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The Revisionist Hegemon - How America Is Rewriting the Order It Built

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For decades, the United States has been widely understood as the principal status quo power within the international system. As the primary architect of the post-1945 order, Washington helped construct and sustain the institutions, alliances, economic arrangements, and normative frameworks that defined international politics after World War II and, later, the Cold War. Conventional theories of international relations have therefore tended to place the United States on one side of a familiar analytical divide. Revisionist powers challenge the order, while status quo powers defend it. This report argues that this distinction no longer adequately captures contemporary American behavior.

The United States remains the world's leading military, economic, and geopolitical power. However, **across a growing range of issues, American policymakers increasingly behave as though important elements of the international order no longer serve U.S. interests.** The result is a distinctive form of revisionism that differs from the traditional model found in the international relations literature. **Rather than challenging an order imposed by others, the United States is increasingly seeking to revise an order that it largely built itself.**

The report utilizes the concept of the revisionist hegemon to describe this phenomenon. Unlike a traditional revisionist challenger, which seeks entry into or dominance over an existing order, a revisionist hegemon seeks to modify the rules, institutions, and expectations of a system it already leads. **The objective is not withdrawal from international politics or the destruction of international order. It is to renegotiate the terms of that order in ways that provide greater strategic flexibility, stronger protection of domestic interests, enhanced industrial capacity, and reduced institutional constraints.**

Drawing upon Power Transition Theory, realism, liberal institutionalism, constructivism, and hegemonic stability theory. This report argues that **revisionism emerges when states become dissatisfied with the relationship between power, interests, and existing arrangements.** Revisionism is not a singular phenomenon. States may pursue territorial, institutional, normative, economic, or hierarchical forms of revisionism, often simultaneously.

Historically, the United States has occupied both sides of the status quo–revisionist divide. The American Revolution itself represented a challenge to the imperial order of the eighteenth century. During the nineteenth century, the United States pursued continental expansion, embraced Manifest Destiny, articulated the Monroe Doctrine, and established a privileged position within the Western Hemisphere. **In many respects, America was a revisionist power long before it became a status quo hegemon. Only after 1945 did the United States become deeply invested in preserving a broader international order.** Even then, American policy frequently combined support for existing institutions with selective efforts to revise them when core interests were at stake.

The report identifies four primary drivers behind contemporary American revisionism.

- **First, perceptions of relative decline have generated growing dissatisfaction with the post-Cold War order.** The rise of China, concerns regarding deindustrialization, border insecurity, public debt, supply-chain vulnerability, and strategic overstretch have contributed to a widespread belief that the existing system benefits competitors, allies, and global institutions more than it benefits the United States.
- **Second, the bipartisan foreign-policy consensus that sustained the postwar order has weakened considerably.** A growing portion of the American political spectrum now views free trade, international institutions, alliance commitments, migration flows, and multilateral governance as constraints upon sovereignty rather than sources of strength.
- **Third, the United States is increasingly reviving older traditions of hemispheric strategy.** Contemporary discussions regarding the Monroe Doctrine, strategic infrastructure, migration, cartel violence, Arctic access, and external influence in Latin America reflect a renewed emphasis on regional primacy and strategic geography.
- **Fourth, economic policy has become gradually subordinate to geopolitical competition.** Tariffs, export controls, industrial policy, sanctions, investment restrictions, and supply-chain restructuring are increasingly used not simply to generate economic growth but to advance national security objectives.

To evaluate these developments, the report examines several contemporary cases from the past year. These include discussions surrounding Greenland, Panama, and Canada; the reemergence of a Monroe Doctrine framework in the 2025 National Security Strategy; tariffs imposed against allies and competitors alike; NATO burden-sharing demands; sanctions against the International Criminal Court; the designation of major Latin American criminal organizations as terrorist entities; and the expansion of industrial policy and technology restrictions aimed at reshaping the global economy.

Individually, these developments may appear unrelated. Collectively, they reveal **a consistent pattern in which the United States is progressively willing to revise inherited arrangements when they are perceived as limiting American sovereignty, security, or economic advantage.**

American revisionism also differs significantly from the revisionism practiced by other major powers. Russia's revisionism is primarily territorial and coercive. China's revisionism is largely institutional, economic, and technological. **The United States occupies a unique position because it is attempting to revise an order that it continues to dominate. It remains both the leading beneficiary and the leading critic of the system.**

To better conceptualize these dynamics, the report proposes a five-part typology of great-power behavior:

STATUS QUO HEGEMON
Defends existing rules because they reinforce its power.

REFORMIST HEGEMON
Updates institutions and arrangements to preserve legitimacy and effectiveness.

REVISIONIST HEGEMON
Alters rules and institutions that are perceived as constraints on national power.

PREDATORY REVISIONIST
Uses coercion or force to seize territory, overthrow regimes, or alter borders.

REVOLUTIONARY REVISIONIST
Seeks to transform the ideological foundations of international order.

The report concludes that contemporary America occupies a position between reformist hegemon and revisionist hegemon, with increasing movement toward a more hierarchical conception of regional order.

Understanding this typology is important because it changes how U.S. foreign policy will interact with and impact the rest of the world. **Allies are likely to hedge by increasing defense spending while simultaneously seeking greater autonomy from U.S. unpredictability. Rival powers will use American revisionism to justify their own challenges to the existing order.** The international system itself may evolve away from a universal liberal framework toward a more fragmented environment characterized by competing regional blocs, overlapping institutions, technological spheres, sanctions networks, and geoeconomic competition. For the United States, the benefits and risks are closely intertwined.

Revisionist policies may provide greater flexibility, strengthen industrial resilience, and better align foreign policy with domestic political realities. At the same time, they may weaken sources of influence that have historically amplified American power, including institutional legitimacy, alliance cohesion, and international trust.

The central argument of this report is not that the United States is abandoning international order. Rather, it is attempting to construct a different kind of order. The emerging vision places greater emphasis on sovereignty, hierarchy, strategic geography, industrial power, and transactional reciprocity than on universalism, institutional restraint, and economic openness. **The defining geopolitical question of the coming decade is not whether America remains powerful enough to shape the international system. It is powerful enough and America is changing the system already. The question is whether the world's leading power still believes that the order it created deserves to endure in its existing form.**

Key Judgments

Key Judgment 1

The United States is increasingly behaving as a revisionist hegemon rather than a pure status quo power. Washington remains the principal beneficiary and leader of the post-1945 international order, yet it is increasingly seeking to revise elements of that order that are perceived as constraining American sovereignty, economic competitiveness, strategic flexibility, or regional primacy.

Key Judgment 2

Contemporary American revisionism is driven less by objective decline than by growing dissatisfaction with the existing order. The rise of China, concerns regarding industrial decline, border insecurity, public debt, supply-chain vulnerability, alliance burdens, and strategic overstretch have contributed to a widespread perception that the current system no longer distributes benefits in ways favorable to the United States.

Key Judgment 3

The current shift reflects a broader transformation in American strategic culture. The dominant assumptions of the post-Cold War era, including globalization, economic interdependence, institutional governance, and liberal internationalism, are being challenged by a framework centered on sovereignty, resilience, reciprocity, strategic competition, and national power.

Key Judgment 4

The United States is reviving older traditions of American statecraft. Contemporary debates regarding the Monroe Doctrine, strategic geography, hemispheric influence, industrial policy, tariffs, maritime access, border security, and great-power competition resemble earlier periods of American history more closely than they resemble the liberal internationalism that characterized much of the post-Cold War period.

Key Judgment 5

Recent developments suggest a pattern of multidimensional revisionism rather than isolated policy disputes. American behavior increasingly reflects territorial and hierarchical impulses (Greenland and Panama), institutional revisionism (ICC sanctions), economic revisionism (tariffs and industrial policy), and regional revisionism (the renewed emphasis on hemispheric primacy). These developments are connected by a common objective. Reducing perceived constraints on American power.

Key Judgment 6

The United States remains a defender of important elements of the existing order. American policy continues to oppose Chinese regional dominance, Russian territorial expansion, and Iranian efforts to alter regional balances of power.

Key Judgment 7

The most likely outcome is a redefinition of American leadership. The United States is unlikely to abandon alliances, international institutions, or global engagement completely. Instead, it is seeking to renegotiate the terms under which those relationships operate.

Key Judgment 8

American revisionism will encourage allies to hedge. Countries such as Canada, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and many European states are likely to increase defense spending and security cooperation while simultaneously pursuing greater strategic autonomy in order to reduce vulnerability to future shifts in U.S. policy.

Key Judgment 9

China and Russia will continue exploiting American revisionism rhetorically and diplomatically. Both powers are likely to use American behavior to challenge U.S. claims of liberal legitimacy and to justify their own efforts to establish spheres of influence, revise institutions, and reshape regional orders.

Key Judgment 10

The international system is likely moving toward what this report describes as competitive order pluralism. Rather than a single dominant liberal order, the emerging environment is likely to be characterized by overlapping institutions, regional blocs, competing technological ecosystems, sanctions networks, industrial strategies, and contested spheres of influence.

Key Judgment 11

The principal strategic advantage of American revisionism is greater freedom of action. The principal strategic risk is the erosion of the institutions, norms, alliances, and expectations that historically amplified American power and legitimacy.

Key Judgment 12

The central geopolitical question facing the United States is whether it can revise that system without weakening the foundations of influence that enabled American leadership in the first place.

OVERALL ASSESSMENT

This report assesses with moderate-to-high confidence that the United States is transitioning from a predominantly status quo hegemon toward a position between reformist hegemon and revisionist hegemon. The trend is most visible in the areas of economic statecraft, hemispheric strategy, alliance management, and institutional sovereignty. This transition does not represent isolationism, withdrawal, or the collapse of American power. It represents a growing effort to redefine international order around sovereignty, strategic geography, industrial resilience, regional hierarchy, and transactional reciprocity. The United States is not abandoning the order it built. It is increasingly attempting to rewrite its terms.

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INTRODUCTION: THE STRANGE CASE OF THE REVISIONIST HEGEMON

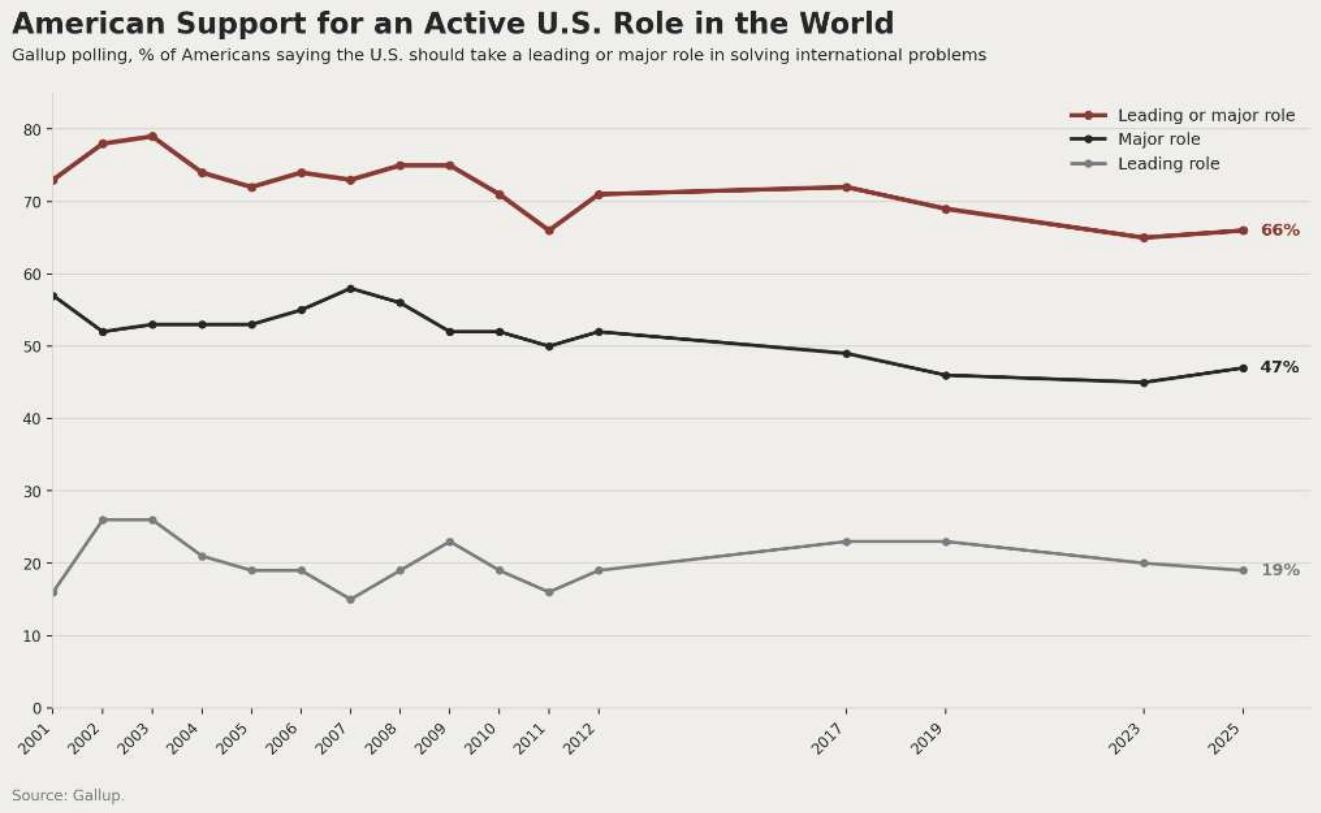
The study of international relations has long distinguished between status quo powers and revisionist powers. Status quo powers are generally understood to be states that are broadly satisfied with the existing distribution of power, territory, prestige, and institutional authority within the international system. Revisionist powers, by contrast, seek to alter those arrangements. They challenge existing rules, contest territorial boundaries, undermine established institutions, or attempt to reshape the distribution of influence in ways more favorable to their interests. This distinction has occupied a central place in theories of international politics from classical realism to contemporary power transition theory. Scholars and policymakers alike have typically associated revisionism with dissatisfied challengers seeking to overturn an existing order. Examples commonly cited include Wilhelmine Germany before the First World War, Imperial Japan during the interwar period, Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union during the Cold War, revolutionary Iran after 1979, and, more recently, Russia and China. Each sought, in different ways, to revise aspects of the prevailing international order in pursuit of greater security, status, ideological objectives, or geopolitical influence.

The United States has traditionally occupied the opposite side of this analytical ledger. Since the conclusion of the Second World War, it has generally been regarded as the principal status quo power within the international system. The United States played the leading role in constructing many of the institutions, norms, and economic arrangements that came to define the postwar order. American policymakers were central to the creation of the Bretton Woods system, the United Nations, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and a broader network of international institutions designed to promote economic openness, collective security, and political stability. Although Washington often bent or selectively interpreted these rules when its interests demanded, the United States was widely viewed as the principal guarantor of the broader system from which it benefited. As a result, revisionism was typically seen as something directed against an American-led order rather than something practiced by the United States itself. This assumption became especially pronounced after the Cold War, when the United States emerged as the world's sole superpower and appeared to stand as both the architect and chief defender of a liberal international order.

However, this traditional distinction fails to capture the realities of contemporary international politics. The assumption that the world's dominant power must necessarily act as a status quo power rests on a deeper assumption that the existing order continues to serve the interests of the state that created it. History offers little support for such a proposition. States do not remain committed to institutions, norms, or strategic arrangements out of sentimentality. They support orders that advance their interests and seek to modify or abandon them when they no longer do so. A state's position within the hierarchy of power does not determine whether it behaves as a status quo or revisionist actor. Satisfaction does.

This insight is particularly important because the international order established after 1945 was never static. It evolved through distinct historical phases, including the bipolar competition of the Cold War, the unipolar moment of the 1990s, the era of globalization that followed, and the contemporary period of renewed great-power competition. The strategic, economic, and political conditions that originally underpinned American support for the postwar system have changed substantially. The rise of China, the return of major-power rivalry, growing concerns about supply-chain vulnerability, domestic political polarization, mass migration, industrial decline in certain sectors, and dissatisfaction with globalization have all contributed to a growing

perception among many American policymakers and voters that the existing order no longer produces the benefits it once did.



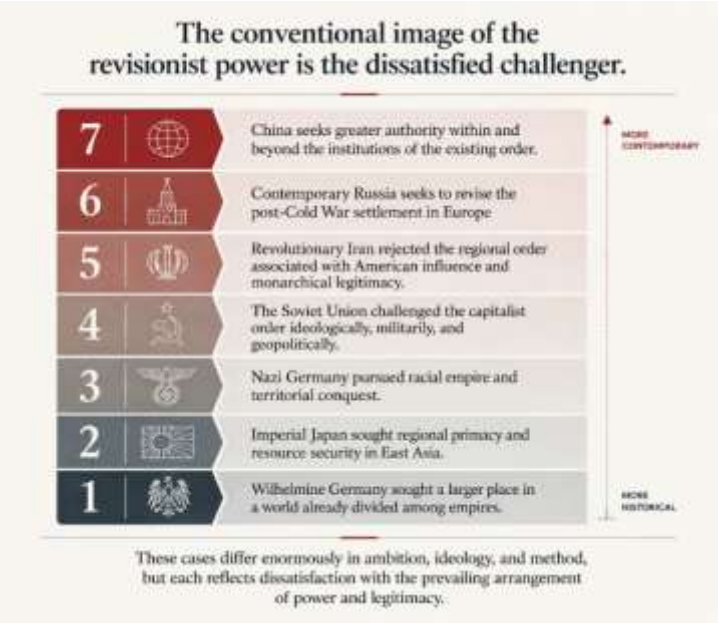
Consequently, the United States increasingly behaves less like a satisfied guardian of the international system and more like a power seeking to renegotiate fundamental aspects of that system. This does not mean that Washington seeks to overthrow the international order in the manner of revolutionary states. Nor does it imply that the United States has abandoned all interest in preserving existing institutions. Rather, American policy reflects a desire to modify rules, institutions, economic arrangements, alliance relationships, and geopolitical understandings that are perceived to constrain American freedom of action or distribute disproportionate benefits to others. In this sense, the United States exhibits a form of revisionism that differs from the traditional model found in much of the literature.

The central argument of this report is that the United States should likely be understood as a revisionist hegemon. Unlike traditional revisionist powers, which seek to challenge an order imposed by others, the United States is attempting to revise an order that it largely built itself. This is the paradox at the center of contemporary American statecraft. The world's strongest state is acting as a dissatisfied architect seeking to redesign portions of that order in response to changing perceptions of power, security, and national interest. The question facing analysts is not whether the United States remains powerful enough to shape the international system. The more important question is what kind of system American leaders now seek to create.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: WHAT IS A REVISIONIST POWER?

The language of "revisionist" and "status quo" powers is useful because it directs attention away from a state's rhetoric and toward its relationship with the existing order. All states claim to seek security, justice, stability, or national dignity. Those claims reveal little by themselves. The more important question is whether a state is broadly satisfied with the prevailing distribution of territory, prestige, institutional authority, economic privilege, and legal rules, or whether it seeks to alter those arrangements in ways that would meaningfully change the structure of international politics. A status quo power is not necessarily peaceful, liberal, or altruistic. It is a state that sees the existing order as broadly compatible with its interests. A revisionist power is not necessarily irrational or aggressive. It is a state that regards important features of the existing order as illegitimate, intolerable, strategically dangerous, or insufficiently favorable to its interests.

This distinction has deep roots in international relations theory. Power transition theorists have long argued that major wars are most likely when a rising or dissatisfied state challenges a dominant power and the order associated with it. Realist scholars similarly treat international order as a temporary settlement among powerful states rather than a neutral legal structure above politics. A status quo order, therefore, is never simply a set of rules. It is a political settlement that reflects power, interest, legitimacy, and institutional design.



The conventional image of the revisionist power is the dissatisfied challenger. However, revisionism should not be treated as a single category. States may seek to revise different parts of an order, using different methods, for different strategic purposes. A state can accept some parts of the existing system while challenging others. It can defend one regional status quo while attempting to change another. It can preserve certain institutions while hollowing out their authority. It can support sovereignty as a general principle while carving out exceptional rights for itself. The status quo-revisionist distinction is best understood as a spectrum rather than a binary.

1 **The first and most familiar form is territorial revisionism.** This involves efforts to alter borders, acquire territory, reclaim strategic space, or redefine sovereignty over contested lands and waters. Territorial revisionism is the most visible and often the most destabilizing form because it directly challenges the principle that borders should not be changed by coercion. It may take the form of annexation, irredentism, military occupation, maritime claims, coercive diplomacy, or the assertion of historical rights over strategic geography. Russia's annexation of Crimea and invasion of Ukraine represent the contemporary archetype, but territorial revisionism is not limited to outright conquest. It can also appear in attempts to renegotiate control over strategic corridors, canals, islands, borderlands, buffer zones, or spheres of military access.

2 **The second form is institutional revisionism.** Here the target is not necessarily territory, but the architecture through which international order is governed. Institutional revisionism involves efforts to weaken, bypass, redesign, capture, or subordinate international institutions. A state may reject the authority of courts, ignore multilateral procedures, create alternative institutions, use veto power to paralyze collective action, or treat alliances and international organizations as instruments of coercive bargaining rather than shared governance. This form of revisionism matters because institutions are not procedural ornaments. They shape who gets to decide, whose preferences count, which disputes are legalized, and which forms of power are made legitimate.

3 **The third form is normative revisionism.** International orders rest not only on power and institutions but also on claims about legitimacy. Normative revisionism seeks to change the principles by which political conduct is judged. This can involve rejecting liberal democracy as a preferred political model, elevating civilizational sovereignty over universal human rights, weakening the norm of non-aggression, contesting humanitarian intervention, redefining self-determination, or treating international law as valid only when it conforms to national interest. Normative revisionism is often harder to measure than territorial revisionism, but it may be more consequential over time because it alters the moral grammar of international politics.

4 **The fourth form is economic revisionism.** Economic orders distribute wealth, vulnerability, technological advantage, and strategic dependence. States revise economic rules when they believe existing arrangements undermine national power or unfairly benefit competitors. Economic revisionism can include tariffs, sanctions, export controls, investment screening, currency politics, industrial policy, supply-chain restrictions, technology denial, resource nationalism, and attempts to create alternative payment systems or trade blocs. It may be practiced by challengers seeking to escape dependence, but also by dominant powers seeking to preserve advantage. In the contemporary period, the boundary between economic policy and security policy has narrowed substantially, making economic revisionism one of the central instruments of great-power competition.

5 **The fifth form is hierarchical revisionism.** This is the attempt to replace formal equality among states with a more explicit hierarchy of privilege, deference, and regional authority. Hierarchical revisionism does not always require annexation or formal empire. It can appear as a sphere of influence, a privileged security zone, a demand that neighboring states limit their external alignments, or a claim that great powers possess special rights within their regions. This form of revisionism challenges one of the central legal fictions of the modern international system that sovereign states are formally equal. In practice, great powers have always enjoyed unequal influence. Hierarchical revisionism makes that inequality explicit and seeks to transform it into a recognized principle of order.

These categories are analytically distinct, but they frequently overlap in practice. A territorial claim may rest on a normative argument about historical justice. Institutional revisionism may support economic revisionism by weakening dispute mechanisms. Economic coercion may enforce hierarchical control. A sphere of influence may require the revision of sovereignty norms, alliance rules, and trade arrangements at the same time. Revisionism should therefore be understood as an orientation toward the current international order. It reflects a judgment that the existing settlement no longer properly reflects power, interest, legitimacy, or status.

This framework is essential for analyzing contemporary American behavior. The United States does not fit neatly into the standard image of the revisionist challenger. It remains the world's leading military power, the central actor in the global alliance system, the issuer of the dominant reserve currency, and the state most

responsible for constructing the post-1945 order. But a state need not be weak, rising, or excluded to become revisionist. A dominant state can also become dissatisfied with the order it created if it concludes that the rules now constrain its freedom, empower rivals, burden its domestic economy, or distribute benefits in ways no longer politically acceptable. In that case, the revisionist power is not an outsider at the gates. It is the architect returning to renovate, fortify, or partially demolish its own building.

Why Do States Become Revisionist?

If revisionism is fundamentally an expression of dissatisfaction with an existing order, the central theoretical question is why do states become dissatisfied in the first place? The answer is more complicated than it initially appears. **States rarely announce that they seek to overturn an international order because they are dissatisfied with it.** Instead, they justify their actions in the language of security, justice, sovereignty, historical rights, economic necessity, or national dignity. **So, what causes a state to conclude that the rules, institutions, and power relationships of the existing system no longer serve its interests?**

Different theoretical traditions offer different answers. **Some emphasize shifts in the distribution of power. Others focus on domestic politics, elite perceptions, institutional incentives, or collective identities.** Each captures an important part of the story. Together, they suggest that **revisionism is not caused by a single factor** but emerges when changes in power, interests, and identity combine to undermine support for the existing order.

The most influential explanation comes from Power Transition Theory. Developed by A.F.K. Organski and later expanded by Jacek Kugler and others, the theory argues that major challenges to international order emerge when rising powers become dissatisfied with arrangements established by dominant states.[1] International systems are inherently hierarchical. Leading powers construct rules, institutions, and norms that reflect their interests and reinforce their advantages. As long as subordinate states remain relatively weak or broadly satisfied with their position, the system remains stable. Instability emerges when a state's capabilities grow faster than its influence within the existing order. The result is a growing gap between power and status. **Revisionism emerges because the rising state believes its growing capabilities are not adequately reflected in the institutions, privileges, and decision-making authority of the international system.** In this view, dissatisfaction is primarily a consequence of structural change. States seek revision not because they are inherently aggressive, but because the existing order no longer reflects underlying realities of power.

Power Transition Theory remains influential because it explains many historical cases, from Wilhelmine Germany's challenge to British predominance to contemporary debates about China's rise. Yet it struggles to explain why some powerful states become revisionist while others do not. Nor does it fully explain why states that already occupy dominant positions within an order sometimes seek substantial revisions. Material power alone cannot account for the complexity of revisionist behavior.

Neoclassical realism emerged partly in response to this limitation. While retaining the realist emphasis on power and competition, neoclassical realists argue that international pressures are filtered through domestic politics, elite perceptions, and state institutions.[2] Leaders do not respond automatically to shifts in power.

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[1] A.F.K. Organski, *World Politics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958); A.F.K. Organski and Jacek Kugler, *The War Ledger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Douglas Lemke, *Regions of War and Peace* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
[2] Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy," *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (1998): 144–172; Randall L. Schweller, *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006);

They interpret those shifts through ideological assumptions, bureaucratic interests, political coalitions, economic pressures, and perceptions of threat. **States therefore become revisionist because influential actors within the state come to believe that the existing order no longer serves their interests.**

This perspective is particularly useful because it highlights the role of domestic dissatisfaction. Economic dislocation, political polarization, industrial decline, migration pressures, fiscal burdens, and perceptions of unfairness can all contribute to a growing belief that the benefits of an international order are flowing elsewhere. **In such circumstances, revisionism becomes not only a foreign policy project but also a domestic political demand.** International institutions, alliance commitments, trade arrangements, and legal constraints can be portrayed as mechanisms through which national interests are sacrificed rather than advanced.

A different explanation emerges from offensive realism. **For scholars such as John Mearsheimer, revisionism is not an exceptional condition requiring special explanation. It is the natural consequence of life in an anarchic international system.**[3] Because no higher authority can guarantee security, great powers are compelled to maximize their relative power whenever opportunities arise. The ultimate objective is regional hegemony and the prevention of peer competitors. **In this view, revisionism is not primarily driven by dissatisfaction or ideology. It is driven by the permanent insecurity of great powers.**

From an offensive realist perspective, periods of apparent status quo behavior are often misleading. States support existing arrangements when those arrangements serve their strategic interests and abandon them when they do not. Great powers continually seek opportunities to strengthen their position, weaken rivals, and expand their freedom of action. What appears to be revisionism is often simply the normal operation of power politics. **This interpretation is especially relevant to contemporary discussions of American foreign policy because many recent developments can be understood as efforts to reassert regional primacy, preserve strategic advantages, and prevent the emergence of rival centers of power.**

Liberal institutionalists offer a markedly different perspective. Rather than focusing primarily on power, they emphasize the stabilizing role of institutions. International organizations, alliances, legal frameworks, and economic regimes reduce uncertainty, facilitate cooperation, and make power more predictable.[4] From this perspective, **the remarkable stability of the postwar order was a product of institutional arrangements that constrained conflict and encouraged cooperation.** This perspective introduces an important puzzle**. If institutions helped sustain American influence for decades, why would the United States weaken or bypass them?** Liberal institutionalists would argue that institutions generate long-term benefits even when they occasionally constrain short-term freedom of action. **The decision by a hegemon to undermine institutions it once championed therefore requires explanation.** The question is why a dominant power will change their views and see those constraints as costs rather than investments in a durable order.

Constructivist scholars approach the problem from a different direction altogether. They argue that states do not simply pursue objective interests derived from material power. Interests themselves are shaped by

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Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, eds., *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[3] John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, updated edition (New York: W.W. Norton, 2014).

[4] Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984); G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order After Major Wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

ideas, identities, and social understandings.[5] **International orders endure because they are viewed as legitimate. Revisionism emerges when those shared understandings begin to change.** From this perspective, the most significant developments may occur in collective narratives. A state that understands itself as the guardian of a liberal international order will behave differently from a state that understands itself as a sovereign civilization, a fortress republic, or a regional hegemon. **As identities change, perceptions of legitimate foreign policy change as well.** Alliances once viewed as essential become burdensome. Economic openness once viewed as beneficial becomes exploitative. International institutions once seen as expressions of leadership become constraints on sovereignty. **Revisionism thus reflects a transformation in how political communities understand their role in the world.**

Finally, hegemonic stability theory directs attention to the costs of order itself. The theory's central insight is that **international orders require leadership, and leadership is expensive**.[6] Open markets, reserve currencies, alliance networks, security guarantees, freedom of navigation, crisis management, and institutional maintenance all impose costs on the leading state. **Hegemons support these burdens because they derive broader benefits from the system. Over time, however, domestic constituencies may begin to question whether those benefits justify the costs.**

The resulting tension has appeared repeatedly throughout history. **Dominant powers often discover that the responsibilities of maintaining order become politically controversial long before they become strategically impossible.** Revisionism can emerge because a hegemon no longer believes the existing order is worth the price. The challenge is particularly acute when domestic groups conclude that the burdens of leadership are concentrated at home while the benefits are distributed abroad.

Importantly, none of these theories fully explains revisionism. Together, however, they reveal a common pattern. States become revisionist when they perceive a growing mismatch between the order that exists and the order they believe should exist. That mismatch may stem from changing distributions of power, domestic political pressures, strategic insecurity, institutional frustration, shifting identities, or the perceived costs of leadership. The specific causes vary across time and place. The underlying dynamic remains remarkably consistent as revisionism is the pursuit of a different order.

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[5] Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Peter J. Katzenstein, ed., *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Martha Finnemore, *National Interests in International Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).
[6] Charles P. Kindleberger, *The World in Depression, 1929–1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973); Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Keohane, *After Hegemony*.

AMERICA'S HISTORICAL RELATIONSHIP WITH REVISIONISM

The tendency to view the United States as the quintessential status quo power is understandable. For much of the postwar era, the United States was the principal defender of the international system, the leading sponsor of global institutions, and the primary guarantor of security across much of Europe, East Asia, and the maritime commons. Nevertheless, this perspective can obscure a larger historical reality. The United States did not emerge into history as a status quo power. It began as a profoundly revisionist project and spent much of its first century seeking to revise the political and geopolitical order of North America and the Western Hemisphere. The post-1945 role of the United States as a defender of international order was historically significant precisely because it represented a departure from earlier patterns of American statecraft rather than their continuation.

The United States as a Revolutionary Republic

The United States was born in opposition to an existing international order. The American Revolution was both a colonial rebellion against British taxation and a challenge to a broader system of imperial governance, hereditary monarchy, mercantilist economics, and hierarchical political authority that dominated the eighteenth-century Atlantic world. The Declaration of Independence rejected the fundamental assumptions about political legitimacy. Sovereignty would rest in the people themselves, not a dynasty.[7]

From the perspective of the European great powers, the American experiment was inherently revisionist. The new republic represented an alternative model of political organization that challenged prevailing assumptions about monarchy, empire, and social hierarchy. Although the early United States lacked the military power necessary to reshape the international system, its ideological significance far exceeded its material capabilities. The success of the American Revolution provided a powerful example for subsequent revolutionary movements and contributed to a broader crisis of legitimacy within the imperial order of the Atlantic world.[8]

As such, the United States entered international politics as a challenger to the established order. Its founding represented both a political and geopolitical act of revisionism. Politically, it rejected the dominant principles of imperial governance. Geopolitically, it removed a vast territory from one of the world's most powerful empires and established an independent republic outside the traditional framework of European power politics.

Continental Expansion and Hemispheric Revisionism

American revisionism became gradually geopolitical during the nineteenth century. If the Revolution challenged the political foundations of the existing order, the following century transformed the territorial and strategic landscape of North America. The Louisiana Purchase doubled the size of the United States and

[7] Pauline Maier, American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997).
[8] Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967); Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992).

fundamentally altered the continental balance of power.[9] Subsequent expansion through diplomacy, settlement, coercion, and war steadily displaced rival European powers and Indigenous nations from much of North America.

Manifest Destiny provided the ideological framework for this expansion. Although often remembered as a slogan, it reflected a broader conviction that the United States possessed a unique historical mission to dominate the continent. The annexation of Texas, the Mexican-American War, and the acquisition of the Southwest dramatically expanded American territory while reshaping the geopolitical map of North America.[10] From a revisionist perspective, these actions altered existing territorial arrangements in pursuit of strategic, economic, and ideological objectives.

The Monroe Doctrine epitomized an equally important form of revisionism. Issued in 1823, the doctrine warned European powers against future colonization in the Western Hemisphere by asserting a special American interest in the political future of the hemisphere and gradually evolved into a claim of privileged regional authority.[11] While initially limited by American weakness, the doctrine established the intellectual foundation for a hemispheric sphere of influence that would become increasingly significant as American power expanded.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the United States had moved beyond continental consolidation toward broader regional dominance. The Spanish-American War of 1898 marked a turning point. The conflict ended Spain's remaining imperial presence in the Caribbean and Pacific while bringing Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines under American control.[12] The United States emerged from the war as an overseas empire with strategic interests extending far beyond North America. The Roosevelt Corollary further expanded this vision. Announced in 1904, it asserted the right of the United States to intervene in the domestic affairs of Latin American states when Washington believed instability threatened regional order.[13] Although often justified in the language of stability and responsibility, the corollary effectively transformed the Monroe Doctrine from a defensive warning against external intervention into an assertion of American primacy within the hemisphere.

Viewed collectively, these developments reveal an important historical pattern. Long before it became the principal defender of international order, the United States was actively engaged in revising regional order. Territorial expansion, hemispheric influence, and strategic exclusion of rival powers were central features of American foreign policy throughout the nineteenth century. America was a revisionist power before it became a status quo hegemon.

The Post-1945 Settlement

The Second World War fundamentally transformed the relationship between the United States and international order. Unlike previous great powers that usually inherited existing systems, the United States played the central role in constructing a new global framework after 1945. The institutions created during this

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[9] Peter J. Kastor, *The Nation's Crucible: The Louisiana Purchase and the Creation of America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004).
[10] Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995); Amy S. Greenberg, *A Wicked War: Polk, Clay, Lincoln, and the 1846 U.S. Invasion of Mexico* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012).
[11] Jay Sexton, *The Monroe Doctrine: Empire and Nation in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2011).
[12] Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860–1898* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1963).
[13] Serge Ricard, *The Roosevelt Corollary* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

period reflected both liberal aspirations and geopolitical realities. They were universal in language but selective in application, cooperative in design but dependent upon American power for their operation.[14]

The resulting order rested upon several interconnected pillars. The Bretton Woods institutions helped stabilize international finance and facilitate economic recovery. The United Nations provided a framework for diplomatic coordination and collective legitimacy. NATO and a broader network of bilateral alliances created an unprecedented architecture of security commitments. The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, later succeeded by the World Trade Organization, promoted expanding economic integration. The U.S. dollar emerged as the central reserve currency of the international economy, while forward-deployed American military forces underwrote stability across key regions.[15]

Figure 1: President Truman signing the document implementing the North Atlantic Treaty at his desk in the Oval Office

This system was liberal in its institutional language but hierarchical in its practical operation. Access to American markets, security guarantees, financial networks, and diplomatic influence provided powerful incentives for participation. The order signified a mutually beneficial arrangement that nevertheless reflected American preferences, American priorities, and American power. As G. John Ikenberry has argued, the postwar order was distinctive because it institutionalized American leadership in ways that made that leadership more durable and acceptable to others.[16] For the first time in its history, the United States became deeply invested in preserving rather than revising the broader international system. Stability, openness, and institutional continuity served American interests. The former revisionist republic had become the principal status quo power.

The Unipolar Moment and the Persistence of Revisionism

The end of the Cold War appeared to reinforce this transformation. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States emerged as the sole superpower. The 1990s witnessed widespread expectations that American leadership, liberal institutions, and economic globalization would define the future of international politics.[17] Yet even at the height of the so-called liberal international order, American behavior demonstrated that support for international rules remained conditional rather than absolute.

The NATO intervention in Kosovo proceeded without explicit authorization from the United Nations Security Council, reflecting a willingness to prioritize humanitarian and strategic objectives over strict legal

[14] John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York: Penguin Press, 2005); Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992).
[15] Benn Steil, *The Battle of Bretton Woods* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).
[16] Ikenberry, *After Victory*; Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan*.
[17] Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment," *Foreign Affairs* 70, no. 1 (1990/91): 23–33. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/1990-01-01/unipolar-moment

procedure.[18] The expansion of NATO eastward revised the European security architecture established at the end of the Cold War and reshaped the geopolitical landscape of Eastern Europe.[19] The invasion of Iraq in 2003 further demonstrated Washington's willingness to act outside established international frameworks when leaders concluded that national security concerns warranted doing so.[20]

The broader War on Terror expanded American claims regarding self-defense, surveillance, detention, sanctions, and the use of force against non-state actors. Democracy promotion initiatives sought to transform domestic political systems abroad in ways that reflected American preferences regarding governance and legitimacy. Economic sanctions became instruments of strategic coercion. In each case, the United States demonstrated that it did not regard international institutions or norms as binding constraints when they conflicted with perceived national interests.

None of this means that the United States ceased to be the principal defender of the postwar order. Instead, it illustrates a deeper reality. Even during the height of American primacy, Washington combined status quo and revisionist impulses. It defended those aspects of the international system that reinforced American power while selectively revising those that did not. The image of the United States as a purely status quo actor therefore reflects only part of the historical record. Understanding this history is essential for interpreting contemporary developments. The United States has occupied both sides of the status quo-revisionist divide at different points in its history. The question facing analysts is whether the balance between defending and revising the order is shifting once again.

[18] Independent International Commission on Kosovo, *The Kosovo Report* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
[19] Ronald D. Asmus, *Opening NATO's Door: How the Alliance Remade Itself for a New Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).
[20] Philip H. Gordon and Jeremy Shapiro, *Allies at War: America, Europe, and the Crisis over Iraq* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004); John Lewis Gaddis, *Surprise, Security, and the American Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

WHY AMERICA IS BECOMING REVISIONIST NOW

The preceding sections argued that revisionism emerges when states become dissatisfied with the relationship between power, interests, and the prevailing international order. The United States remains the world's largest economy in nominal terms, the issuer of the dominant reserve currency, the leading military power, and the central node in an unparalleled network of alliances and partnerships.[21] By most conventional measures, American power remains extraordinary.

Still, history suggests that revisionism is driven less by objective decline than by perceptions of relative position and future trajectory. States become revisionist when influential political actors conclude that the existing order no longer adequately serves national interests. In the contemporary United States, this perception has become widespread. Across ideological divides, Americans have grown more skeptical of the assumptions that underpinned the post-Cold War order. The result is a growing demand that American power be exercised differently. Essentially, the United States is becoming revisionist because many Americans increasingly believe that the system their country built benefits others more than it benefits the United States itself.

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[21] Michael Beckley, *Unrivaled: Why America Will Remain the World's Sole Superpower* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018); Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, *America Abroad: The United States' Global Role in the 21st Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

Relative Decline and the Politics of Dissatisfaction

The first driver of contemporary American revisionism is the perception of relative decline. Whether that decline is real, exaggerated, or temporary is ultimately less important than the fact that it has become a central feature of American political discourse. Throughout the post-Cold War period, American leaders operated under the assumption that globalization, economic integration, technological innovation, and liberal institutionalism would reinforce American predominance. Instead, many observers now perceive a very different outcome.

The most important catalyst has been the rise of China. During the 1990s and early 2000s, integration into the global economy was widely expected to transform China into a more market-oriented and politically liberal actor. Instead, China emerged as America's principal strategic competitor while simultaneously becoming deeply integrated into global supply chains, manufacturing networks, and international markets.[22] For many policymakers, the result appeared paradoxical: the very system designed and protected by the United States had facilitated the rise of a rival capable of challenging American influence in the Indo-Pacific and beyond.

This perception extends beyond strategic competition with China. Deindustrialization in parts of the American heartland, persistent trade deficits, concerns regarding border security, growing public debt, supply-chain disruptions exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic, and mounting concerns regarding military overstretch have all contributed to a broader narrative that the United States bears disproportionate costs while competitors and allies enjoy disproportionate benefits.[23] Whether these perceptions are fully supported by economic data is less important than their political consequences. Revisionist movements emerge when enough citizens and elites conclude that the existing order is producing unacceptable outcomes.

The resulting politics is driven less by absolute decline than by relative dissatisfaction. Americans do not compare their country to historical standards of great-power influence. They compare contemporary outcomes to expectations formed during the unipolar moment, when American dominance appeared uncontested and globalization was widely expected to strengthen rather than complicate American primacy.

The Revolt Against Elite Internationalism

These perceptions have fueled a broader political revolt against the foreign-policy consensus that dominated American statecraft for much of the postwar era. From the late 1940s through the early twenty-first century, a broad bipartisan establishment generally agreed on several core assumptions: open markets promoted prosperity, alliances enhanced security, international institutions advanced American interests, immigration strengthened the economy, and global leadership justified substantial costs. Differences certainly existed between administrations, but the underlying framework remained remarkably stable.[24]

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[22] Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021); Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017); Hal Brands and Michael Beckley, *Danger Zone: The Coming Conflict with China* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2022).
[23] Robert D. Atkinson, *Innovation Economics: The Race for Global Advantage* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012); Adam S. Posen, "The Price of Nostalgia: America's Self-Defeating Economic Retreat," *Foreign Affairs* 100, no. 3 (2021): 28–36. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-04-20/america-price-nostalgia ; Barry Eichengreen, *In Defense of Public Debt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).
[24] Walter Russell Mead, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001); Robert Kagan, *The Jungle Grows Back: America and Our Imperiled World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2018).

That consensus has fractured. Across both political parties, skepticism toward globalization, interventionism, and multilateralism has grown substantially. Although the most visible manifestations emerged during the Trump era, the shift is broader than any individual political figure. Concerns regarding industrial decline, immigration, foreign wars, international institutions, and economic dependence on geopolitical competitors have become mainstream.

From this perspective, many pillars of the postwar order no longer appear as instruments of American leadership but as constraints upon American sovereignty. Free trade is criticized for accelerating industrial decline. International institutions are viewed as mechanisms through which foreign governments constrain American policy. Alliance commitments are portrayed as subsidies for wealthy partners. Migration flows are increasingly framed as challenges to social cohesion and state capacity. Foreign aid is criticized as a transfer of resources away from domestic priorities. International legal institutions are viewed with suspicion whenever they appear capable of constraining American freedom of action.[25]

The significance of this transformation should not be understated. Revisionism requires more than strategic opportunity; it requires political support. The erosion of elite consensus has created a domestic constituency for revising aspects of the international order that previous generations largely accepted.

The Return of Spheres of Influence

A third driver of American revisionism is the gradual reemergence of hemispheric thinking. During the height of the liberal international order, American policymakers often portrayed international politics as global, interconnected, and governed by universal rules. More recently, however, strategic discourse has emphasized geography, proximity, and regional primacy. This shift mirrors a renewed focus on the Western Hemisphere as a distinct strategic space. Chinese investment in Latin America, expanding Russian diplomatic activity, transnational criminal organizations, migration flows, and competition over critical infrastructure have encouraged policymakers to think once again in terms of regional influence rather than universal integration.[26]

Historically, this logic would have been immediately recognizable to nineteenth-century American strategists. The Monroe Doctrine and its successors rested upon the assumption that the Western Hemisphere occupied a special position within American security thinking. External powers were not viewed as legitimate participants in regional affairs. The distinction between domestic security and regional security was often blurred. Contemporary rhetoric reflects similar assumptions. Concerns regarding foreign control of strategic infrastructure, external influence in neighboring states, access to critical maritime chokepoints, and geopolitical competition in the Arctic all suggest a partial return to sphere-of-influence thinking. The language differs from that of earlier eras, but the underlying logic is familiar. The Western Hemisphere is increasingly viewed not as a neutral geopolitical space but as an area in which American interests enjoy special priority.

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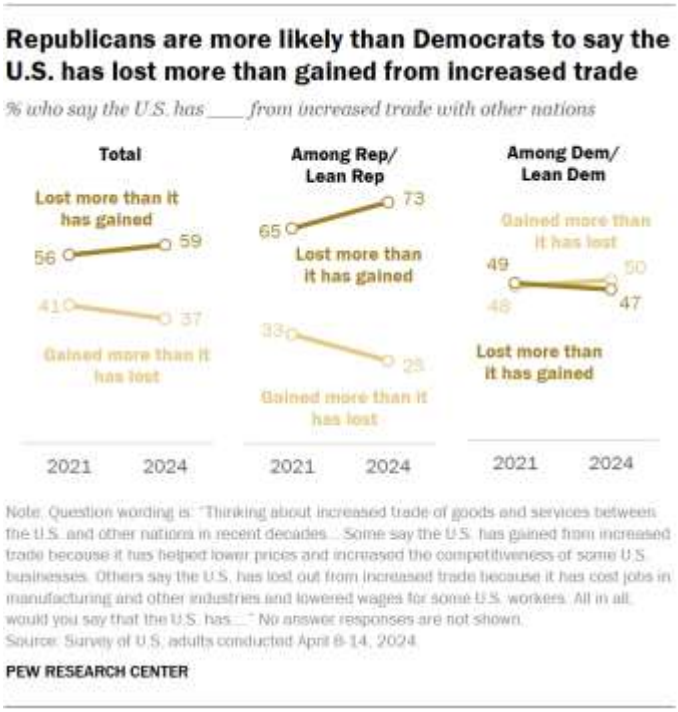
[25] Walter Russell Mead, "The Jacksonian Revolt," *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 2 (2017): 2–7; Stephen M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018).
[26] Sexton, *The Monroe Doctrine*; Brian Winter, ed., *The Monroe Doctrine at 200: The Future of U.S.–Latin America Relations* (New York: Americas Society/Council of the Americas, 2023).

From Free Trade to Geoeconomics

Perhaps the clearest manifestation of contemporary revisionism is the growing fusion of economics and national security. For much of the post-Cold War period, economic integration was treated as both a source of prosperity and a mechanism for reducing geopolitical rivalry. Markets would create interdependence, interdependence would encourage cooperation, and economic openness would reinforce stability.[27] This assumption has weakened considerably. American policymakers treat economic relationships as instruments of strategic competition. Tariffs, export controls, sanctions, investment restrictions, industrial policy, technology controls, and supply-chain restructuring have become central tools of statecraft. The objective is strategic resilience, technological advantage, industrial capacity, and geopolitical leverage.



This transformation is visible across administrations.[28] The Trump administration's tariffs challenged longstanding assumptions regarding trade liberalization. The Biden administration expanded industrial policy through legislation such as the CHIPS and Science Act and maintained many restrictions on Chinese technology access. The current strategic environment is defined by efforts to reduce dependence on geopolitical competitors, secure critical supply chains, protect advanced technologies, and reshape patterns of economic interdependence.[29] The result is a profound shift in the character of American leadership. The United States is not acting primarily as the chief sponsor of an open global economy, but rather as the architect of a selectively integrated economic order organized around security considerations. Economic relationships remain important, but they are increasingly judged according to their contribution to national power rather than their contribution to global efficiency.

These developments suggest that contemporary American revisionism is neither temporary nor purely partisan. It reflects a broader reassessment of the relationship between American power and the international order. Perceptions of relative decline have generated dissatisfaction with existing arrangements. Domestic political pressures have weakened support for elite internationalism. Strategic competition has revived

[27] Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Power and Interdependence*, 4th ed. (Boston: Longman, 2011); Thomas L. Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999).
[28] For example, compare and contrast the National Security Strategies of Biden and Trump. The White House. *National Security Strategy of the United States*. Washington, DC: Executive Office of the President, October 2022. https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf ; The White House. *National Security Strategy of the United States*. Washington, DC: Executive Office of the President, December 2025. https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf
[29] Robert D. Blackwill and Jennifer M. Harris, *War by Other Means: Geoeconomics and Statecraft* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016); Henry Farrell and Abraham Newman, *Underground Empire: How America Weaponized the World Economy* (New York: Henry Holt, 2023); Chris Miller, *Chip War: The Fight for the World's Most Critical Technology* (New York: Scribner, 2022).

interest in spheres of influence. Economic rivalry has elevated geoeconomics over globalization. The cumulative effect is a growing willingness to revise elements of the order that the United States once championed. The emerging debate is a debate about what kind of order best serves American interests in a world defined by great-power competition. The United States is not withdrawing from international politics. It is reconsidering the terms on which it participates.

CONTEMPORARY EVIDENCE: CASES FROM THE LAST YEAR

The argument that the United States is becoming a revisionist power requires more than a change in tone or rhetoric. It requires evidence that American policy is directed toward revising rules, institutions, territorial assumptions, alliance obligations, legal constraints, and economic arrangements that earlier generations of American leaders helped build or defend. The last two years provide several such cases. None proves the argument alone. Taken together, however, they show a consistent pattern in which the United States is increasingly willing to treat inherited arrangements as negotiable when they appear to constrain American sovereignty, security, economic advantage, or regional primacy.

Greenland, Panama, and Canada

The clearest evidence of territorial and hierarchical revisionism appeared in the renewed discussion of Greenland, the Panama Canal, and Canada. In January 2025, Donald Trump refused to rule out military or economic action to pursue U.S. control of Greenland or the Panama Canal.[30] Around the same period, he suggested that economic pressure could be used to make Canada the fifty-first state, a proposal Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau publicly rejected.[31] In March 2025, Trump again said the United States needed Greenland, while NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte avoided being drawn into the issue and framed the Arctic as a strategic space involving Russia and China.[32]

These statements did not constitute formal annexation policy. They may have been intended as coercive bargaining, political theater, or strategic signaling, but the analytical significance lies precisely there. Revisionism is not limited to tanks crossing borders or treaties being formally abrogated. Great-power rhetoric alters allied threat perceptions when it forces other governments to plan for contingencies they previously regarded as implausible. If Canada, Denmark, Greenland, or Panama must evaluate whether U.S. pressure could become more coercive, then the political environment has already changed.

The Greenland, Panama, and Canada episodes blur the line between alliance management and hierarchy. Greenland is part of the Kingdom of Denmark, a NATO ally. Canada is a treaty ally, major trading partner, and member of the same continental defense architecture. Panama controls one of the world's most important maritime chokepoints. In each case, the United States signaled that proximity, strategic geography, and

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[30] Steve Holland, "Trump Will Not Rule Out Force to Take Panama Canal, Greenland," *Reuters*, January 8, 2025. https://www.reuters.com/world/trump-wont-rule-out-military-economic-action-he-seeks-control-panama-canal-2025-01-07/
[31] David Ljunggren and Steve Scherer, "Trudeau Rejects Trump's Idea of Forcing Canada to Become a U.S. State," *Reuters*, January 7, 2025. https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/canada-rejects-trumps-comments-about-possible-use-economic-force-2025-01-07/
[32] Steve Holland, "Trump Tells NATO Chief the U.S. Needs Greenland," *Reuters*, March 13, 2025. https://www.reuters.com/world/trump-expresses-confidence-that-us-will-annex-greenland-2025-03-13/

American security concerns could override the assumptions of sovereign equality and allied deference that normally structure relations among friendly states.

The broader point is not that Washington is certain to acquire territory or formally reassert control over the Panama Canal. It is that the United States has revived a mode of statecraft in which strategic geography near the American homeland is treated as too important to be left to ordinary diplomacy. That is hierarchical revisionism. It asserts that some states, territories, and chokepoints occupy a special place in American security thinking and therefore cannot be treated as entirely neutral or autonomous spaces.

The Trump Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine

The 2025 National Security Strategy transformed this instinct into doctrine. The strategy explicitly described a "Trump Corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine as a restoration of American power and priorities in the Western Hemisphere. It framed the hemisphere around migration control, drug flows, land and maritime security, and the exclusion or limitation of extra-hemispheric influence.[33] Outside analysts quickly recognized the significance of this language. The Atlantic Council described the strategy as prioritizing U.S. territory and the Western Hemisphere while treating malign activity by extra-hemispheric powers as a serious national security threat.[34] Chatham House similarly interpreted the strategy as an attempt to revive the Monroe Doctrine through expanded military presence, border deployments, and a more assertive regional posture.[35]

This is not isolationism, though. Isolationism implies withdrawal from external commitments. The Trump Corollary points in the opposite direction because it represents a claim of regional primacy. It treats the Western Hemisphere as a privileged strategic zone in which U.S. interests deserve special authority and in which external powers, especially China, are treated as illegitimate or dangerous intruders. The revisionist dimension lies in the effort to modify the post-Cold War assumption that the hemisphere could be treated as part of a global liberal order governed by economic openness, sovereign equality, and multilateral institutions. The Trump Corollary returns to an older American strategic tradition: the hemisphere as a security perimeter, a resource base, a migration-control zone, and a sphere of influence. In that sense, it is a doctrinal statement of regional revisionism.

Tariffs Against Allies and the Revision of the Trade Order

The United States has also revised the economic logic of the order it once championed. In February 2025, the Trump administration imposed 25 percent tariffs on Mexican and most Canadian imports and 10 percent tariffs on goods from China, linking the measures to fentanyl, illegal immigration, and national security.[36] The move pushed into new trade law territory through the use of emergency authorities to justify tariffs against

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[33] The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: Executive Office of the President, December 2025). https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf
[34] Jason Marczak, "The Trump Corollary Is Officially in Effect," Atlantic Council, January 5, 2026. https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/dispatches/the-trump-corollary-is-officially-in-effect/
[35] Christopher Sabatini, "The 'Trump Corollary' in the U.S. Security Strategy Brings a New Focus to Latin America. It Is a Disordered Plan," Chatham House, December 11, 2025. https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/12/trump-corollary-us-security-strategy-brings-new-focus-latin-america-it-disordered-plan
[36] David Lawder, Andrea Shalal, and Trevor Hunnicutt, "Trump Launches Trade War with Tariffs on Mexico, Canada and China," *Reuters*, February 1, 2025. https://www.reuters.com/business/trump-readies-order-steep-tariffs-goods-mexico-canada-china-2025-02-01/

Canada, Mexico, and China.[37] In April 2025, the administration announced a broader reciprocal tariff regime, including a baseline 10 percent tariff on goods from all countries and higher rates for countries deemed to maintain barriers against U.S. imports, which was a rupture within the more than seventy-five-year-old global trading system.[38]

This development is analytically important because the United States was the central architect of the postwar trade order. For decades, American policy generally favored trade liberalization, rules-based dispute settlement, and expanding market access, even when specific industries or administrations sought exceptions. The new tariff approach treats trade less as a system of mutual gains and more as an arena of coercive bargaining. Tariffs are not merely protective instruments. They become tools for reshaping migration policy, supply chains, industrial geography, and allied behavior.

The most recent USMCA disputes reinforce the point. In May 2026, U.S. Trade Representative Jamieson Greer said the United States planned to keep tariffs on Canada and Mexico despite the USMCA, citing deficits and national security concerns.[39] The administration also proposed raising North American auto-content requirements while requiring at least half of that content to come from the United States, excluding Canada from counting toward that U.S.-specific requirement.[40] Such proposals suggest a shift from trilateral economic integration toward U.S.-centric regional production.

This is economic revisionism as the United States is subordinating trade rules to leverage, security, and industrial strategy. The old logic of market-opening hegemony is giving way to protectionist bargaining and geoeconomic discipline.

NATO Burden Shifting and Coercive Alliance Management

A similar pattern appears in alliance politics. The United States has long pressured NATO allies to increase defense spending, but the demand for a 5 percent target represents a significant escalation. Interestingly, most U.S. allies at NATO had endorsed Trump's demand that members invest 5 percent of GDP in defense and related security needs.[41] NATO members agreed to a major increase in the defense spending target to 5 percent of GDP, as demanded by Trump, although Spain objected to full compliance.[42]

The issue is not whether NATO allies should spend more. There is a strong strategic case that European states need greater defense capacity, especially after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The revisionist element

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[37] David Lawder, "Trump Stretches Trade Law Boundaries with Canada, Mexico, China Tariffs," *Reuters*, February 3, 2025. https://www.reuters.com/business/trump-stretches-trade-law-boundaries-with-canada-mexico-china-tariffs-2025-02-02/
[38] David Lawder, "What's in Trump's Sweeping New Reciprocal Tariff Regime," *Reuters*, April 2, 2025. https://www.reuters.com/world/us/whats-trumps-sweeping-new-reciprocal-tariff-regime-2025-04-03/
[39] David Lawder, "U.S. to Keep Tariffs on USMCA Countries, Issues with Canada 'Significant,' Greer Says," *Reuters*, May 26, 2026. https://www.reuters.com/business/us-plans-tariffs-usmca-countries-has-issues-with-canada-2026-05-26/
[40] David Shepardson, "Trump Administration Wants to Raise North American Auto Content to 82%, with Half from U.S.," *Reuters*, May 29, 2026. https://www.reuters.com/business/autos-transportation/trump-administration-wants-raise-north-american-auto-content-82-with-half-us-2026-05-29/
[41] Lorne Cook, "Most NATO Members Accept Trump's 5% Defense Spending Demand, Rutte Says," *Associated Press*, June 5, 2025. https://apnews.com/article/nato-capability-targets-plans-defense-spending-trump-b123977c8f3c1bce277fb1b9957b1b78
[42] Andrew Gray and Belén Carreño, "NATO Countries Approve Hague Summit Statement with 5% Defence Spending Goal," *Reuters*, June 22, 2025. https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/nato-countries-approve-hague-summit-statement-with-5-defence-spending-goal-2025-06-22/

lies in the changing logic of alliance legitimacy. During the Cold War and the early post-Cold War period, NATO was often described as a community of shared values and collective defense. Under the emerging model, allies must continually prove their value in material terms. Security guarantees become increasingly conditional upon fiscal contribution, industrial capacity, and political alignment.

This does not destroy NATO. It changes NATO's character. The alliance begins to look less like an institutionalized security community and more like a transactional compact in which protection is explicitly tied to burden sharing. That shift reflects hierarchical revisionism within an existing alliance structure. The United States remains the central power, but it is renegotiating the terms of allied legitimacy.

Sanctions Against the ICC and Resistance to International Legal Constraint

The sanctions imposed against the International Criminal Court provide evidence of institutional and legal revisionism. In February 2025, Trump issued an executive order finding that the ICC had engaged in "illegitimate and baseless actions" targeting the United States and Israel.[43] ICC Prosecutor Karim Khan became the first person hit by the sanctions, which included economic and travel restrictions.[44] Dozens of countries subsequently issued a statement expressing support for the ICC's independence and integrity.[45]

This case illustrates the long-standing American ambivalence toward international law. The United States has often supported international legal institutions when they reinforce order, punish adversaries, or legitimize American objectives. It has resisted them when they appear capable of constraining U.S. personnel, U.S. allies, or U.S.-supported military operations. The ICC sanctions make that hierarchy explicit. International law is acceptable as an instrument of order, but not as a binding constraint on American sovereignty or close allied action.

The revisionist element is institutional rather than territorial. Washington is contesting the authority of a specific institution to exercise jurisdiction in ways that conflict with American preferences. That is precisely how institutional revisionism often works via selective resistance to unwanted constraints.

Latin America, Cartels, and the Securitization of Transnational Crime

The designation of cartels and criminal organizations as terrorist entities represents another important form of revisionism. On January 20, 2025, Trump issued an executive order directing the designation of certain cartels and other organizations as Foreign Terrorist Organizations and Specially Designated Global Terrorists.[46] In

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[43] The White House, "Imposing Sanctions on the International Criminal Court," Executive Order, February 6, 2025. https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/02/imposing-sanctions-on-the-international-criminal-court/

[44] Stephanie van den Berg and Anthony Deutsch, "White House Confirms War Crimes Prosecutor First Target of ICC Sanctions," *Reuters*, February 10, 2025. https://www.reuters.com/world/us/white-house-confirms-war-crimes-prosecutor-first-target-icc-sanctions-2025-02-10/

[45] Michelle Nichols and Stephanie van den Berg, "Countries Vow 'Unwavering' Support for ICC, as Trump Hits Court with Sanctions," *Reuters*, February 7, 2025. https://www.reuters.com/world/trump-impose-sanctions-international-criminal-court-2025-02-06/

[46] The White House, "Designating Cartels and Other Organizations as Foreign Terrorist Organizations and Specially Designated Global Terrorists," Executive Order, January 20, 2025. https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/designating-cartels-and-other-organizations-as-foreign-terrorist-organizations-and-specially-designated-global-terrorists/

February 2025, the administration formally designated eight Latin American criminal organizations as foreign terrorist organizations.[47] Treasury guidance later identified the designations and their sanctions implications.[48]

The move expanded the legal and strategic vocabulary available for confronting transnational criminal organizations. It also blurred the boundary between law enforcement, counterterrorism, border security, sanctions policy, and regional strategy. For example, designating Mexican cartels as foreign terrorist organizations could increase the reach of U.S. law enforcement while complicating international business, asylum claims, and relations with Mexico.[49] In 2026, the United States expanded this approach by announcing plans to designate Brazil's PCC and Comando Vermelho as terrorist organizations, prompting concerns in Brazil that the move could affect investment and create pretexts for more intrusive U.S. pressure.[50]

Importantly, this is a hemispheric security doctrine. By recoding organized crime as terrorism, the United States creates legal authorities and political arguments that can support sanctions, financial isolation, intelligence operations, and potentially more coercive action. The analytical point is that terrorism designation changes the policy domain and moves cartel violence from criminal justice into national security and regional order.

Industrial Policy, Export Controls, and Techno-Geopolitical Revisionism

The final case is the restructuring of the global technology economy. The United States is rebuilding rules around semiconductors, artificial intelligence, advanced manufacturing, data, critical minerals, and supply chains through the logic of national security. In January 2025, the United States tightened global AI chip controls by capping exports to many countries, allowing broader access for close allies, and maintaining restrictions on China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea.[51] In May 2025, the United States had ordered a broad range of companies to stop shipping certain goods to China without licenses, with restrictions aimed at chokepoints in key sectors.[52] In September 2025, the Commerce Department expanded its export blacklist rules to include subsidiaries that are at least 50 percent owned by listed entities, greatly increasing the number of companies requiring licenses to receive American goods and services.[53]

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[47] Lisa Mascaro, "Trump Administration Designates 8 Latin American Cartels as Foreign Terrorist Organizations," *PBS NewsHour*, February 19, 2025. https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/trump-administration-designates-8-latin-american-cartels-as-foreign-terrorist-organizations

[48] U.S. Department of the Treasury, Office of Foreign Assets Control, "OFAC Alert: International Cartels Designated as Foreign Terrorist Organizations and Specially Designated Global Terrorists," March 18, 2025. https://ofac.treasury.gov/media/934096/download

[49] Diego Oré, "Trump's Bid to Label Mexican Cartels 'Foreign Terrorists' Poses Risks for Companies," *Reuters*, January 21, 2025. https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/trumps-bid-label-mexican-cartels-foreign-terrorists-poses-risks-companies-2025-01-21/

[50] Lisandra Paraguassu and Ricardo Brito, "U.S. to Designate Two Brazilian Gangs as 'Terrorist Organizations,' Rubio Says," *Reuters*, May 28, 2026; David Biller, "U.S. Government Labels Brazil's 2 Biggest Drug Gangs as Foreign Terrorist Organizations," *Associated Press*, May 28, 2026. https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/us-intends-designate-two-brazilian-gangs-terrorist-organizations-rubio-says-2026-05-28/

[51] Karen Freifeld and David Shepardson, "U.S. Tightens Its Grip on AI Chip Flows Across the Globe," *Reuters*, January 13, 2025. https://www.reuters.com/technology/artificial-intelligence/us-tightens-its-grip-ai-chip-flows-across-globe-2025-01-13/

[52] Karen Freifeld and Fanny Potkin, "U.S. Curbs Chip Design Software, Chemicals, Other Shipments to China," *Reuters*, May 29, 2025. https://www.reuters.com/world/china/trump-tells-us-chip-designers-stop-selling-china-ft-reports-2025-05-28/

[53] Karen Freifeld, "U.S. Expands Export Blacklist in Crackdown on Chinese Firms," *Reuters*, September 29, 2025. https://www.reuters.com/business/autos-transportation/us-expands-export-blacklist-include-subsidiaries-2025-09-29/

This policy trajectory spans administrations. The Biden administration used export controls, the CHIPS and Science Act, and industrial subsidies to protect strategic technologies and rebuild domestic manufacturing capacity. The Trump administration modified and expanded parts of this architecture while retaining the core assumption that advanced technology flows must be governed by security priorities rather than market efficiency.[54] This is perhaps the most consequential form of contemporary American revisionism because it changes the operating logic of globalization itself. The United States is no longer defending a general principle of open technological integration. It is designing a selective order built around trusted partners, controlled chokepoints, strategic denial, and industrial resilience. The world economy remains interconnected, but interconnection is filtered through geopolitical alignment.

CONCLUSION

These seven cases demonstrate that contemporary American revisionism is multidimensional. Greenland, Panama, and Canada reveal territorial and hierarchical instincts. The Trump Corollary formalizes hemispheric primacy. Tariffs revise the trade order. NATO burden shifting renegotiates alliance legitimacy. ICC sanctions resist legal constraint. Cartel designations securitize regional crime. Export controls and industrial policy redesign the technological foundations of globalization. What the cases show is that the United States is attempting to rewrite the terms on which it engages the world.

[54] Karen Freifeld, "Trump Officials Eye Changes to Biden's AI Chip Export Rule, Sources Say," *Reuters*, April 29, 2025. https://www.reuters.com/world/china/trump-officials-eye-changes-bidens-ai-chip-export-rule-sources-say-2025-04-29/

HISTORICAL COMPARISONS

While no historical case is identical to the present, comparison helps identify recurring patterns in how states respond to changing distributions of power, shifting perceptions of legitimacy, and growing dissatisfaction with existing arrangements.

The United States occupies an unusual position within the contemporary international system. It is neither a rising challenger nor a declining secondary power. It remains the most powerful state in the international system while increasingly questioning aspects of the order it helped create. As a result, the most relevant historical comparisons are not those involving weak or excluded states seeking entry into an established order. They are cases involving powerful states attempting to preserve, revise, or redefine an order that no longer appears fully aligned with their interests.

Britain Before the First World War

The British Empire offers perhaps the closest historical parallel to the dilemma currently confronting the United States. During much of the nineteenth century, Britain occupied a position of extraordinary influence. It dominated global finance, maintained the world's most powerful navy, controlled strategic maritime chokepoints, and presided over an international economy increasingly structured around British commercial interests.[55] Like the United States after 1945, Britain was one of the principal architects and beneficiaries of that system.

By the late nineteenth century, however, Britain's position had become more complicated. Germany's industrial growth, American economic expansion, Russian territorial reach, and Japanese modernization gradually eroded Britain's relative advantages. Importantly, Britain did not experience immediate collapse or even absolute decline. It remained one of the world's strongest powers. The challenge was relative rather than absolute. British leaders confronted a world in which maintaining the existing order required greater effort while producing fewer obvious advantages.[56]

The British response was not straightforward defense of the status quo. Britain revised important aspects of its strategy in order to preserve its broader position. It abandoned long-standing policies of strategic isolation, negotiated new diplomatic alignments with former rivals, restructured military priorities, and increasingly concentrated resources on protecting core imperial interests.[57] In effect, Britain modified parts of the order in order to preserve the larger system from which it benefited.

This comparison is instructive because it highlights a common misunderstanding regarding revisionism. Revisionism is often associated with revolutionary transformation, but powerful states frequently engage in selective revision precisely to preserve their primacy. Britain's adjustments before 1914 were not revolutionary, but they reflected a growing recognition that inherited arrangements were no longer sufficient. Contemporary American debates about alliances, trade, industrial policy, military posture, and strategic

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[55] Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1998 [1976]).
[56] Aaron L. Friedberg, *The Weary Titan: Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline, 1895–1905* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).
[57] Zara S. Steiner, *The Foreign Office and Foreign Policy, 1898–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969); Paul Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism, 1860–1914* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1980).

geography reveal a similar logic. The objective is not necessarily to destroy the existing order but to revise it in ways believed necessary for its continued viability under American leadership.

The United States in the Late Nineteenth Century

An even more revealing comparison may be found in America's own history. Much of the contemporary discussion surrounding American revisionism assumes that the post-1945 liberal order represents the natural expression of American statecraft. Historically, however, the United States spent much of the nineteenth century pursuing policies that resemble many contemporary trends (as discussed above).

Following the Civil War, American policymakers focused on continental consolidation, industrial expansion, tariff protection, naval modernization, and hemispheric dominance. The United States embraced high tariffs as instruments of national development, protected domestic industry against foreign competition, expanded its naval capabilities, and asserted increasing influence throughout the Western Hemisphere.[58] Strategic thinkers such as Alfred Thayer Mahan argued that economic prosperity, military power, and control of key maritime routes were inseparable components of national greatness.[59]

The Monroe Doctrine became more expansive, culminating in the Roosevelt Corollary and a growing willingness to intervene throughout the Caribbean and Latin America. European involvement in hemispheric affairs was increasingly viewed not as a normal feature of international politics but as an unacceptable intrusion into a privileged American sphere of influence.[60]

The parallels with contemporary debates are striking. Current discussions surrounding industrial policy, supply-chain resilience, maritime competition, Arctic access, canal security, border control, and strategic competition with China all echo themes that would have been familiar to late nineteenth-century American policymakers. Many of the assumptions underlying contemporary American strategy appear less like a radical departure from historical practice than a partial revival of older traditions that predate the liberal international order.

Revolutionary France and Napoleonic Europe

The French Revolutionary and Napoleonic period provides a useful contrast because it illustrates a fundamentally different form of revisionism. Revolutionary France sought the abrogation of institutions or adjustment of the distribution of power, and it did so by challenging the ideological foundations of the European order itself. The French Revolution questioned monarchy, aristocracy, dynastic legitimacy, and the traditional structure of European politics. Napoleon subsequently combined ideological transformation with territorial expansion, military conquest, and the reorganization of political authority across much of Europe.[61] This form of revisionism was simultaneously territorial, ideological, institutional, and normative. The objective

[58] Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860–1898* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1963).
[59] Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1890).
[60] Sexton, *The Monroe Doctrine*.
[61] David A. Bell, *The First Total War: Napoleon's Europe and the Birth of Warfare as We Know It* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007); Martyn Lyons, *Napoleon Bonaparte and the Legacy of the French Revolution* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994).

was to replace the system itself. Unsurprisingly, such ambitions generated broad coalitions dedicated to restoring or reconstructing European order.

The comparison highlights what contemporary American revisionism is not. The United States is not attempting to export a universal ideology, overthrow prevailing systems of government, or fundamentally redefine the principles of political legitimacy across the international system. Its objectives are narrower and more pragmatic. Current American debates focus on sovereignty, industrial capacity, border security, alliance burdens, technological competition, and strategic geography rather than universal ideological transformation. This distinction matters because it suggests that contemporary American revisionism is primarily hierarchical rather than revolutionary. It seeks greater freedom of action, stronger regional primacy, enhanced economic leverage, and reduced institutional constraints. It does not seek to fundamentally remake the ideological foundations of global politics.

China and Russia Today

The most important comparisons are with contemporary China and Russia, both of which are frequently described as revisionist powers. However, their revisionism differs significantly from the emerging American variant. Russia's revisionism is primarily territorial and geopolitical. The annexation of Crimea in 2014, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and repeated challenges to the post-Cold War European security architecture reflect an effort to revise borders, restore influence within former Soviet territories, and weaken institutions perceived as hostile to Russian interests.[62] Russian revisionism relies heavily upon military coercion and the direct use of force. It seeks to alter facts on the ground through territorial control and strategic intimidation.

China's revisionism operates differently. Although territorial issues remain important, particularly regarding Taiwan and maritime claims in the South China Sea, Beijing's strategy is more heavily focused on institutions, economics, and technology. China has worked to expand its influence within international organizations, create parallel institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, reshape global infrastructure through the Belt and Road Initiative, and reduce vulnerabilities to American economic pressure.[63] Chinese revisionism seeks to modify the distribution of authority within the existing system while constructing alternatives where existing institutions are viewed as unfavorable.

The United States differs from both. It is not attempting large-scale territorial conquest in the manner of Russia, nor is it seeking entry into an order dominated by another power, as China arguably seeks to do. Instead, the United States occupies the unique position of revising an order that it largely built and still dominates. Its revisionism emerges from within the system rather than from outside it. This distinction is analytically important. Most theories of revisionism assume that challengers confront dominant powers. The contemporary United States does not fit this model. It remains the dominant power, yet it questions aspects of the order associated with its own leadership. Rather than defending every institution, norm, alliance

[62] Angela Stent, *Putin's World: Russia Against the West and with the Rest* (New York: Twelve, 2019); Serhii Plokhy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War: The Return of History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2023).
[63] Doshi, *The Long Game*; Nadège Rolland, *China's Eurasian Century? Political and Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative* (Seattle, WA: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2017); Elizabeth Economy, *The World According to China* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022).

commitment, and economic arrangement inherited from the post-Cold War period, Washington is selectively revising those it views as inconsistent with contemporary interests.

Hegemonic Revisionism

The result is a distinctive form of behavior best described as hegemonic revisionism. Unlike traditional revisionist powers, the United States is not seeking admission to a system from which it is excluded. Nor is it attempting to overthrow an order imposed by others. Instead, it is revising the rules, institutions, and expectations of an order that it continues to lead. Historical comparison does not prove that the United States is becoming revisionist. It does, however, clarify the nature of that revisionism. America today resembles neither revolutionary France nor contemporary Russia. It shares some characteristics with a rising China, but even that comparison is imperfect. The closest parallels are found among powerful states confronting a changing strategic environment and seeking to revise portions of an existing order in order to preserve their long-term position within it. All of this means that United States is acting as a dissatisfied hegemon.

COUNTERARGUMENTS AND ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATIONS

The argument advanced in this report is that the United States more and more exhibits characteristics associated with revisionist powers. Such a claim inevitably invites skepticism. The United States remains the central actor within the international system, maintains extensive alliance commitments, supports many of the institutions it helped create, and continues to oppose the revisionist ambitions of other major powers. Critics may therefore argue that the revisionist-hegemon framework exaggerates recent developments or misinterprets normal great-power behavior.

These objections deserve serious consideration. Indeed, some contain important elements of truth. The objective of this section is not to dismiss alternative interpretations but to evaluate them. The question is not whether evidence exists against the revisionist-hegemon thesis. It does. The question is whether that evidence outweighs the broader pattern identified throughout this report.

America Is Still Defending the Status Quo Against China, Russia, and Iran

The strongest objection is also the most obvious. The United States continues to oppose many of the world's most prominent revisionist powers. American forces remain deployed across Europe and the Indo-Pacific. Washington continues to support Ukraine against Russian aggression, maintain a network of alliances intended to balance China, and resist Iranian efforts to reshape the Middle East through proxies and coercion.[64] These actions appear more consistent with a status quo power defending an existing order than with a revisionist state seeking to overturn it.

[64] Hal Brands, *The Eurasian Century: Hot Wars, Cold Wars, and the Making of the Modern World* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2025); Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, *America Abroad: The United States' Global Role in the 21st Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

This observation is fundamentally correct. The United States remains status quo-oriented in several critical theaters. American strategy in Europe is largely aimed at preserving the territorial and political settlement established after the Cold War. In East Asia, Washington seeks to prevent the emergence of a Chinese-dominated regional order. In the Middle East, successive administrations have opposed efforts by Iran and its partners to alter regional balances of power through coercion or force.

The problem is that this objection assumes that states must be either status quo or revisionist across all domains simultaneously. History provides little support for such a binary distinction. States routinely defend some aspects of an international order while seeking to revise others. Britain defended global maritime commerce while repeatedly adjusting imperial arrangements. The Soviet Union challenged the Western-led order while defending its own sphere of influence. China supports some elements of globalization while seeking to revise others.

The same pattern appears in contemporary American policy. The United States may seek to preserve the balance of power in East Asia while simultaneously revising trade rules. It may oppose Russian territorial revisionism in Europe while asserting greater hemispheric primacy in the Western Hemisphere. It may defend certain international institutions while resisting others. Revisionism and status quo behavior are not mutually exclusive categories. They often coexist within the same state.

The more precise argument is that the United States has become revisionist toward portions of the order it once defended. The international system is not a single institution or set of rules. It is a collection of arrangements spanning security, economics, law, diplomacy, and regional authority. American policy seeks to preserve some of these arrangements while modifying others.

Trump's Rhetoric Is Not Policy

A second objection emphasizes the distinction between rhetoric and action. Much of the evidence presented in previous sections involves statements regarding Greenland, Panama, Canada, tariffs, alliances, or hemispheric influence. Critics may argue that such statements are bargaining tactics, campaign rhetoric, negotiation strategies, or media spectacles rather than actual policy commitments.[65] This caution is reasonable. International politics is filled with threats that are never implemented and declarations that are never translated into concrete action. Analysts should always distinguish between rhetoric and behavior.

However, great-power rhetoric cannot be dismissed as politically irrelevant. International politics operates not only through actions but through expectations. States make decisions based on what they believe other states might do. Alliance planning, defense spending, investment flows, diplomatic positioning, and military procurement all depend upon assessments of future behavior rather than present realities.[66]

Consequently, rhetoric becomes strategically significant when it consistently alters the calculations of other actors. Whether or not the United States ultimately attempts to acquire Greenland is only part of the analytical question. The more important question is whether Denmark, Greenland, NATO allies, and other governments regard such a possibility as requiring consideration. If they do, then the rhetoric has already produced geopolitical consequences. The same logic applies to tariffs, alliance commitments, sanctions, and spheres

[65] Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976).
[66] Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966); Glenn H. Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

of influence. Repeated statements from senior American officials shape expectations regarding future policy. Markets respond. Allies hedge. Adversaries adapt. Strategic planners revise assumptions. In international politics, rhetoric from major powers is often a form of action. The revisionist-hegemon thesis does not require every statement to become policy. It requires only that these statements collectively reveal a growing willingness to question assumptions that previously appeared settled.

The Liberal International Order Was Never Truly Liberal

A third objection challenges the report's characterization of the postwar order itself. According to this critique, there is nothing especially new about contemporary American behavior because the liberal international order was never as liberal as its advocates claimed. The United States has always mixed universal principles with strategic exceptions. It has long used military force without international authorization, imposed sanctions unilaterally, supported favored allies, intervened in foreign political systems, and maintained privileged influence within key regions.[67]

This criticism is difficult to refute because it is largely correct. The postwar order was never a purely neutral system governed exclusively by universal rules. American power played a central role in creating and sustaining it. The United States often operated outside formal legal constraints when leaders believed core interests were at stake. The order itself was always characterized by a tension between liberal aspirations and geopolitical realities. Recognizing this reality, however, strengthens rather than weakens the central argument of this report. The claim is not that the United States has suddenly become hypocritical. Nor is it that American foreign policy has abandoned a previously perfect liberal order. Rather, the argument is that American leaders progressively reject the legitimating language that once accompanied those practices.

Throughout much of the post-Cold War period, American policymakers generally justified controversial actions in the language of liberal internationalism. Military interventions were often framed as humanitarian obligations. Trade agreements were presented as engines of shared prosperity. Alliances were described as communities of shared values. Institutions were defended as sources of legitimacy and cooperation.[68] Today, many American leaders are comfortable using a different vocabulary. Sovereignty, reciprocity, strategic competition, industrial resilience, border control, burden sharing, and spheres of influence have become more prominent concepts. The shift is conceptual, meaning what has changed is how the United States explains what it does.

This Is Restoration, Not Revisionism

A final objection argues that contemporary American policy should be understood not as revisionist but as restorative. From this perspective, many recent developments represent attempts to recover older traditions of American statecraft rather than create entirely new arrangements. The renewed emphasis on the Monroe

[67] Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan*; Patrick Porter, *The False Promise of Liberal Order: Nostalgia, Delusion, and the Rise of Trump* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020).
[68] Tony Smith, *America's Mission: The United States and the Worldwide Struggle for Democracy in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994); John Gerard Ruggie, *Winning the Peace: America and World Order in the New Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

Doctrine, strategic geography, industrial policy, tariffs, hemispheric security, and great-power competition all have deep historical precedents.[69] This observation is also largely correct.

Many contemporary policies do resemble earlier periods of American history more closely than they resemble the liberal internationalism of the immediate post-Cold War era. In that sense, they can reasonably be described as restorative. The problem is that restoration and revisionism are not mutually exclusive concepts. Restoring an earlier order often requires revising the current one. The relevant comparison is not between today's policies and those of Theodore Roosevelt or William McKinley. The relevant comparison is between today's policies and the post-Cold War order that prevailed during the three decades following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

A renewed Monroe Doctrine, for example, may represent a return to older American strategic traditions, yet it still requires revision of assumptions that became widely accepted after 1991. A shift from trade liberalization toward tariffs and industrial policy may draw upon nineteenth-century precedents, but it nevertheless alters the rules governing contemporary economic relationships. A greater emphasis on spheres of influence may have historical roots, but it still challenges the universalist assumptions embedded within much of the post-Cold War order. Restoration does not invalidate the revisionist-hegemon thesis. It simply identifies the historical source from which contemporary revisionism draws inspiration.

Limitations of Counterarguments

These counterarguments reveal both the strengths and limitations of the revisionist-hegemon framework. The United States remains a defender of important elements of the existing order. Not all rhetoric becomes policy. The liberal order was never entirely liberal. Many contemporary policies have historical precedents. These observations should caution against overstating the case. Simultaneously, none fundamentally undermines the central argument. States can simultaneously defend and revise different aspects of an international order. Rhetoric can reshape strategic expectations even when implementation remains uncertain. A selective order can still be revised. Restoration can still be revisionist. The cumulative evidence suggests that the United States is not abandoning international order altogether but redefining which parts of that order deserve preservation and which parts require revision.

[69] Mead, *Special Providence*; Sexton, *The Monroe Doctrine*.

TOWARD A TYPOLOGY OF GREAT-POWER BEHAVIOR

The conventional distinction between status quo and revisionist powers has considerable analytical value, but it also possesses significant limitations. Throughout this report, the United States has repeatedly demonstrated characteristics associated with both categories. It remains deeply invested in preserving important elements of the existing international system while simultaneously seeking to revise others. Existing theories often treat these categories as mutually exclusive. In practice, however, great powers rarely fit neatly into either classification.

The problem is particularly acute when analyzing hegemonic states. Most theories of revisionism were developed to explain the behavior of dissatisfied challengers rather than dominant powers. They focus on states seeking entry into an order from which they are excluded or disadvantaged. Contemporary America presents a different phenomenon. It remains the leading power within the international system yet increasingly questions aspects of the order associated with its own leadership. To better capture these distinctions, it is useful to think of great-power behavior as existing along a spectrum rather than within a binary framework.

The Status Quo Hegemon

At one end of the spectrum stands the status quo hegemon. Such a state derives substantial benefits from the existing order and therefore seeks to preserve its core institutions, rules, norms, and power relationships. While no hegemon accepts every constraint equally, the status quo hegemon broadly views the prevailing order as an asset. The costs of maintaining the system are outweighed by the advantages it provides. Previously, the United States during much of the Cold War and the immediate post-Cold War period approximated this category. American leaders generally viewed international institutions, alliance networks, open trade, and security commitments as mechanisms through which U.S. influence could be sustained. The objective was to defend and expand the system. The dominant policy questions confronting policymakers were how to preserve the existing order rather than how to revise it.

The Reformist Hegemon

The second category is the reformist hegemon. A reformist hegemon remains committed to the broad architecture of the existing order but seeks adjustments to preserve its effectiveness, legitimacy, or sustainability. Reformists view the system as fundamentally beneficial but recognize that institutions and arrangements must evolve in response to changing circumstances. A reformist hegemon seeks adaptation rather than transformation. It may support alliance modernization, institutional reform, burden sharing, regulatory changes, or limited economic restructuring, yet these reforms are intended to preserve the system rather than replace it.

The distinction between a status quo hegemon and a reformist hegemon is subtle but important. The former primarily seeks continuity. The latter seeks controlled adaptation. Both remain fundamentally invested in the survival of the existing order. Many American administrations since the end of the Cold War exhibited reformist tendencies. Calls for greater NATO burden sharing, modifications to international trade arrangements, reforms within international institutions, or adjustments to global governance structures generally reflected efforts to sustain American leadership rather than abandon it.

The Revisionist Hegemon

The third category is the revisionist hegemon. This state continues to occupy a dominant position within the existing order but views important aspects of that order as constraints rather than assets. Rather than seeking reforms designed to preserve the system, the revisionist hegemon seeks changes that enhance its freedom of action, reduce institutional limitations, and redistribute costs and benefits in its favor. Unlike traditional revisionist powers, the revisionist hegemon is not attempting to overthrow an externally imposed order. It is revising an order that it largely created itself. This distinction is critical because the objectives differ significantly from those of conventional challengers.

The revisionist hegemon does not necessarily reject institutions, alliances, or economic integration. Instead, it evaluates them through a transactional lens. Institutions are valuable when they reinforce national power and dispensable when they constrain it. Alliances are justified when partners contribute materially to shared burdens. Economic openness is supported when it advances national advantage and restricted when it strengthens competitors. The revisionist hegemon seeks greater autonomy within the system it leads. Its objective is not withdrawal but renegotiation.

Many of the developments examined in this report fit this pattern. The revival of hemispheric thinking, the growing use of tariffs and export controls, the willingness to challenge allied assumptions, resistance to international legal constraints, and efforts to restructure technological and economic relationships all reflect attempts to revise the terms of American leadership rather than abandon leadership altogether.

The Predatory Revisionist

A fourth category consists of predatory revisionist powers. Unlike revisionist hegemons, these states seek direct territorial expansion, regime change, coercive domination, or the forcible alteration of borders. Predatory revisionists employ military force or the threat of force as primary instruments of revision. The defining characteristic is not dissatisfaction alone but the willingness to impose change through coercion. Territorial conquest, annexation, military occupation, and overt challenges to sovereignty are common features of this model.

Contemporary Russia represents the clearest example. The annexation of Crimea and the invasion of Ukraine were not efforts to renegotiate institutional arrangements. They were attempts to revise territorial realities through force. This category highlights an important distinction. Not all revisionism is equally disruptive. States can revise institutions, norms, or economic relationships without resorting to territorial aggression. Treating all forms of revisionism as equivalent obscures meaningful differences in both intent and behavior.

The Revolutionary Revisionist

At the far end of the spectrum stands the revolutionary revisionist. This category includes states that seek to transform the ideological foundations of international order itself. Revolutionary revisionists challenge prevailing understandings of legitimacy, sovereignty, governance, and political authority. Their ambitions extend beyond territory or influence. They seek to reshape the normative principles upon which international politics is organized.

Revolutionary France, the early Soviet Union, Maoist China, and certain phases of the Iranian Revolution all exhibited elements of revolutionary revisionism. These projects were as much geopolitical as they were

ideological. This form of revisionism is relatively rare because it generates exceptionally broad resistance. States may tolerate shifts in power more readily than they tolerate challenges to the fundamental legitimacy of the international system itself.

Table 1. Typology of Great-Power Behavior

Category and Core Objective	Analytical Profile
STATUS QUO HEGEMON Preserve the existing international order and its institutions.	**Relationship to existing order** Views the current order as beneficial and legitimate. **Typical behaviours** Maintains alliances, supports institutions, upholds established rules, and provides public goods. **Historical examples** Post-1945 United States during the early Cold War; 19th-century Britain after the defeat of Napoleon. **Contemporary examples** Elements of U.S. foreign policy during the 1990s and early post-Cold War era; many aspects of contemporary EU leadership within the liberal international order.
REFORMIST HEGEMON Preserve the system through adaptation and modernisation.	**Relationship to existing order** Supports the existing order but believes adjustments are necessary for sustainability. **Typical behaviours** Institutional reform, burden-sharing demands, alliance modernisation, regulatory updates, and trade adjustments. **Historical examples** Britain's gradual adaptation of its imperial and maritime system in the late 19th century; U.S. administrations pursuing NATO and IMF reforms. **Contemporary examples** Many U.S. administrations since the end of the Cold War; efforts to reform NATO burden sharing, WTO rules, and international financial institutions.
REVISIONIST HEGEMON Revise aspects of the order to increase autonomy, reduce constraints, and redistribute costs.	**Relationship to existing order** Sees parts of the system it created as liabilities rather than assets. **Typical behaviours** Transactional alliances, selective institutional participation, tariffs, export controls, resistance to legal constraints, and economic nationalism. **Historical examples** Few clear historical examples because most hegemons either defended or lost their orders; some scholars point to aspects of late British imperial retrenchment. **Contemporary examples** The contemporary United States as described in this report, particularly under administrations emphasising sovereignty, industrial policy, strategic decoupling, and transactional alliances.

PREDATORY REVISIONIST Alter territorial, political, or strategic realities through coercion.	**Relationship to existing order** Rejects aspects of the status quo and seeks change through force. **Typical behaviours** Territorial conquest, annexation, military occupation, coercive diplomacy, and regime change. **Historical examples** Nazi Germany; Imperial Japan; Saddam Hussein's Iraq during the invasion of Kuwait. **Contemporary examples** Contemporary Russia's annexation of Crimea and invasion of Ukraine; some analysts also place aspects of Chinese behaviour in the South China Sea within this category, though without large-scale territorial conquest to date.
REVOLUTIONARY REVISIONIST Transform the ideological foundations of international order.	**Relationship to existing order** Rejects not only power arrangements but the legitimacy of the system itself. **Typical behaviours** Export of ideology, support for revolutionary movements, creation of alternative institutions and norms, and universal ideological claims. **Historical examples** Revolutionary France; early Soviet Union; Maoist China. **Contemporary examples** Iran during the early revolutionary period; ISIS's attempted caliphate project as a non-state example; some analysts argue aspects of early Communist internationalism fit this model.

Locating Contemporary America

Where does the contemporary United States fit within this framework? The evidence presented throughout this report suggests that the United States does not fit comfortably within the category of status quo hegemon. American policymakers question assumptions that underpinned the post-Cold War order. Trade liberalization, alliance structures, institutional authority, international legal constraints, and hemispheric openness are all being reevaluated through the lens of sovereignty, strategic competition, and national resilience. At the same time, the United States does not fit the model of a predatory or revolutionary revisionist. Washington is not pursuing large-scale territorial conquest. It is not attempting to export a universal ideological project comparable to revolutionary France or the Soviet Union. Nor is it seeking to overthrow the international system in its entirety.

Instead, contemporary America occupies an intermediate position between the reformist hegemon and the revisionist hegemon. Many current policies can still be understood as efforts to preserve American leadership through adaptation, but an increasing number of initiatives reflect a desire to remove constraints, reassert regional primacy, restructure economic relationships, and redefine the terms under which the United States engages the world. The trend line is particularly notable in the Western Hemisphere. The renewed emphasis on the Monroe Doctrine, strategic geography, migration control, transnational criminal organizations, Arctic competition, and critical infrastructure suggests movement toward a more explicitly hierarchical conception of regional order. The United States appears willing to assert that certain regions, relationships, and strategic spaces occupy a special status within American security thinking.

This does not mean the United States has become a traditional revisionist power. It suggests, though, the emergence of a distinctive category that existing theories often overlook: a hegemonic state that remains committed to leadership but is increasingly willing to revise the rules of the order it leads.

The concept of the revisionist hegemon provides a useful framework for understanding this phenomenon. It captures the central paradox explored throughout this report. The United States is not rejecting international order. It is redefining the terms of that order in ways intended to maximize sovereignty, strategic flexibility, economic resilience, and regional primacy. The resulting system would remain American-led, but it would differ significantly from the order that emerged after 1945 and matured after the Cold War.

IMPLICATIONS

If the United States is evolving from a status quo hegemon toward a more revisionist form of leadership, the consequences will extend far beyond American domestic politics. International orders shape how states calculate risk, allocate resources, build institutions, and formulate long-term strategy. Changes in the behavior of the system's leading power inevitably produce ripple effects throughout the international system. The significance of contemporary American revisionism will be in how other actors interpret those actions. Allies, adversaries, multinational corporations, international institutions, and smaller states all organize their behavior around assumptions regarding American intentions. When those assumptions begin to change, the effects accumulate across the entire system. The implications also extend beyond specific disputes involving tariffs, alliances, or strategic geography. They raise broader questions regarding the future character of American leadership and the evolution of the international order itself.

Implications for Allies: Hedging in an Era of Conditional Leadership

The most immediate effects are likely to be felt among America's allies and security partners. For decades, much of the alliance system rested upon an assumption of relative predictability. Although allies frequently disagreed with Washington, few questioned the basic durability of American commitments or the broader logic of American leadership. That assumption is becoming less certain. Contemporary American policy emphasizes reciprocity, burden sharing, strategic autonomy, and transactional relationships. From Washington's perspective, these demands often appear reasonable. Many American policymakers argue that allies have become overly dependent on U.S. military power and insufficiently attentive to their own defense responsibilities. The push for greater allied contributions reflects genuine concerns regarding sustainability, fiscal burden, and strategic overextension.

However, even successful burden shifting can produce unintended consequences. As allies increase defense spending and develop greater independent capabilities, they also acquire greater strategic autonomy. The result is likely to be a dual-track response. On one hand, allies such as Japan, South Korea, Poland, Australia, and many European states will continue strengthening military capabilities and deepening security cooperation with the United States. On the other hand, they will likely seek insurance against the possibility of future American unpredictability.

This dynamic is already visible in Europe. Discussions regarding strategic autonomy, European defense industrial capacity, independent military planning, and reduced dependence on American capabilities have

accelerated significantly in recent years. Similar debates are emerging in East Asia, where governments increasingly confront the possibility that future American administrations may define national interests differently than their predecessors. Importantly, hedging should not be confused with abandonment. Most American allies lack either the desire or the capability to replace the United States as their primary security partner. The more likely outcome is diversification. Allies will continue cooperating closely with Washington while simultaneously seeking greater freedom of action and reduced vulnerability to shifts in American policy. Poignantly, a strategy intended to reduce allied dependence may ultimately succeed. The issue is whether increased allied autonomy strengthens or weakens American influence over time.

Implications for Adversaries: Strategic Opportunity Through Narrative Competition

American revisionism also creates opportunities for rival powers. Throughout the postwar era, the United States derived considerable influence from its role as the principal defender of an international order. American diplomacy frequently portrayed Washington as the guardian of rules, institutions, sovereignty, and economic openness against revisionist challengers. That narrative becomes more difficult to sustain when the United States openly questions elements of the order it once defended. China and Russia have already demonstrated a willingness to exploit this tension. Russian officials regularly cite Western interventions, NATO expansion, and American exceptionalism when defending Russian actions in Ukraine and elsewhere. Chinese officials argue that American support for international rules is selective and conditional, applying only when those rules align with American interests.

Whether these claims are persuasive is ultimately less important than the fact that they become easier to make. Revisionist behavior by the leading power weakens its ability to portray rivals as uniquely revisionist. Adversaries gain rhetorical space to justify their own demands for spheres of influence, institutional reform, and strategic autonomy. The irony is that many American policymakers would likely reject the comparison. From Washington's perspective, China's ambitions in Asia and Russia's actions in Eastern Europe are fundamentally different from American efforts to revise trade rules, strengthen hemispheric influence, or increase allied burden sharing. However, international politics is shaped as much by perception as by intention. Rival powers will increasingly use American behavior to legitimize their own revisionist projects. The result may be an intensification of narrative competition in which competing powers seek not only material advantage but also the authority to define what constitutes legitimate behavior within the international system.

Implications for the International System: From Liberal Order to Competitive Order Pluralism

Much of the post-Cold War era was characterized by the assumption that a single, largely integrated international order would gradually expand across the globe. Economic interdependence, multilateral institutions, open markets, and universal rules were expected to produce increasing convergence. That vision appears uncertain. Rather than a single universal order, the emerging system may be characterized by what could be described as competitive order pluralism. Different regions, institutions, and networks will operate according to distinct political, economic, and security logics. Instead of one dominant framework, multiple overlapping orders may coexist and compete.

Several features of this transition are already visible. Regional blocs are becoming more important. Economic security shapes trade relationships. Technology ecosystems are fragmenting. Sanctions networks are expanding. Supply chains are being reorganized around geopolitical considerations rather than purely economic efficiency. Financial systems are becoming more politicized. Strategic infrastructure is increasingly viewed through the lens of national security. The United States is not solely responsible for these developments. China's rise, Russia's aggression, technological competition, and broader geopolitical fragmentation all contribute to the trend. Nevertheless, American revisionism accelerates the process because it weakens the assumption that the leading power remains fully committed to maintaining the previous model of order.

The resulting system may not resemble traditional multipolarity. It may instead consist of overlapping spheres of influence, competing regulatory regimes, rival technology ecosystems, and selective economic integration. States will navigate among multiple centers of power rather than operating within a single dominant framework. The liberal international order is unlikely to disappear entirely. Its institutions remain deeply embedded and continue to provide substantial benefits, but the future may belong less to a universal order than to a collection of partially overlapping orders competing for influence and legitimacy.

Implications for American Strategy: Freedom Versus Influence

The central attraction of revisionist policies is obvious. By reducing institutional constraints, renegotiating burdens, increasing strategic flexibility, and prioritizing sovereignty, the United States gains greater freedom of action. Policymakers are less constrained by multilateral procedures, alliance expectations, trade obligations, and international norms. Decisions can be more closely aligned with immediate national priorities. From one perspective, this represents a rational response to changing geopolitical realities. The international environment is more competitive than it was during the immediate post-Cold War era. Strategic rivals are more capable. Technological competition is more intense. Supply chains have become security concerns. The costs of maintaining global leadership have become more politically controversial. Greater flexibility may therefore enhance American resilience and strategic adaptability.

The benefits, however, come with corresponding costs. International influence depends upon more than military and economic power. It also depends upon trust, predictability, legitimacy, and institutional leverage. Alliances become more valuable when partners believe commitments will endure. Institutions become more useful when other actors regard them as legitimate. Economic leadership becomes more effective when rules appear relatively stable and impartial. The central strategic tradeoff is then between autonomy and influence. A revisionist hegemon gains freedom by weakening constraints, but many of those same constraints historically amplified American power by encouraging cooperation, reducing uncertainty, and legitimizing leadership.

The danger is not that the United States will lose its position as a great power. Its advantages remain immense. The danger is more subtle. Washington may gradually exchange durable forms of influence for more immediate forms of leverage. It may gain greater freedom to act while reducing its ability to shape the preferences and behavior of others over the long term. Historically, successful hegemons have exercised power through a combination of coercion, consent, institutions, and legitimacy. The distinctive strength of the postwar American order was that it often transformed American interests into international norms and institutions. Others frequently complied because participation in the system appeared beneficial, but that will move towards a transactional approach instead.

CONCLUSION: AMERICA IS REVISING THE ORDER IT BUILT

The conventional distinction between status quo and revisionist powers has shaped how scholars and policymakers understand international politics for generations. Revisionists were typically portrayed as dissatisfied challengers seeking to overturn an existing order, while status quo powers were seen as defenders of prevailing institutions, rules, and distributions of power. For much of the postwar era, the United States appeared to fit comfortably into the latter category. As the principal architect of the liberal international order, Washington was widely viewed as its primary beneficiary, guarantor, and defender. This report has argued that such a characterization has become incomplete.

The fundamental claim is that the United States has become a revisionist power, but not like the ones usually described by existing models. America is not attempting to conquer neighboring states, export a revolutionary ideology, or overthrow the international system in its entirety. Nor has it abandoned many of the commitments associated with its postwar leadership. The United States continues to maintain alliance networks, defend important elements of the existing balance of power, support key international institutions, and oppose the revisionist ambitions of rival powers such as China, Russia, and Iran. Yet these observations capture only part of the contemporary reality.

Across a growing range of issues, the United States behaves as a state dissatisfied with important aspects of the order it once championed. Trade arrangements that were once defended as engines of prosperity are now treated as sources of strategic vulnerability. Institutions once praised as mechanisms of cooperation are increasingly viewed as constraints on sovereignty. Alliances once justified in the language of shared values are increasingly evaluated according to burden sharing and reciprocity. Economic interdependence is subordinated to national resilience. Strategic geography, industrial capacity, border control, and hemispheric influence have reemerged as central organizing principles of American statecraft. The result is an attempt to renegotiate the terms of international order.

This distinction is critical. Much of the contemporary debate incorrectly frames the issue as a choice between internationalism and isolationism. The evidence suggests something different. The United States is not retreating from the world. It remains deeply engaged in Europe, the Indo-Pacific, the Middle East, and the global economy. What is changing is the conception of leadership itself. The dominant problem is how to reshape the post-Cold War order in ways that provide greater strategic flexibility, stronger protection for domestic interests, enhanced industrial capacity, and reduced dependence upon institutions or arrangements perceived as constraining American power. In this sense, the United States is best understood as a revisionist hegemon. Unlike rising powers that seek entry into an order dominated by others, the United States occupies the unique position of revising an order that it largely created and continues to lead. It is simultaneously the architect, beneficiary, critic, and reformer of the system.

Allies are already adjusting to a world in which American commitments appear more conditional and transactional. Rival powers exploit American behavior to challenge claims of liberal legitimacy and justify their own demands for regional influence. International institutions face growing pressure as major powers place sovereignty and strategic competition above universal rules. The broader system looks to be evolving away from a single liberal order toward a more fragmented landscape characterized by competing regional blocs, overlapping institutions, geoeconomic competition, technological spheres, and contested hierarchies.

Whether this transformation eventually strengthens or weakens American power remains uncertain. Revisionism can solve real strategic problems by reducing burdens, increasing flexibility, restoring industrial capacity, and better aligning foreign policy with domestic political realities. Even with those potential benefits, revisionism also carries risks. The institutions, alliances, and norms that many policymakers view as constraints were also force multipliers that extended American influence far beyond what military and economic power alone could achieve. The postwar order was built upon a particular synthesis of power, legitimacy, institutions, and consent. That synthesis is now under significant strain. The United States remains powerful enough to rewrite significant portions of the system it created. What is less clear is whether it remains sufficiently satisfied with that system to sustain it.

Ultimately, the story of contemporary American foreign policy is not one of decline, withdrawal, or isolation. It is the story of a great power reassessing the relationship between its interests and the order it built to serve them. The United States is not abandoning international order, but it is attempting to construct a different one, organized less around universalism and institutional restraint and more around sovereignty, hierarchy, strategic geography, industrial power, and transactional loyalty. Due to all of that, the defining geopolitical problem of the coming decade will be whether the world's leading power still believes that the order it created deserves to endure in its current form.