international relations theory.
> tends to portray hegemony in a predominantly positive light, emphasizing.
> leadership, provision of public goods, and stability. The idea of the tributary system, in contrast, lays bare the inequality of the relationship by its very vocabulary. China thrived on that inequality and the rituals that affirmed it. . . . The tributary idea, in other words, emphasizes hierarchy and inequality in ways that the notion of hegemony seeks to dissipate.[5]

This difference notwithstanding, the two concepts—US-led hegemonic liberal order and the ATS—can be used interchangeably, since their objective characteristics are similar, despite their different normative implications. The reason for connecting my notion of the ATS to Ikenberry's US hegemonic order (for the purposes of this article) is that I intend to build on Ikenberry's argument that the US-led liberal hegemonic global order is "now in crisis." For Ikenberry, it is a "crisis of authority—a struggle over how liberal order should be governed, not a crisis over the underlying principles of liberal international order." By that, he meant "what is in dispute is how aspects of the liberal order—sovereignty, institutions, participation, rules, and responsibilities—are to be allocated, but all within that order rather than in its wake."[6]

I agree with Ikenberry that the US-led hegemonic liberal order or the ATS—is in crisis, but I would go further to suggest that it is also a crisis over the underlying principles, and not just about how the aspects of that order are to be allocated. Developments in the last decade suggest that challenges to the ATS are over fundamentals or its underlying principles, with a risen China as the challenger-in-chief. We need look no further than Ikenberry's characterization of the post-World War II global order as the "*American-led liberal hegemonic order*" to appreciate why the challenge is over the fundamentals. The italicized phrase captures the underlying premises of what I described as the ATS and what gives it its distinctive character, namely that it is (1) US-led; (2) undergirded by predominant US power and influence; and (3) distinguished by liberal characteristics.

Today, all three principles are heavily contested by China in Asia and beyond. The external challenges posed by China's "arrival" and actors such as Russia, India, North Korea, and Iran are crucial to understanding the nature of the ATS crisis, but there is also an "internal" factor—a disaffected and disunited US body politic—that is just as relevant. Put another way, the ATS faces both an external (China) as well as an internal challenge (US body politic) to its fundamental premises.

In what follows, I will discuss the challenges to each of these underlying principles, beginning with US power and influence, followed by US leadership, and finally, liberalism. The article will be organized as follows. In Part II, I provide a working definition of international or global order,

[4] John G. Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), p. 334.
[5] Khong, "The American Tributary System," p. 39.
[6] Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan*, p. 334.

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followed by a brief historical analysis of the global order(s) that may be said to have existed during the Cold War and its aftermath. Parts III, IV, and V elaborate on the three challenges to the ATS foregrounded above. Part VI brings in the domestic challenges, and Part VII concludes the analysis by speculating whether the three "fundamental" challenges are likely to upend the ATS as we know it.

Global Order: What is it and Did/Does it Exist?

How would we know global or international order when we see it? Two conditions would need to be present. First, the absence of systemic or great power wars like the world wars that convulsed the international system in the first half of the twentieth century. Second, the existence of a set of norms, principles, and institutions that are accepted and practiced by a plurality of actors in the international system. Norms and principles such as respect for state sovereignty, open economies, cooperation through multilateralism, and diplomatic immunity play important roles in regulating relations and facilitating cooperation; in so doing, they help uphold stability and predictability in relations among the relevant actors.

Since both the above conditions were met in the post-World War II era, global order may be said to have existed. This despite regional convulsions in Asia (Korean and Vietnam Wars) and the Middle East (the Arab Israeli wars), where the great powers confronted one another through proxies. It is important to remember, however, that for much of the post-World War II era, that is, from 1945 to 1990, there was not one, but at least two global orders: a US-led liberal order and a Soviet-led illiberal-communist order. One might also point to a third possible order, the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), where a set of developing countries sought to insulate themselves from the two-bloc bifurcation of the US and Soviet-led orders. As the Cold War dragged on, however, it became increasingly difficult for key members of NAM to avoid aligning politically with one of the two dominant blocs. From the mid-1960s, countries like India, Cuba, Egypt, Vietnam, and North Korea aligned with the Soviet bloc, while Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and US treaty allies Thailand and the Philippines sided with the West.

That the ATS proved to be more resilient and outlived or "vanquished" the Soviet-led order in the early 1990s should not detract from the fact that the US-led order was challenged throughout its existence. The implosion of the Soviet Union in 1991and the desertion of what was left of the Soviet Union by its satellites did usher in what many have called a unipolar international system with the US emerging as the uncontested hegemon. William Wohlforth, for example, has argued that this was more than a "unipolar moment," that it would last one generation, and that it was conducive to world peace and stability. Francis Fukuyama's "end of history" thesis was an encomium for the victory of the liberal values associated with this US-led order.

Within a decade, however, "history" would return to haunt the US-led international liberal order. In September 2001, Islamic fundamentalists—in the guise of Al Qaeda—aggrieved by US power and policies in the Middle East, hijacked three planes, two of which were used as military projectiles to bring down the twin towers of the New York's World Trade Center. The third struck the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., and caused massive damage. That these acts of terror by a non-state actor were aimed at the sinews of American economic and military power suggests that a new form of challenge to global order had emerged.

The US and its allies would spend the next two decades responding to this challenge through its Global War on Terror (GWOT), which included launching wars against Afghanistan in 2001(which harbored Al Qaeda) and Iraq in 2003 (which was feared for having Weapons of Mass Destruction that it may transfer to Al Qaeda) and intervening in the Syrian civil war in 2014. These "forever wars" in the Middle East are widely regarded as having failed in achieving US war aims such as making the Middle East safe for democracy, but they did put Al Qaeda and

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its offshoots (Islamic State or ISIS) on the defensive. Osama bin Laden, the mastermind behind the 11 September attacks, was trapped and killed by a US SEALs team in 2011, and the fact that the US has not suffered a second major terrorist attack suggests that Al Qaeda's challenge to (the US-led) global order failed.

America's preoccupation with the GWOT, however, did distract it from a brewing challenge of a more traditional nature, that is, rising powers dissatisfied with their position and their place in that order. Among these rising powers, China today poses the most formidable challenge to the ATS. China benefitted greatly from the ATS—"open markets, cooperative security, multilateral institutions, social bargains"[7]—but as it grew richer and stronger, it felt it could do better. As some US intelligence officials remarked when China obtained a military base in Djibouti in 2017, "Chinese leaders see the US-led world order . . . .as constraining China's rise and are attempting to reshape the world order to better suit Chinese preferences and growing clout."[8] In what follows, I elaborate on how China is attempting to "reshape world order" by challenging the underlying bases of the ATS: US power, US leadership, and US liberalism.

The Challenge of Relative Decline

For analytical purposes, it is useful to separate the issue of US power from US leadership. One may possess power but may not want or be ready to lead. The classic example is America's overtaking Britain as the most powerful country in the world in the early twentieth century, but its reticence about assuming global leadership then. With commitments outstripping resources, the old hegemon (Britain) was no longer able to lead; the new hegemon, however, had yet to assume the leadership role. We may be in an analogous situation today, with China catching up with the US in power terms and poised (despite its current economic and demographic problems) to displace it in the long term.

An America-led liberal hegemony implies that the US is the primary maker of rules, allocator of values, and adjudicator of responsibilities, as befits the "leader of the free world." But American hegemony is no longer what it used to be because a peer competitor whose comprehensive power is approximating that of America has appeared on the horizon. Put another way, the shifting global balance of power has resulted in a disjunction between (declining) US power and its continued ability to call the shots. We have arrived at a historical juncture where the question of who is or should be the authoritative allocator of values is on the global agenda.

This shifting balance of power, with China approaching 90% of US comprehensive power in Asia (according to the Lowy Institute of Australia), constitutes a challenge to the ATS. Ray Dalio's computation of China-US relative strength globally, using different measures, comes to the same conclusion: China today is at 89% of US strength.[9] According to the Lowy Institute, Asia today has two superpowers—the US and China—that tower above all others in comprehensive power.[10] In other words, Asia is bipolar. Others have argued that what is true of Asia is also true of the world, that is, the world is bipolar. According to Jo Inge Bekkevold, "Today, there are only two countries with the economic size, military might, and global leverage to constitute a pole: the United States and China."[11] Potential candidates such as India, Japan, Russia, Germany, Britain, and France are major powers, but not in the same league as the US and China.

[7] Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan*, p. 334, and Chapter 1.

[8] "US Intel Sees China's Military Expanding Bases Globally, Potentially Conflicting Interests," *The Straits Times*, 7 October, 2017, https://www.straitstimes.com/world/united-states/us-intelligence-sees-chinas-military-expanding-bases-globally-potentially

[9] Ray Dalio, "The Great Powers Index: 2024: How the Leading 24 Countries Are Doing and Their Prospects for the Next 10 Years," *Economic Principles,* 2024, https://economicprinciples.org/downloads/DalioRay_Power_Index_Appendix.pdf

[10] The Lowy Institute, *Asia Power Index*, 2024, https://power.lowyinstitute.org

[11] Jo Inge Bekkevold, "No, the World is Not Multipolar," *Foreign Policy*, 2023, https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/09/22/multipolar-world-bipolar-power-geopolitics-business-strategy-china-united-states-india/

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What these depictions of the world power distribution suggest is that the unipolar moment is over. To be sure, China remains behind the US in both economic and military power. China's economy may have surpassed that of the US in PPP terms in 2014, but projections of overtake by China in nominal terms by 2030 are now seen as doubtful, given China's sputtering growth in the post-Covid years. The US remains ahead of China in defense spending and overall military capability, but China has the edge on "military posture in Asia," according to the Lowy Institute. The point, however, is that in sheer hard power terms, the days when the US had no peer competitors are gone. As the US National Security Strategy Documents by the Trump and Biden administrations make clear, while the US has adversaries such as Russia, North Korea, and Iran, the only real peer competitor is China.

How do these observations about China's approximating America's comprehensive power amount to challenging the ATS? They point to the rising power's attainment of the *sine qua non* for mounting a credible challenge to the existing US-inspired order. Unipolarity told the world that there was no alternative to the ATS. Bipolarity or multipolarity raises the possibility of an alternative, like during the Cold War. It could be that the China-inspired alternative—sometimes labeled the Beijing consensus—might (like the Soviet-led order) fail and peter out after a few decades of competition. But the challenge is a fundamental one because it is not just about changing specific ATS norms or principles; it is about the emergence and arrival of a player with the clout—real and perceived—to question the legitimacy of existing ATS norms and principles. In other words, it is China's strong economic growth since the late 1970s and its success in translating that into military-political-diplomatic prowess that allows it to take on America.

Early manifestations of that prowess can be seen as far back as March 2001 in the EP-3 incident, where a Chinese jetfighter collided with a US spy plane and forced it to land on Hainan Island. It was China's opening salvo about its displeasure at the US's freedom to roam at will above the skies in its neighborhood. The incident would have been seen as a display of China's newfound military prowess and would have set back China-US relations more seriously if not for the 11 September attacks on America. The latter forced the US to focus on the greater threat stemming from Afghanistan and the Middle East; it also became necessary for the US to solicit China's cooperation in its GWOT. For the next decade and more, the US took China off its strategic crosshairs.

Later manifestations of Chinese military strategy and power include the development of anti-ship ballistic missiles capable of sinking aircraft carriers. These "Anti-Access/Area Denial" (A2/AD) capabilities became a key part of China's military strategy to deter the US from deploying its naval power within range of the missiles in the event of a military crisis or confrontation over Taiwan. Today, US defense officials and strategists express alarm about Chinese shipbuilding capacities dwarfing those of the US (and allies combined), and about China's quantitative lead in battleships. Others point to results of wargaming exercises that showed the US losing time after time" in military confrontations with China over the Taiwan straits.

China's catch-up with the US in the economic and military spheres has also been widely recognized. According to a 2015 PEW poll, a plurality of nations believe that China has or will overtake the US as the global superpower. The poll asked individuals in 40 countries if China will/has or will never replace the US as the superpower of the world. It found that 25 of those countries believed China will or has replaced the US as superpower, while 15 said never. Interestingly, US respondents were almost evenly split, 48% said never, 46% said has/will. Of the countries that said never, four were in Asia: Japan, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia.[12] These naysayers notwithstanding, China's rise since the late 1970s has put it in a (power)

[12] Pew Research Centre, "Views of China and the Global Balance of Power" in *Global Publics Back U.S. on Fighting ISIS, but Are Critical of Post-9/11 Torture*, 2015, https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2015/06/Balance-of-Power-Report-FINAL-June-23-2015.pdf

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position to challenge the US. In the next section, we examine how the challenge also extends to displacing the US as the regional hegemon or leader.

Challengers to US Leadership

US leadership of the free (and unfree) world is a fundamental tenet of the ATS. This tenet is also being challenged by China, its allies such as Russia, North Korea, and Iran, and to some extent by many in the Global South. Most of the BRICS nations, including new members such as Argentina, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Ethiopia, and others aspiring to join, such as Indonesia, Mexico, Turkey, Thailand, and Malaysia, are clamoring for a global order that is not American-centric. Excluded from the G-7, like China, many of them see China—the number one trading partner for 120 nations—as a potential equally legitimate spokesperson for their interests. This does not equate to their wanting China to replace the US as hegemon, but they do see China as a plausible counterweight to the US. This is probably all China needs for now to mount its challenge to US leadership in Asia (in the first instance).

China's challenge of US leadership manifests itself in the questioning and delegitimizing of US values and actions, providing alternative interpretations of world developments, and creating new institutions and norms to rival and ultimately replace those built by the US. The Asian Financial Crisis of 1997–98 provided a first opportunity when the US was perceived as being more partial to helping alleviate the crisis in South Korea than in Southeast Asia, where the crisis began in Thailand, and which spread quickly to Indonesia and Malaysia. By not devaluing the yuan, China was seen as having played a helpful role in mitigating the situation for ASEAN. In the aftermath of the crisis, a new institution, the ASEAN +3 (China, Japan, and South Korea), was created to foster greater cooperation and regional resilience on financial matters. The focus on regional resilience (read: minus the US) meant that the larger Asian economies with deeper pockets (Japan, and increasingly China) would exercise some form of regional leadership in preventing and mitigating future financial crises.

The Global Financial Crisis (GFC) was a watershed event in leading China to believe that it had finally caught up with the US economically and that its model of development was not inferior to the one advocated by the US. Analysts detected a certain confidence, if not arrogance, in China's assessments of its economic prowess and that of a US in "terminal decline." Given US military predominance in the Western Pacific, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—its pivot to the West—may be seen as an attempt to create greater strategic space for itself, a geoeconomics strategy to "win friends and influence people." In championing new institutions such as the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the New Development Bank (NDB or BRICs bank), the BRI, and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and more recently, the Global Development Initiative (GDI), Beijing is playing to its strength (in economics) in challenging US economic leadership in the region. By setting up these alternative institutions—all of which exclude the US—as part of the economic architecture of the region, China is preparing a leadership role for itself on the economic front.

US President Barack Obama saw the China challenge for what it was. He pressed Britain not to join the AIIB as a founding member because over time, the AIIB could be an alternative to the Asian Development Bank or even the World Bank. When the British government disregarded his advice and joined, it opened the floodgates for the rest of Europe to also join, to Obama's dismay. Similarly, in explaining why the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) was important to the US, Obama argued that it was to prevent China from making the rules of the economic game. For Obama, it was America, not China, that should be making the rules.[13]

[13] Yuen Foong Khong, "Power as Prestige in World Politics," *International Affairs*, Vol. 95, No. 1 (2019), p. 135.

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For many in Asia and Africa, China's economic influence already seems to be greater than the US's. In the 2024 Yusuf Ishak Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) survey of elite Southeast Asian opinion, 60% of the respondents saw China, while 11% saw the US the most influential economic power in Southeast Asia. The same elites perceived China's political-strategic influence to be stronger (than that of the US) by a 44–32% margin.[14] The saving grace for the US is that the respondents found China's economic and political-strategic clout more worrying than welcoming. That did not prevent the Southeast Asians from choosing China (50.5%) over the US (49.5%) when asked who ASEAN should choose to align with if it were forced to, in the context of the China-US rivalry. While the margin in favor of China is minuscule, it is the change from the 2023 position—61% preferring the US; 39% China—that is significant. The change is partly explained by the antipathy felt by Muslims in Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, and Singapore toward the Biden administration's overly pro-Israel policies in the Israel-Hamas war. The ISEAS survey also suggests that under certain conditions, China's calling out the US for actions inconsistent with a "rules-based international order" can fall on receptive ears.

Whether Southeast Asia's disillusionment with the US will persist is an interesting question; the point is that, unlike the first two decades after the Cold War, there is now a serious contender to the US for regional leadership. The Biden administration was, of course, extremely alert to this, and it identified China as "America most consequential geopolitical challenge" and "the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to advance that objective."[15] The vortex of the competition is in Asia, and a clear sign of this is the pressure that the US and China are exerting on the uncommitted in the region to align with them. If Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, and Australia are already spoken for (as being aligned with the US), it is Southeast Asia where key countries are up for grabs. That is also why many in Southeast Asia have repeated the mantra of "not wanting to choose" and wanting to be friends with both China and the US. Yet as Joseph Liow and I have recently argued, Southeast Asia's direction of travel in the last decade, as far as its alignment postures are concerned, favors China. Countries like Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia are solidly aligned with China. Singapore, Malaysia, and Brunei have also moved slightly away from the US toward China while remaining within the hedging zone. Vietnam is the only country that has edged a bit closer to the US from being aligned with China to a hedging position. Only the Philippines has remained solidly aligned with the US.[16] The data on which these findings are based covers the period from 1995 to 2024, which also means that they do not incorporate the responses of these countries to the policies of the second Trump administration.[17]

Beyond Southeast Asia, prominent Western analysts are beginning to contemplate about the contours of a "post-American world." Shocked and disillusioned by Trump 2.0's foreign policies—from deserting Ukraine, threats to annex Greenland and even Canada, to the tariff war to viewing climate change as a hoax—they lament the "shoot oneself in the foot" character of these policies and their inadequacy in responding to the challenges of the 21st century, especially those posed by China and Russia. For Gideon Rachman of the *Financial Times*, China's hosting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit and the celebration

[14] Sharon Seah et al., "The State of Southeast Asia," *ISEAS—Yusof Ishak Institute* (2024), pp. 34–7, https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/The-State-of-SEA-2024.pdf

[15] The White House, *National Security Strategy,* October 12, 2022, https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/8-November-Combined-PDF-for-Upload.pdf

[16] Yuen Foong Khong and Joseph Linyong Liow, "Southeast Asia is Starting to Choose: Why the Region is Leaning toward China," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2025, pp. 151–61, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/southeast-asia-starting-choose-khong-liow

[17] See the Anatomy of Choice Alignment Index (AOCAI) website for an interactive approach to the data: https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/cag/research/aocai

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of the 80th anniversary of World War II's ending in September 2025 held great symbolic significance: they brought together the leaders of China, Russia, North Korea, Iran—what some have called "the axis of upheaval"—a group of nations intent on changing the (US-led) world order.[18] US President Trump certainly noticed and lost no time in posting a message to Chinese President Xi: "Please give my warmest regards to Vladimir Putin, and Kim Jong Un, as you conspire against the United States of America."[19] Although one cannot be sure how tongue-in-cheek Trump's posting was, Rachman's concern was that the US had put itself in a poor position to round up allies to counter this "axis," given the upheaval the US itself was creating:

> [Since] taking office in January, Trump has sown confusion and dismay within the Western alliance—threatening the sovereignty of Canada and Denmark and imposing 15% tariffs on the EU. Japan and South Korea, which both host American military bases, have also been hit with 15% tariffs. Taiwan, which China covets and which America has pledged to protect, got 20% tariffs.[20]

Especially inexplicable to Rachman was Trump's reversal of twenty years of US strategic cultivation of India "as a counterweight to a rising China." By imposing a 50% tariff rate on India, presumably for India's sin of buying Russian oil, Trump incentivized India to seek rapprochement with China; he also rekindled a "school of thought within the Indian elite that sees Russia as an old and reliable friend—and the US as treacherous and unreliable." For Rachman, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's first visit to China in 7 years, presumably to attend the SCO summit, and his participating in a "warm group photo with Xi and Putin," was a deliberate message to the US." "A massive act of geopolitical self-harm" was how James Crabtree described the consequences of Trump's alienation of India.[21] David Rennie of *The Economist* concurs with this assessment; he suggests that Trump's actions, by leading India to rethink its relations with the US, China, and Russia, is one of three opportunities where China can "notch wins in a global narrative war" and "increase its [global] influence" in the Trump 2.0 years.[22]

China's second opportunity resides in "clean tech." Trump's skepticism about climate change and renewable energy cedes leadership on tackling environmental degradation to China. China is not only at the forefront of producing affordable and high-quality EVs or electric vehicles, but it is also the "dominant provider of solar panels, wind turbines and advanced batteries . . . and an expert in building the smart electrical grids needed to knit green technologies together."[23] Trump's obsession with fossil fuels and rejection of clean tech/clean energy harm US economic competitiveness in the long term while enabling China to consolidate its leadership on tackling what most nations consider to be the key existential challenge of the 21st century. The third opportunity is Africa, which China has cultivated for decades through economic aid and the BRI. While Trump has derided African countries with an expletive in 2018, slapped 50% tariffs on South Africa while boycotting the G-20 Summit in late 2025, China has "extended free access to imports from 53 African nations."[24] The implication here is that in the years to come, Africa might find China a more congenial economic and security partner than the US.

[18] Gideon Rachman, "Xi Jinping Plots a Post-American World," *Financial Times*, 6 September, 2025, https://www.ft.com/content/26207277-0a76-4ed4-b34a-8dd27b6c83b4; Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Richard Fontaine, "The Axis of Upheaval: How America's Adversaries Are Uniting to Overturn the Global Order," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2024, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/axis-upheaval-russia-iran-north-korea-taylor-fontaine

[19] Cited in Rachman, "Xi Jinping Plots a Post-American World."

[20] *Ibid*.

[21] The Crabtree remark is cited in Rachman, "Xi Jinping Plots a Post-American World."

[22] David Rennie, "China's Global Opportunity" in The World Ahead 2026, *The Economist*, November 15–21, 2025, pp. 29–30.

[23] *Ibid.*

[24] *Ibid.*

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Similarly, Patrick Wintour, diplomatic editor of Britain's The Guardian, documented how many of Europe's leaders are concluding that the US has changed fundamentally. Of the many expressions of disillusionment, that of Joseph Borrell, the European Union's former High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy ,was especially poignant:

> Trump's plan to end in the war in Ukraine exposes the failure of the EU's appeasement [of Trump] strategy. Giving in to his demands on military spending, tariffs, digital deregulation, multinational taxation, and energy supplies has achieved nothing. With the 28-point plan to end the war in Ukraine, Trump's US can no longer be considered an ally of Europe, which is not even consulted on matters affecting its own security. Europe must acknowledge this shift in US policy and respond accordingly.[25]

While China poses a formidable challenge to US leadership, it remains true that the US has a very powerful set of tools to maintain its position, from its massive military power projection capabilities (including formal military allies), technological prowess, huge-lucrative market, economic resilience to its ability to weaponize the dollar and global financial institutions against adversaries. Shocked by how the US used the latter against Russia after Putin's attempted invasion of Ukraine in 2022, both adversaries and friends of the US are initiating schemes to diversify from relying on the dollar as the reserve currency and primary medium of economic exchange. Nascent moves involving the use of local currencies, instead of the US dollar, to settle trade and energy accounts are gathering pace among those concerned about US's weaponization of its economic instruments. Participating countries include Russia and China (using the yuan and rubles), China and Brazil, and emerging economies such as India, Thailand, and Indonesia. Serious "de-dollarization" will be a long-haul process, but it has not escaped US's notice. When the BRICS countries expressed interest in moving away from the US dollar and hinted at creating a new BRICS currency, President Trump responded by threatening tariffs of 100% on those with the gumption of moving in that direction.[26]

While Trump's choice weapon—tariffs—strikes fear in those who count on exports to the US for their economic well-being, recent examples of his use of tariffs suggest that there are limits to the strategy. Initial announcements of punishing tariffs are often dialed down when the bond or stock market responds negatively, or when the affected country—especially if it is powerful—retaliates. The case of the US-China tit-for-tat interactions over tariffs is instructive. Trump's April 2025 "liberation day" tariffs on China took the effective rate on Chinese imports to 54%; a few days later, China responded with a 34% tariff on US goods and its first restrictions on rare earth exports. A series of tit-for-tat actions, followed by truces, continued for much of the summer.

In October, China expanded its restrictions on rare earth exports. Trump described it as a "sinister and hostile" move which would "make life difficult for virtually every Country in the World." [27] Trump was right: a shortage of those minerals would have severe implications for the production processes of the automotive, semiconductor, defense, and aerospace, as well as precision industrial equipment industries. Their production processes could be brought to a standstill. With China controlling 70% of the mining and 90% of the refining of the rare earth minerals, China seemed to have found an economic and technological pain point of the US that is perhaps even more serious than that felt by Chinese businesses suffering from high US tariffs.

[25] Patrick Wintour, "The Week Europe Realized it Stands Alone against Russian Expansionism," *The Guardian*, 29 November, 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/nov/29/the-week-europe-realised-it-stands-alone-against-russian-expansionism

[26] Kaanita Iyer, "Trump Threatens 100% Tariff on BRICS Countries if They Pursue Creating New Currency," *CNN*, 1 December 2024, https://edition.cnn.com/2024/11/30/politics/trump-brics-currency-tariff/

[27] Ana Swanson, "In Retaliatory Move, Trump Threatens 100% Tariffs on Chinese Goods," *The New York Times*, 10 October, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/10/10/us/politics/trump-xi-china-tariffs-rare-earth.html

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The denouement of this episode took place in Busan, South Korea, in late October. President Trump met Chinese President Xi prior to the APEC summit, and the two sides came to an agreement: the US would cut tariffs imposed on China from 57 to 47% while also halving the 20% "fentanyl-related" tariffs to 10%; China, in turn, will pause the October rare earth controls for 1 year. Wendy Cutler, former Acting Deputy US Trade Representative and a Senior Vice President of the Asia Society Policy Institute, summarized the logic of the situation well: "two can play this game."[28]

Challenges to American Liberalism I

The final challenge posed by China is directed at the liberal political and economic principles championed by the US and instituted in the ATS. Put another way, China's autocratic political system and its state-led approach to economic modernization exist in tension with the political and economic norms of the ATS. This tension may be ignored and overlooked—by both the US and China—when China was a novice participant in the ATS. As China became more experienced and stronger, the question whether its model, often described as the Beijing Consensus, would upend the underlying political and economic norms of the ATS—per the Washington Consensus—became urgent. Given China's authoritarian political system, it can be expected to object to an international order that privileges democracies in both moral and political terms. Except for Trump, all previous US administrations saw the US as occupying the high moral ground: by privileging the rights of the individual citizen, democracies are morally superior to systems that deny their populace such rights. China does not deny that it gives short shrift to individual rights, but it sees itself as emphasizing the primacy of community over the individual. Politically, the ATS assumes that a system of democratic states will be more conducive to peace and stability. Whatever the truth about democracies not going to war against other democracies, China has little trouble pointing to how democracies like the US have routinely employed military force against non-democracies in Latin America, Southeast Asia, and, more recently, the Middle East in pursuit of its own political objectives.[29]

Where China fits in the strategic playbook of the Trump 2.0 administration has only become slightly clearer with the release of its National Security Strategy (NSS) of the US in November 2025. Unlike Biden's 2022, and Trump's 2018 NSSs, the 2025 NSS does not view China as the key strategic challenge or threat. Instead, the emphasis is on restoring "the sovereign borders of the United States" and using the US military "to stop this [immigrant] invasion of our country."[30] The key existential threats to the US have to do with immigration, drug cartels smuggling fentanyl to the US, and foreign incursions into the Western Hemisphere. As far as China is concerned, the focus will be on "rebalancing the economic relationship"[31] and "deterring a conflict over Taiwan, ideally by military overmatch."[32] America will also "not support any unilateral change to the status quo in the Taiwan Strait."[33] The demotion of China as the key challenge can also be inferred from the document's selection of the Middle East—but not East

[28] Cited in Ana Swanson, "In Retaliatory Move, Trump Threatens 100% Tariffs on Chinese Goods."

[29] The Trump 2.0 administration's use of air strikes to kill "narcoterrorists" off the coast of Venezuela in the Fall of 2025 has been condemned by the United Nations High Commissioner of Human Rights as violating international human rights laws. Members of the US Congress are also investigating whether the US Secretary of Defense might have ordered the killing of survivors of those strikes, which constitutes a war crime. See Josh Meyer, "Venezuelan Boat Strikes Lack Legal Justification, Democrats Say," *USA Today*, 28 November, 2025, https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/225/11/28/trump-venezuela-boat-strikes-legal-illegal/87470197007/?utm_source=flipboard&utm_content=USAToday/magazine/Top+Stories

[30] The White House, National Security Strategy of the United States of America, November 2025, https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf, p. 1.

[31] *Ibid.*, p.20.

[32] *Ibid.*, p. 23.

[33] *Ibid.*.

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Asia or Europe– as a "core vital interest." The US needs to prevent "an adversarial power from dominating the Middle East, its oil and gas supplies, and the chokepoints through which they pass . . . ."[34] Past depictions of US strategy have always deemed it vital for the US to prevent a hostile hegemon from dominating not just the Middle East, but also Western Europe and East Asia. By omitting the latter regions while emphasizing securing the Middle East and the Western Hemisphere (via the Trump Corollary), the 2025 NSS is foregrounding the direction of travel of Trump's security strategy: a US disengaging from Europe and East Asia, with the medium to long term objective of shifting the primary burden of defending the two regions to their inhabitants. Many in Europe have already anticipated this given Trump and Vice-President J D Vance's hectoring them as "free riders;" East Asia's leaders, however, remain in denial about the possibility of US retrenchment.

China's challenge, therefore, consists in neutralizing and defenestrating the ATS association of democratic politics with a higher morality for the individual (fulfillment of individual rights) and the international system (peace and stability). China is doing this not just because of its high valuation of community rights, but more crucially, to protect and legitimize its domestic governance system—an authoritarian government led by the Chinese Communist Party. Hence, as Lim and Ikenberry have argued, this "imperative to preserve the authority and legitimacy of a specific domestic political configuration—one-party rule by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)—will be the key feature of a "illiberal Chinese hegemony."[35]

On the economic front, China's challenge consists in its mixed strategy that relies on market mechanisms as well as state intervention to advance economic growth and resilience. The strong hand of the Chinese state, whether in picking champions or the provision of subsidies for high-priority or sensitive industries, often working in tandem with state-owned enterprises, was seen as a deviation from market principles and unfair by the US and the West. Economists such as Dani Rodrik argued that developing countries that relied completely on the market and free trade tend to do less well economically than those that experimented and picked and chose the aspects of the economy subjected to market discipline or state guidance. Add to these deviations from market principles accusatons of China's theft of intellectual property, forcible technology transfer, and Xi Jinping's "Made in China 2025" policy of achieving self-sufficiency in key technologies, it is hard to escape the impression that China's acceptance of the ATS economic rules is partial: China observes the rules when they suit it and ignores them when they do not. If China's approach had resulted in lethargic economic growth, its ATS-inconsistent behavior would not have mattered.

The fact that China racked up 8–9% average GDP growth for four decades (to 2020) is what concerns the US and supporters of the ATS: China's economic model works and appears poised, by the early 2020s, to challenge the core principles of the ATS or Washington Consensus. The success of the China challenge would have been demonstrated by China's overtake of the US as the largest economy in 2030, as some have predicted. However, the Covid-19 pandemic, China's drastic response to it, the bursting of the real estate bubble, and demographic challenges have led some to argue that China's economy has plateaued or peaked, and it is unlikely to overtake the US by 2030, if at all. For our purposes, however, the more salient fact is that China's economic performance in the last forty years has shown that its dirigiste model works and constitutes a formidable alternative to the ATS's "free market and free trade" approach.

Perhaps the best evidence of the seriousness of the China challenge can be seen in the Trump and Biden administrations' responses. Donald Trump's accusations of China "raping" the US was premised on a narrative about China's not playing by the ATS rules. Xi's "Made in China

[34] *Ibid.*, p. 5.

[35] Darren J. Lim and G. John Ikenberry, "China and the Logic of Illiberal Hegemony," *Security Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (2023), pp.1–31.

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2025" policy was seen by Trump as an attempt by China to outgrow the US, which Trump was not going to countenance. These concerns help explain Trump's trade war against China. Similarly, the Biden administration not only kept all the tariffs Trump imposed on China but also passed the Chips and Science Act (2022) to provide government funds (up to US $280 billion) to entice US and other manufacturers of semiconductor chips to "reshore" to the US. This is, of course, a form of industrial policy and not that dissimilar from the US has accused China of doing. In that sense, the Act showcases the seriousness of the Chinese challenge: the Biden administration seems to have concluded that if you cannot beat them, you join them (in leveraging on the strong hand of the state on selected aspects of economic policy).

China's rise and its industrial policies with Chinese characteristics were not the only factors that convinced the US of the necessity of doing something similar. Two other factors have galvanized the move toward industrial policy: the Covid global pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Both led to significant supply-chain disruptions and raised anxieties about the lack of sufficient domestically based stockpiles, especially in the event of an (inter)national emergency.[36] The Covid pandemic highlighted the importance of supply-chain security—in something as basic as masks and protective gear, and of course vaccines—not just for the US, but for much of the world. Russia's invasion of Ukraine raised serious concerns about the security of energy supplies for Europe as the latter joined the US in imposing severe economic sanctions against Russia.

While China has contested some of the key political and economic ATS norms, it has been protective of the norm of respect for the sovereignty of states and the desirability of multilateral cooperation. The sovereignty norm, conceived as "the freedom to choose one's internal political system and to define one's friends and enemies,"[37] is a constitutive norm of international society that is prized by all states, not just liberal ones like the US and Europe. In fact, China—like many other non-democracies—is far more protective of the norm than most Western liberal states. The latter, in China's view, have eroded the norm through their strident criticisms of, and application of sanctions against, those they perceive as suppressing the human rights of their citizens. International rules such as the responsibility to protect (R2P), especially the third pillar sanctioning military intervention against states that "manifestly fail" to protect their citizens, are also seen as anti-thetical to the sovereignty and non-interference norm. A China-inspired global order, some have argued, will be much more protective of the sovereignty norm, to the point where states are expected to deal with one another as moral equals regardless of how they treat their population.[38] For China and many non-democracies, privileging the sovereignty and non-interference (in the domestic affairs of others) norm will supposedly be more conducive to international peace and stability.

Challenges to US Liberalism II

Our discussion of challenges to the ATS would not be complete without factoring in the internal war on American liberal democracy. If the ATS involved a writ large extension of US domestic political principles to the international sphere, it follows that the polarization of US domestic politics today threatens to undermine the legitimacy and attractiveness of the ATS. A recent Carnegie Endowment for International Peace report found that "Over the past two decades,

[36] Maiya Clark, "Revitalizing the National Defense Stockpile for an Era of Great-Power Competition," *The Heritage Foundation*, 2022, https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2022-01/BG3680.pdf

[37] Kanti Bajpai and Evan Laksmana, "Asian Conceptions of International Order: What Asians Want," *International Affairs*, Vol. 99, No. 4 (2023), pp.1371–81.

[38] Stephen M. Walt, "China Wants a Rules-based International Order Too," *Foreign Policy*, 3 March, 2021, https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/31/china-wants-a-rules-based-international-order-too/

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democratic backsliding has become a defining trend in global politics."[39] The report identified twenty-seven backsliders worldwide, not counting right-wing populist movements in countries such as Germany and Sweden, with the potential of winning power. "Backsliders" in Europe include Hungary, Poland, and Turkey; in Asia, Thailand, Myanmar, India, the Philippines; in Latin America, Brazil; and in North America, the US.

The backslider of most consequence for the ATS is, of course, the US, or rather, the persona and politics of Donald Trump, 45th and 47th President of the US. Trump's insistence that the 46th Presidential election was stolen from him, and his encouraging his MAGA supporters to storm the Capital on January 2021, provides strong evidence of US democratic backsliding and political decay. Peaceful handover of power through elections has been a defining feature of working liberal democracies. The shock of 6 January—to half of America who voted for Joe Biden and much of the rest of the world—was that American politics has become so polarized that a segment of losing side could not countenance handing power to "the other side." Equally worrisome, Republicans and Democrats today consider "the other" as "enemies." For Francis Fukuyama, January 6 is a reflection of how "American institutions have been decaying steadily for some time" and "are now at a major crisis point."[40] The political philosopher Michael Sandel attributes the decay of those institutions to the decades-long feelings of disempowerment by Americans, frustrated that "their voices do not matter . . . that the moral fabric of community has been eroded." Globalization was the major external cause of this phenomenon, creating winners and losers and "widening inequalities of . . . . wealth." Sandel provides a simple yet elegant explanation on how the latter enabled the rise of Trump:

> Those who have landed on top during the age of globalization have come.
> to believe that their success is their own doing and that they therefore deserve.
> all the rewards the market bestows on them, and by implication, that those.
> who struggle, those left behind, must deserve their fate too. This gives rise.
> to a sense of anger, resentment and humiliation among those who did not.
> benefit from globalization. Many working people, especially those without.
> university degrees, feel that elites look down on them. Donald Trump speaks.
> to these grievances . . . . This . . . .is the heart of his political appeal.[41]

Sandel's analysis, blending economic, political, and psychological factors, helps shed light on the rise of the MAGA movement, its "America First" policies, and the implications for the ATS. The key word in the MAGA discourse, I submit, is "Again." The word is psychologically and politically significant: it assumes that America is no longer great, that it lost its greatness and prestige somewhere along the way (since Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society" reforms?). Americans who have internalized this belief—whether banged into them by Trump or by social media's echo chambers—that the US has been a sucker, raped, and screwed by China, Europe, Japan, and rest of the world, on the economic and military fronts, would by definition, have qualms about claiming that their country is still the prestigious hegemon atop the hierarchy of nations. A US with such self-doubt will be psychologically ill-equipped to expect or ask the world to acknowledge and respect it as the reigning hegemon and "leader of the free world." The MAGA worldview, in other words, is a self-diminishing discourse; it is not a narrative that bestows

[39] Thomas Carothers, "Understanding and Responding to Global Democratic Backsliding," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2022, https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/10/20/understanding-and-responding-to-global-democratic-backsliding-pub-88173

[40] Francis Fukuyama, "It's Not Too Late to Reverse America's Political Decay," *Financial Times,* 1 March, 2024, https://www.ft.com/content/2b204c19-4050-4316-852c-9b0dbfdf23a1

[41] Yuanyue Dang, "Michael Sandel on Donald Trump's Rise, Meritocracy and US-China Rivalry," *South China Morning Post*, 3 November, 2025, https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3331224/michael-sandel-donald-trumps-rise-meritocracy-and-us-china-rivalry?module=feature_package_2&pgtype=homepageSee also Michael Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* (Penguin Books: 2021).

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self-respect, and hence not a narrative for winning the respect of the world. This absence of self-belief is new, it is psychologically debilitating, and it prevents the US from asserting world leadership.

If the MAGA psychology makes America incapable of leading, the "America First" policies flowing from it undermine America's claim to being the "leader of the free world." For if the US has been taken such grievous advantage of by its allies and adversaries, it stands to reason that the US would want to rectify the situation by all means available to it. Only after such successful rectification would the US become great again. In the economic realm, unfair trade and bad deals hollowed out America's manufacturing base and impoverished its working class. Hence the necessity of an "America First" policy of protectionism: imposing tariffs on those with substantial trade surpluses to "rectify" the trade imbalances, per Trump's initiation of its trade war in 2108 and the liberation day tariffs of April 2025. The Biden administration, despite its rejection of the MAGA worldview, shied away from rescinding the tariffs imposed by Trump, for fear of antagonizing the MAGA base. Similarly, to restore US manufacturing prowess, policies to force US multinationals to "reshore" and foreign companies to "onshore" (to the US) are presumed necessary.

Analysts have described the Trump approach as "transactional," and that is undoubtedly true, but for many, they are transactions done at gunpoint, via threats and coercive tactics that they consider unbecoming of the hegemon. Trump and his MAGA supporters will probably agree that the US has to resort to such tactics because America's prestige—"the shadow cast by [its] power"—is no longer what it once was. States with high prestige, according to Robert Gilpin, can generally achieve their aims without having to use their power.[42] The Trump administration finds it necessary to resort to using its economic and military power to threaten and force its friends and adversaries to help "make America great again"—from reshoring manufacturing to the US to increasing their military spending substantially—suggests that US feels that it is not enough to rely on its prestige to achieve its objectives.

Trump's tariffs and his asking European and Asian allies to more than double (on average) their defense budget also indicate a hegemon who is no longer willing to provide the public goods that undergird regional and global order. The Biden administration did not rescind Trump's tariffs, and it also pressed allies to spend more, albeit by less coercive means. The second Trump administration's focus on passing the defense buck and leveraging on its enormous market and technological might to extract payment and obedience from others may work in the short term. US allies will still pay obeisance and negotiate the best terms they can, but in the long term, they are likely to look for alternatives.

Externally, if the "America First" policies of Trump 2.0 persist in the form and content witnessed so far—exiting Ukraine on terms more favorable to Russia than Ukraine, threats of annexing Greenland, Canada; "extra-judicial killings" of unverified "narcoterrorists" off the coast of Venezuela, boycotting the G-20 in South Africa on grounds that latter's ill treatment of South Afrikaners—both allies and adversaries are likely to conclude that US is no longer the predictable, reliable, and prestigious superpower it used to be.

The reactions of two of America's closest allies, Canada and Germany, demonstrate this. Soon after becoming Canada's Prime Minister, Mark Carney opined that "The old relationship we had with the United States, based on deepening integration of our economies and tight security and military cooperation, is over."[43] His foreign minister, Melanie Joly, responding to Trump's threat to make Canada the 51st state while imposing tariffs of 25% on Canadian steel and aluminum, warned: "If the US can do this to us, their closest friend, then nobody is safe," she

[42] Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 31.

[43] Sean Boyton and Saba Aziz, "Canada's 'Old Relationship' with U.S. 'is Over' Amid Trump Tariffs: Carney," *Global News*, 27 March, 2025, https://globalnews.ca/news/11100883/donald-trump-tariffs-auto-canada-response/

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said, highlighting the broader implications of US's aggressive trade policies.[44] Similarly, in the months before he became Chancellor of Germany, Fredric Merz, a staunch Atlanticist, argued that Europe can "longer rely on US protection."[45] Although he has backtracked from those sentiments since assuming office, he continued to believe that Trump is "largely indifferent to the fate of Europe."[46] The 28-point US-Russia plan to end the war in Ukraine, negotiated without Ukrainian and European participation, which basically gave Russia most of what it wanted at Ukraine's expense, has only reinforced this sense of US abandonment of Europe.[47]

A necessary caveat to the analysis provided here is the need for caution in assuming that Trump and his "America First" approach represent the future trajectory of US politics and foreign policy. When Joe Biden defeated Trump in 2020, he made strenuous efforts to bring the US back to its historical proclivities in ways reminiscent of the ATS. Rejecting the MAGA worldview, Biden portrayed the US as returning to the [head of the] table, i.e., reasserting its world leadership role. Under Biden, the US re-joined the United Nations Human Rights Council, the World Health Organization, and Paris Climate Agreement, all of which the US left under the Trump administration. Instead of excoriating US allies as "free riders" and "deadbeats," the Biden administration engaged and cajoled them to join the US in meeting strategic challenges posed by China and Russia. He also framed the latter geopolitical struggles as one between "democracy vs autocracy" and it convened a "summit of democracies." Biden, however, chose not to rescind the tariffs imposed by Trump, nor did he try to rejoin the TPP—now in the guise of the CPTPP—a signature economic achievement of the Obama administration. If Kamala Harris had won the Presidential election of 2024, she could conceivably have built on Biden's efforts. But she lost, and Trump won both the electoral College and popular vote, suggesting that Trump's 1.0 victory was not a fluke. Whoever comes after Trump 2.0 will have to deal with the MAGA base. Vice-President J D Vance, a possible successor, will, of course, ride the wave, but even Democrats will have to contend with that segment of America that feels hard done by the external world and who no longer willing to bear the hegemon's burden.

If, as I have tried to argue, the two tributes I wrote about in the original essay—willing acknowledgement by others of America's hegemonic leadership and emulation of its liberal democracy—are no longer central to America's understanding of itself and what it wants from the rest of world, it would seem that the ATS is unlikely to endure. We may say it was a short success, good while it lasted. Those who bought into the ATS—US allies and strategic partners (or tributaries)—are scrambling for cover today. To return to the tianxia-guojia observation by Zhang Yongjin cited at the beginning of this essay, we are beginning to see a situation where the US's place in world (underpinned by the MAGA psychology and its "America First" policies) shows signs of transiting from rule over "tianxia" to contested rule (within the US polity) over "guojia."

Conclusion

In his seminal treatise *On Global Order*, Oxford political scientist Andrew Hurrell surveyed the sources of global order and argued that since "the problem of domestic political order has been solved," the challenge of maintaining global order was threefold: "the need to capture shared

[44] Nandini Singh, "Canada Sounds the Alarm as US Trade War Escalates Ahead of G7 Summit," *Business Standard*, 13 March, 2025, https://www.business-standard.com/world-news/canada-g7-summit-us-trade-policies-threaten-sovereignty-tariffs-annexation-125031300569_1.html

[45] Anne-Sylvaine Chassany and Laura Pitel, "Germany's Friedrich Merz Says Europe Can no Longer Rely on US Protection," *Financial Times,* 22 February, 2025, https://www.ft.com/content/8be43051-bfcf-4664-9143-f9fe582c2f3a

[46] Noah Keate, "Germany's Merz Admits Europe Has Been a 'Free-Rider' on US Defense," *Politico*, 18 July, 2025, https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-free-rider-us-defense-germany-friedrich-merz-donald-trump-nato/

[47] Wintour, "The Week Europe Realized it Stands Alone against Russian Expansionism."

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and common interests [among states]," "manage unequal power," and "mediate cultural diversity and value conflict."[48] If these are the three tasks that need to be accomplished, the ATS is in trouble today. As I have tried to argue above, the enthusiasm for capturing shared and common interests has diminished significantly because of the shifting balance of power, that is, China's catch-up with the US and the resulting geopolitical competition. The US and China have also not come to a modus vivendi on how to manage unequal power among themselves and between themselves and others—the US is pushing back on China's challenge to its hegemonic status, and the two superpowers are pressuring others to align with them. And there seems to be a lack of tools or will to mediate cultural diversity and value conflict, judging by the way the West and the East are pitting their values against each other across their range of competing initiatives.

Add to the above China-related challenges the problem of domestic order, which, contrary to Hurrell's claim, has *not* been solved. In China and Russia, strongman rule prevails despite yearnings for change. But for both cases, the relationship between domestic order and international order is unclear because neither leads the world. The issue of domestic political order, for now, is most relevant for the US, self-described (at least before Trump) "leader of the free world." As argued above, US domestic political order is under severe stress. At issue are some of the key liberal values that post-World War II America internalized and sought to export or impose on the world. Francis Fukuyama puts it this way: "For most of the country's history, its people believed in some version of American exceptionalism according to which the country would be an inspiration to oppressed peoples around the world." But to his chagrin, "one of the biggest transformations that has occurred in US society over the past decade has been a revolution in the moral evaluation of the country itself."[49]

A US unsure of, and at war with itself, combined with the challenges stemming from China's rise, may just be enough to deal the final blow to the ATS as we know it. In an October 2024 exchange with Yan Xuetong in Beijing, John Mearsheimer, America's pre-eminent realist and ardent watcher of the implications (for the US) of China's rise, concluded that "the existing US-led international order, which China integrated into in the 1990s and early 2000s, was collapsing while a Chinese-led order . . . .was emerging."[50] The analysis presented in chapter is consistent with Mearsheimer's observation that the US-led international order, aka the ATS, is "collapsing," but I would hold off pronouncing the arrival of the Chinese-led order. Gramsci's adage about "the old world is dying and the new world struggles to be born"[51] captures the condition we find ourselves in better.

[48] Andrew Hurrell, *On Global Order: Power, Values, and the Constitution of International Society* (Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 1–2.

[49] Fukuyama, "It's Not Too Late to Reverse America's Political Decay."

[50] As cited in Orange Wang, "Why a Kamala Harris White House Could Mean More Conflict for US and China," *South China Morning Post*, 13 October, 2024, https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3282185/why-kamala-harris-white-house-could-mean-more-conflict-us-and-china

[51] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1971), pp. 275–6.

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