

Don't Wish for a Post-Pax Americana

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Who knows, at this writing, what Vladimir Putin will decide to do with the forces he's massed along Ukraine's borders?

If Putin backs down, maybe thanks to some face-saving diplomatic formula, the Biden administration will deserve full credit for masterly crisis management: whipping into line our European allies, particularly Germany; thwarting Russian covert operations by leaking details to the media; expanding America's military presence in frontline NATO states; working on ways to supply Europe with liquefied natural gas; refusing to negotiate at Ukraine's expense; threatening sanctions against Moscow that, for once, have real teeth.

If Putin doesn't back down, these were still the right and necessary steps. They just weren't sufficient.

Either way, the crisis should serve as a tutorial on what the so-called post-Pax Americana world will look like. In a fantasy version of that world — a world in which American power isn't constantly being called upon to address faraway crises or reassure nervous allies — the United States trades the burdens of being a superpower for the modest but more manageable, affordable and humane ambitions of a normal country.

Our military shrinks to a size adequate for national defense, not global policing. We spend the savings on mending the frayed edges of society.

Our allies stop freeloading off our security guarantees and start spending more on their own defense.

Our foreign policy becomes less arrogant and more collaborative. We lose the illusion that we can, or should, solve other people's problems, and we free ourselves from the personal sacrifices and moral compromises that go with that illusion.

Our economic policies shift to adapt to a less-globalized world. Instead of depending on China for low-cost manufacturing and labor, we reinvest in American workers and factories and become independent in everything from energy to microchips.

It's a tempting vision, a left-right marriage of George McGovern's "[Come Home, America](#)" and Donald Trump's "[America First](#)." It's also been thought of before: Bob La Follette Jr., the progressive senator from Wisconsin, and Father Charles Coughlin, the antisemitic radio host, shared the same sorts of ideas in the run-up to World War II. They had broad public appeal all the way through Dec. 6, 1941.

Editors' Picks

What's wrong with those ideas? For starters, global order is not a self-generating phenomenon. In the absence of Pax Americana, would the United Nations be capable of enforcing rules of the road, like freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, over which as much as one-third of the world's commercial traffic passes? How about regional alliances, like the European Union or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations? Don't count on it.

This has some obvious knock-on effects. It's an invitation to predatory behavior — precisely of the kind we're witnessing on Ukraine's borders and also seeing signs of over the Taiwan Strait. And predatory behavior is rarely satisfied. A Russia that possesses more of Ukraine or a China that seizes Taiwan will each want more. They'll be in a stronger position to get it.

Another obvious consequence: There will be no peace dividend in a post-Pax Americana world. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the United States today spends historically little on defense — about [3.7 percent of gross domestic product](#), compared to more than 5 percent in the last year of the Carter administration. But military spending would have to return to Cold War levels for an era in which core U.S. interests were constantly threatened by hostile and confident powers.

We would also find ourselves perplexed and frightened by the behavior of our traditional allies. Instead of having freeloaders, we would enter a world of freelancers, countries aggressively out for themselves, irrespective of American wishes or established norms. Without the assurance of U.S. protection, what would keep a future Japanese government from rapidly fielding a vast nuclear arsenal as a response to China? Why shouldn't Turkey and Saudi Arabia go nuclear, too, particularly if Iran winds up with a bomb?

A world in which several combustible regions each have multiple nuclear powers in varying configurations of alliance and hostility is a recipe for miscalculation, accident and tragedy.

It's also not a formula for prosperity. The idea that the United States should aspire to some sort of autarky is divorced from any conceivable economic reality. In a post-Pax Americana world, we would simply have to depend on flows of trade at the mercy of hostile powers and unexpected events.

Most dangerously, the post-Pax Americana world is one in which liberal democracy would wither. This is already happening abroad, from [Budapest](#) to [Ankara](#) to [Mexico City](#). Why shouldn't it happen here, too?

Charismatic dictatorships often inspire a current of admiration among democratic publics; it's why a corner of the progressive left admired the Castro regime in Cuba, just as the new far right is quietly infatuated with Putin. Anyone who says it can't happen here must have slept through the past five years.

Whatever happens next in Ukraine, it won't matter as much as the lessons we draw from it. Only the innocent think that an America that turns its back on the world will be left alone in turn.

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