



FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Published by the Council on Foreign Relations

[Home](#) > The Real History of the Liberal Order

Tuesday, August 7, 2018 - 12:00am
The Real History of the Liberal Order
Neither Myth Nor Accident
Michael J. Mazarr

MICHAEL J. MAZARR is Senior Political Scientist at the RAND Corporation.

For 70 years, U.S. commentators have, by and large, supported the idea of a U.S.-led, rules-based international order. Yet recently, more and more [scholars](#) ^[1] and [experts](#) ^[2], including the political scientist Graham Allison writing [in the latest issue](#) ^[3] of *Foreign Affairs*, have started [dismissing](#) ^[4] it as a “[myth](#)” ^[5]. Their argument has more than academic significance: given the accelerating assault on the institutions and practices of the postwar order by politicians around the world, the idea that the system is more mythical than real implies that the United States can get along perfectly well without it.

Yet these critiques typically conflate three different orders: the postwar institutional order, the components of that system that espouse liberal values, and the U.S.-led global military order with its goal of U.S. primacy. Allison rightly worries that a “surge of triumphalism” after 1989 tempted the United States to overreach in promoting liberal values and in its ambitions for primacy. But the foundational postwar order isn’t responsible for that overreach. Allowing that order to melt away would sacrifice perhaps the greatest competitive advantage that a leading power has ever enjoyed.

NO ACCIDENT

Allison’s thoughtful essay makes many important points but goes wrong in three related ways: it misreads the history of the postwar order, exaggerates its goals, and mistakes undue U.S. global activism for the operation of the order itself.

Start with the history. Allison argues that the order was an “unintended consequence” of the Cold War, essentially a historical accident. It emerged out of “fear” and the pursuit of a balance of power, not any intention to reshape world politics. It was, he implies, always a realist power grab dressed up as a way to spread liberal values.

That is at best a one-sided portrait of a complex history. Different officials held different views of the order as they went about building it, but broadly speaking, the United States in the 1940s invested in the United Nations, the international trade regime, and global institutions of economic stability in order to fashion a more ordered world that would be less likely to fall victim to the disasters of the 1930s. These concepts predated the recognition by U.S. diplomats that the U.S. relationship with the Soviet Union was destined to sour. Allison is wrong to say that ideas for postwar institutions emerged “only when [U.S. officials] perceived a Soviet attempt to create an empire.” U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt was deep into discussions with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and others about the creation of the UN by 1941, and formal UN organizations had been put in place by 1943. The Bretton Woods conference, which created the postwar monetary and financial order, was held in 1944.

The scholar Stewart Patrick, an expert on international institutions, examines this history in detail in his magisterial book, *The Best Laid Plans*. The United States' interest in multilateralism, he explains, "not only preceded containment as the organizing framework for U.S. foreign policy, it also outlasted it, into the 1990s." The goal, he makes clear, "was to create an *open world*—a rule-based global order in which peace-loving countries could cooperate to advance their common purposes within international institutions." Only when the hope of including the Soviet Union in that order died away did the United States move "to safeguard the independence and prosperity of a narrower 'Free World' community." Within this vision, the Bretton Woods institutions quickly assumed the most elaborate character. As the historian Mark Mazower notes in *Governing the World*, the postwar economic order "represented a concerted intervention to manage international capitalism far beyond anything the League [of Nations] had ever attempted."

The importance of such ordering mechanisms appears in U.S. national security documents from very early on. Allison quotes NSC-68, a major Truman administration national security policy paper written in 1950, but he leaves out its powerful endorsement of ordering mechanisms. "Even if there were no Soviet Union," the paper argued, the United States would still "face the fact that in a shrinking world the absence of order among nations is becoming less and less tolerable."

The United States did not, then, aim merely to play power politics or deter the Soviet Union after World War II. U.S. officials hoped to establish the foundation for a more collaborative and rules-based world politics. Yet as Allison rightly notes, Roosevelt and others blended realpolitik with their idealism in the shape of the UN Security Council, which puts great powers at its center. The order's institutions and rules focused on geopolitical and economic stability, not on spreading U.S. values.

DEFINING ORDER

From a narrow view of the order's founding objectives, Allison moves on to an exaggerated description of what its advocates think it has achieved. He argues that the order's proponents believe it "has been the principal cause of the so-called long peace among great powers for the past seven decades." I am not aware of anyone who holds such an extreme view of the order's importance. All meaningful treatments of the order recognize that U.S. power and credibility have been essential to the postwar system and view the order's institutions as a complement to other factors underwriting peace and prosperity. This mindset was apparent from the beginning: Mazower explains that the U.S. government made the case for the UN to the American people by preaching "a pragmatic realism—the new international organization was a vital necessity, even if it would not solve all the world's problems."

That leads to the problem of terminology. Allison rightly worries that the idea of the international order is "conceptual Jell-O." But his argument mixes three different phenomena: the bedrock postwar order, the liberal elements of that order, and the global posture of U.S. power. To suggest, as Allison rightly does, that forcible value promotion and efforts to sustain U.S. primacy must be reined in does not imply that the foundational postwar order is a myth.

In fact, the institutional and normative core of the postwar order lies in a large but straightforward set of institutions: the UN system, not only the Security Council and the General Assembly but also the peacekeeping and development units; the major global economic institutions, including the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the Bank for International Settlements, the World Trade Organization, and other institutions for trade negotiations; regional political and economic organizations, such as the EU, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and the African Union; more informal organizations and processes, from the G-7 and the G-20 to recurring conferences and dialogues; and the rules and conventions associated with all those organizations.

The system formed by those institutions is the descendant of the order that U.S. officials consciously set about creating in the mid-1940s. It is the order that has featured prominently in every U.S. National Security Strategy since the 1950s. And it is the order that dozens of other countries have placed at the center of their own conceptions of security and prosperity. I have spoken to many current and former officials from countries around the world over the last two years as part of a broad assessment of the postwar order ^[6] conducted by the RAND Corporation, and it is clear that a long list of countries other than the United States—Australia, France, Germany, India, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, the United Kingdom, and many more—view the order as a real thing and deeply fear its passing.

What Allison has sensed, more than some mythological nature of the postwar order, is the growing difficulty of reconciling such an order with an intrusive U.S. approach to international politics and U.S. efforts to force other countries to adopt American values. As other countries grow in power, they are demanding a greater say in the operation of the order and raising more objections to unilateral U.S. interpretations of the rules. But that tension doesn't mean the order is a myth; it only suggests that the United States must temper its impulses to push liberal values and find a way to share influence. (These are two of the leading findings ^[7] of our study.) That restraint should be coupled with efforts to renew and rehabilitate, not abandon, the core institutions of the order.

KEEPING IT TOGETHER

With 70 years of hindsight, it is clear that some of the hopes of the architects of the postwar order have been at least partly fulfilled. The multilateral processes those architects created have helped stabilize the global economy and deter aggression ^[8]. By aligning three-quarters of the world economy around ^[9] a broad set of norms ^[9], they created a powerful gravitational pull ^[10] toward stability at the center of world politics. Nations knew that to sustain their competitiveness, they could not oppose the prevailing order.

By joining its own power to this multilateral project, moreover, the United States helped legitimize its role in the world—and earned forbearance for the times when it failed to live up to its own ideals. Allison argues that the order-busting hypocrisy of U.S. military action since 2001 “speaks for itself.” But few international behaviors speak for themselves. They are interpreted by other countries in the context of wider understandings of power and purpose. The association of U.S. power with a shared order has helped mitigate reactions to its misuse. The United States may well have reached the end of this tolerance, which is why Allison's instinct for restraint hits the mark. But the answer is to reinvigorate, not forsake, the multilateralism that once assuaged antagonism toward U.S. power.

The creators of the postwar order set out to do something both limited and revolutionary. They aimed to work within the constraints of national self-interest and international balances of power to build institutions and processes that could shape the character of world politics. The system they made has succeeded in important ways, even if only as one of several factors that have kept the peace and made the world rich. As the world enters an era of greater international competition, U.S. policymakers should take care not to underestimate the importance of the postwar system. The order is far from a myth; it is the United States' most important competitive advantage.

Copyright © 2018 by the Council on Foreign Relations, Inc.

All rights reserved. To request permission to distribute or reprint this article, please fill out and submit a Permissions Request Form. If you plan to use this article in a coursepack or academic website, visit Copyright Clearance Center to clear permission.

Source URL: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2018-08-07/real-history-liberal-order>

Links

[1] <https://www.cato.org/publications/policy-analysis/world-imagined-nostalgia-liberal-order>

[2] <https://warontherocks.com/2018/06/whats-so-disordered-about-your-world-order/>

- [3] <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2018-06-14/myth-liberal-order>
- [4] <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/the-global-order-myth/>
- [5] <http://nationalinterest.org/article/the-mythical-liberal-order-8146>
- [6] <https://www.rand.org/nsrd/projects/international-order.html>
- [7] https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2397.html
- [8] https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2226.html
- [9] <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0163660X.2017.1328917?needAccess=true>
- [10] <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/review-of-international-studies/article/integrating-rising-powers-liberal-systemic-theory-and-the-mechanism-of-competition/7BF92A0AFE4EE73F17F8F1D7601922A6>