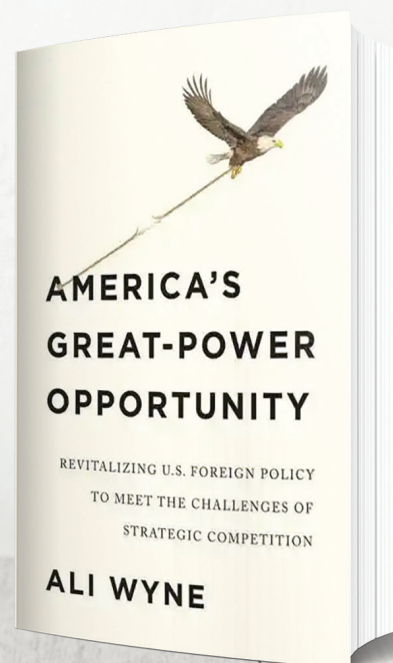


America's Great-Power Opportunity

Revitalizing U.S. Foreign Policy to Meet the Challenges of Strategic Competition



Ali Wyne, Polity, Cambridge, United Kingdom, 2022, 224 pages

Ambassador Douglas Lute, Retired

Lt. Col. Jordan Becker, PhD, U.S. Army

Order, Guglielmo Ferrero contended as he watched it disintegrate in mid-twentieth-century Europe, is “the set of rules that man must respect in order not to live in the permanent terror of his fellow men, of the innate madness of men and its unpredictable explosions—a set of rules that man calls freedom.”¹ In modern practice, this means predictable, transparent, norms-based interactions among states seeking to pursue their own interests as they relate to others, with reduced risk of unpredictable outcomes or violent coercion. Modern scholars Rebecca Friedman Lissner and Mira Rapp-Hooper define this as “the governing arrangements among states that establish

fundamental rules, principles, and institutions ... the basic framework that creates rules and settles expectations among states.”²

The current international order is under strain, and consequent concerns about living in one or another variety of permanent terror abound. While arguments about history “accelerating” may just be artifacts of cognitive biases or implicit theories of commentators writing current history, the current international order is, at a minimum, undergoing change, and change implies risk.³ If a bipolar rivalry between the Soviet Union and the United States defined the post-World War II order, and American hegemony defined the post-Cold

War order, then a putative “exit” from U.S. hegemony suggests that significant changes are inevitable, whether or not the current order is in fact “unravelling,” as Alexander Cooley and Dan Nexon have argued.⁴

Ferrero made his observations about order while examining the Concert of Europe, a defining example of a security regime—the defining example according to Bob Jervis.⁵ An Italian writing in French while exiled to Switzerland for antagonizing Mussolini, he

strained international order while avoiding the kinds of catastrophes that often precede such reconstructions.

In Washington and many allied capitals, strategists have struggled to identify themes around which to build national consensus on how—even in the most general sense—to think about international ordering, what needs to be reconstructed, and what needs to be jettisoned. The Trump administration’s 2017 *National Security Strategy* recognized shifts in the distribution

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could be forgiven for having grave concerns about the future (and present) of international order. He contended that orders are generally constructed in the wake of disastrous events upending previous orders once humans have had enough of terror and wished to again curtail their “innate madness.” Bear Braumoeller argued, analogously (and far more recently), that “war makes orders and orders make war.”⁶ Braumoeller’s formulation borrows consciously from Charles Tilly’s famous aphorism that “war made the state, and the state made war.”⁷

So, while it is not a foregone conclusion, shifts in hegemonic systems and more broadly in international ordering are likely to be fraught, if not downright dangerous.⁸ Recognizing that the shift of relative economic power globally toward the Indo-Pacific, combined with Chinese and Russian authoritarian revanchism, is likely to lead to some form of great power rivalry, scholars and strategists around the world have considered ways to anticipate and adapt to shifts to benefit their constituencies.

A “near-consensus that the liberal international order led by the United States since World War II is fraying” has created an impetus to think about “reconstructing” international order as if we were living in a “post war” period, while averting the war itself. Navigating a “safe passage” into a posthegemonic period will likely be the central challenge of the coming decade—and it is far from guaranteed.⁹ The key strategic challenge of our time is reconstructing a

of power internationally and sought to address them by “mak[ing] America great again” internationally, focusing more unilaterally on American power than previous approaches had, with a particular emphasis on competition with China.¹⁰ The Biden administration’s interim *National Security Strategic Guidance* and *National Defense Strategy* have similarly focused on challenges to the current international order.¹¹ NATO’s 2022 *Strategic Concept* likewise identifies threats from Russia and competition with China as key factors structuring the international system.¹²

In a period in which domestic consensus is elusive (to say nothing of multilateral consensus), the idea that “great power competition” is an accurate descriptor of the international security environment seems to be one area in which political actors across countries and ideologies agree.

It is into the debate about how to reconstruct the existing international order in the shadow of great power competition that Ali Wyne steps with his new book, *America’s Great-Power Opportunity: Revitalizing U.S. Foreign Policy to Meet the Challenges of Strategic Competition*.¹³

Wyne acknowledges that great power competition is, in fact, a reasonable descriptor of the international security environment. He argues convincingly, however, that it is less reasonable, and potentially harmful, as foreign policy prescription. The United States is less influential, in relative terms, than it was at the height of the post-Cold War “unipolar moment”; whenever one dates that peak, it

is not occurring in 2022.¹⁴ Wyne introduces his arguments by acknowledging the need for what he calls a “unifying construct” for American foreign policy, and he identifies challenges that are almost psychological in nature (both at the individual and collective levels) to thinking about foreign policy without “ballast” or an “anchor” provided by a clear adversary.

At the same time, he introduces his case that the United States should “articulate a forward-looking conception of its role in the world, identifying cases where circumscribed competition with China and Russia might further that vision.”¹⁵ This case for circumscription is based on three risks of focusing excessively on rivalry with China and Russia: the risk of stumbling into an “expansive, yet poorly specified struggle against two formidable powers”; the risk of eliciting defensive responses and driving Russia and China together; and the risk of making it more difficult to manage transnational challenges that require international cooperation. He contends that the United States’ role in international affairs depends primarily on its ability to “restore the appeal of its domestic example.”

Wyne criticizes commentators’ and practitioners’ tendency to reach for analogies—the two he identifies as both facile and troublesome are the 1930s and the Cold War. The key difference between now and the 1930s, he contends, is that there is a robust international order to update today, despite the many challenges associated with doing so. He identifies nine major differences between the current period and the Cold War, leading him to argue that “on balance, contemporary contrasts between today’s disorder and the apparent stability of the Cold War reflect a misplaced nostalgia.”¹⁶ He nonetheless concludes that we can extract three key lessons from the 1930s and the Cold War era: first, ideologies affect behavior; second, early years of protracted competitions can be the most dangerous because of high levels of uncertainty; and third, uncertainty plays a larger role than policy makers often acknowledge.

Wyne concludes that while neither Russia nor China constitutes an existential threat to the United States in the way the Soviet Union did, complacency is dangerous, and the risks of nuclear confrontation should remain front of mind for strategists. In fact, he suggests, fear in the minds of officials regarding the dangers of confrontation can play a constructive role in establishing a stable relationship between great powers in an emerging

international order. Paradoxically, Wyne argues that the simmering anxiety of great power competition among nuclear-armed powers combined with the “quiet confidence” of a strong and domestically stable United States can open opportunities for a relatively stable international order in which rivals can simultaneously compete and cooperate, depending on the issues and stakes.

This argument brings Wyne and his readers back to the fundamentally psychologically oriented aspect of his overall case: the competitive challenge facing the United States hinges on the extent to which the United States is confident enough in itself to focus on renewing the fundamental sources of its own power, maintaining awareness of its rivals without allowing their actions to determine its own.

What, then, are the implications of Wyne’s general argument that “centering America’s role in the world around” competition with China and Russia “risks subordinating affirmative planning to defensive reactions”?

America’s Great-Power Opportunity is an ambitious work, and its implications are legion. Here, we focus on three that are likely to coincide with major foreign policy debates among U.S. actors and with allies and partners around the world as they grapple with changes in the relative distribution of power in the international system, ordering, and alliance structures.¹⁷

First, if not great power competition, then what? If great power competition is not the appropriate overarching conceptual framework for U.S. foreign policy, and particularly if it

Ambassador Douglas

Lute is the former U.S. permanent representative to NATO and retired from the U.S. Army at the rank of lieutenant general. He is the Robert F. McDermott Distinguished Chair in the Department of Social Sciences at the U.S. Military Academy, West Point.

Jordan Becker is an academy professor and director of the Social Science Research Lab at the U.S. Military Academy, West Point. He is also affiliated with the Centre for Security, Diplomacy and Strategy at the Vrije Universiteit Brussels, and *L’Institut des hautes études de défense nationale* (IHEDN, The Institute for Advanced National Defense Studies) and *L’Institut de recherche stratégique de l’École militaire* (IRSEM, The Institute for Strategic Research at the Military Academy).

is an inaccurate description of the current international system, what three-word alternatives are available?¹⁸ Brevity and pithiness are important here—an organizing principle that can't be generally defined in a few words is unlikely to capture the lasting attention of foreign policy elites or the wider population. Wyne offers “eight principles to inform U.S. foreign policy,” which is a start.¹⁹ What, however, should we “name” a foreign policy approach for the coming decades that aligns with those principles?

Second, what are the practical policy implications of Wyne's findings and the eight principles he articulates? What, for example, do Wyne's principles suggest the United States and its allies do about the Russo-Ukrainian War? There are surely large segments of electorates and elites across the United States and its allies to whom Wyne's approach will appeal and who will likely want to understand such practical implications. What does renewal of America's domestic sources of strength look like in practice, and how do America's diplomats communicate that abroad? What precisely *are* the “limits to America's unilateral influence,” and how can America best exercise influence within them? What does international cooperation, including with rivals, look like, particularly if the United States is able, as Wyne prescribes, to truly focus on its vocation in the Indo-Pacific?

Third, there are also likely large segments of both electorates and foreign-policy elites (such as U.S. primacists who also see the United States as in decline), who will find Wyne's arguments so counterintuitive as to have difficulty dealing with them seriously.²⁰ This segment of American society, in particular, is not limited to a fringe; a venerable current of international relations scholarship holds that “alliances are against and only derivatively for, someone or something.”²¹ More recently, Kyle Lascurettes argues that rather than being inclusive, orders are deliberately constructed by leading powers to “exclude particular actors and entities in world politics” and that international orders originate, in fact, from “the logic of competition and exclusion.”²²

The policy implications that Lascurettes draws from his analysis are not so different from Wyne's: a recognition of the fact that “the United States does not control the future shape of order and can instead only push it in a ‘least bad’ direction,” which, for Lascurettes, is likely to lead to a near-term accommodation with China.

On the other hand, Lascurettes acknowledges that such a recognition would be difficult for U.S. elites. We assess that it will be difficult for a significant proportion of the American electorate as well, which raises a third question: How likely is it that the United States and its allies will be able to forge some type of domestic and multilateral consensus around Wyne's positive, but somewhat nebulous, vision of a foreign policy approach? The principles Wyne convincingly argues for seem to demand some sort of minimal domestic consensus in the United States and, by implication, its allies, on the basic contours of an affirmative foreign policy approach. Is such a consensus foreseeable now, or in two, four, or twelve years?

To return to the Ukraine example mentioned above, Russia's strategic theory of victory in the Russo-Ukrainian war appears to center the idea of maintaining pressure on Ukraine long enough to exhaust Ukraine and its Western allies' collective ability to maintain a common sense of purpose, enabling them to continue to resource and prosecute their side of the war. Conversely, Ukraine and the West's theory of victory seems to center on the idea of waiting for Russia's army to break apart on the shoals of an unsuccessful military campaign in Ukraine before Russia's hope for Western disunity and failure is attained.

Each side's theory of victory seems, then, to rely in part on a breakdown of domestic consensus (in whatever form it takes according to the different parties' regime types) on the part of the other side. Thus, in both the near- and the long-term, strategic success for the United States and its allies depends on achieving minimal consensus on broad aims. Those aims may involve excluding autocracies from international order, and there is some question as to the United States' ability to do that as the limitations of its power become more apparent. A consensus on the extent to which an emerging order is inclusive as opposed to exclusive, and on which entities to include or exclude, could be the floor for a workable strategic approach.

America's Great-Power Opportunity offers affirmative motivation and general direction to achieve such a consensus but leaves much to be determined. This is natural—in reality, strategy is most often developed on the fly rather than as the product of a grand vision from on high. How the United States and its allies navigate the domestic and intra-alliance politics of the

Russo-Ukrainian war will offer some initial contours of what such an approach might look like. The incorporation of that approach into a broader understanding of emerging international systemic factors will point toward what a reconstructed international order might look like—or if such a (semi) peaceful reconstruction is even possible.

How, then, should U.S. policy makers consider shaping the emerging international order? Wyne is correct that “great power competition” is an accurate description of the current dynamic, but a poor prescription for policy. Ferrero’s notion of reconstruction is helpful, but rests on the observation that orders are mostly reconstructed after catastrophe. The foreign policy challenge of our time, however, is to prevent such a catastrophe.

We contend, therefore, that *reaffirmation* of a transparent, open, and nonexpansionary international order is an appropriate guiding theme for leaders in the United States and its allies. Reaffirmation entails an acknowledgement that the order the United States and its allies have constructed and tended to since the end of the Cold War was always international, but never a “world order.” It also entails an acknowledgement that order building (and order maintenance) are in large part about exclusion—or determining which entities are part of an order and which are not. The U.S. approach to ordering should support the sovereign right of each state to choose how it positions itself internationally—thereby clarifying that it is not interested in coercively expanding the current order but will not accept coercive attempts to shrink it either.

Together, these acknowledgements imply that rather than actively seeking to extend the breadth of the

current order that includes the United States and its allies and partners, leaders should focus on deepening the institutional anchors of that order and defending them assiduously. In Europe, the major question is whether Ukraine is inside or outside this order. Battlefield developments in the Russo-Ukrainian war will be the key determinant here, and Ukraine’s Western allies have an interest in ensuring that this decision is made by a sovereign Ukraine, not imposed by Russia. However, the nature of the international order will continue to affect those battlefield developments as well. For instance, the fact that countries sanctioning Russia comprise over 60 percent of global GDP but only 16 percent of global population suggests that much of the “Global South” has chosen nonalignment.²³

The question is a bit murkier in Asia, but a similar dynamic exists. China appears uninterested in supporting a U.S.-led order there, and there is contestation about the frontiers of that order. First among those appears to be the future status of Taiwan. So, as rivals seek to limit the breadth of U.S.-led regional orders in the West and the Far East of Eurasia, Braumoeller’s insights about the peace-inducing nature of orders for those within them, coupled with the dangers associated with establishing their boundaries, are especially important.²⁴

By acknowledging limitations in its ability to order the entire planet, the United States can enable itself to focus on reconsolidating the existing order to seize its great power opportunity. Doing so requires strengthening and deepening the institutions that make up that order—from alliances and international organizations to domestic institutions safeguarding liberal democracies. ■

Notes

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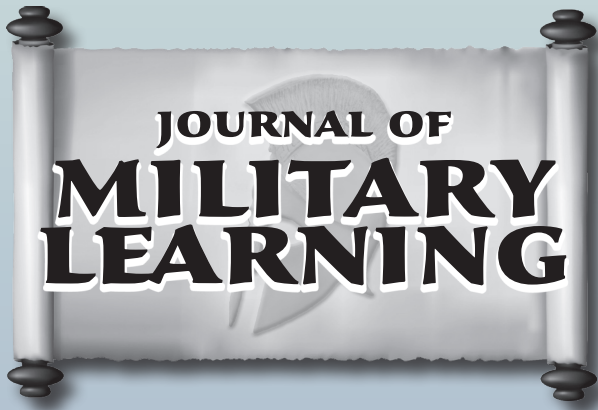
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