

A New Security Order

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For the first time since 1945, the United States faces militarily aggressive great power adversaries in both Europe and Asia. Both are bent on expanding their geopolitical power and influence and, in the case of China, its economic reach. We need to look at the security order in global terms, not just in the separate contexts of Ukraine and Taiwan.

There are many lessons from the Cold War. One in particular is the critical importance of alliances and partnerships. The breadth of NATO members' response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine with sanctions, arms supplies, and increased defense spending provides fresh and powerful evidence of the value of the Alliance. Our security alliances in Europe and Asia are—and must remain—the bedrock of any U.S.-led security order. But they are, by themselves insufficient now and for the future.

In response to the questions posed at this year's Aspen Strategy Group meeting, I would like to make three points.

First, with regard to NATO, with the addition of Sweden and Finland, NATO is at or near the limits of expansion in Europe. So, should the Alliance look to expand beyond Europe and North America? What about Japan, Australia, and South Korea, all recent attendees at a NATO meeting as observers? For a number of reasons, I think trying to add them to NATO would be a mistake (not to mention that they might have no interest at all).

However, we do need to look for opportunities to increase connectivity between our treaty alliances in Europe and Asia. The alignment between Russia and China reaching across the Eurasian land mass requires it. Perhaps formal observer status at NATO for our Asian allies, or some kind of NATO-Asia Council. Whatever closer cooperation looks like, it is needed.

Second, in addition to these treaty-based alliances, the U.S. has created or joined a wide range of economic, political, and security arrangements, such as the Quad, as well as many bilateral agreements. These are important and, in many cases, should be strengthened.

That said, there is a glaring problem in our foreign policy and that is the low priority accorded by the United States to the global south—Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and parts of Asia. Summits and grand statements are a poor substitute for a policy and sustained engagement. In Latin America and Africa, the Chinese have already established a formidably dominant economic position and—until the invasion of Ukraine—the Russians had become deeply involved selling weapons and Wagner Group soldiers to a dozen African countries (including arms sales to Egypt for the first time in half a century). Our inattention was underscored by China's recent move to consolidate and expand its position in the Pacific Islands, prompting a last minute save by Australia and the U.S.

I also need to note that our ability to engage the global south and others as well is seriously handicapped by our political allergy in recent years to negotiating and sustaining both bilateral and multilateral trade agreements.

In short, for political, economic, and security reasons, any attempt to refresh the security order requires the United States to dramatically up its game in the global south.

Third, and finally, it is a serious mistake to frame a new security order solely in terms of democracies versus authoritarians. We must keep our eye on the strategic and security ball. The galvanizing danger from Russia and China is military aggression in their respective regions. More broadly, as we heard from the Singaporean and Kenyan ambassadors, many countries—whether democratic or authoritarian—fear the use of force by their neighbors. From our own perspective, in challenging Russian and Chinese aggressiveness and in creating a new security order, we will need the cooperation and help of at least some governments we call authoritarians, e.g., Turkey, Hungary, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and others—like Singapore.

While we must continue to have at the forefront of our foreign policy support for democracy, human rights, and freedom, we are most likely to gain the widest possible support for a “rules-based” order if it is framed around territorial integrity, the impermissibility of changing internationally-recognized borders by force, and an alignment of interests and principles. That is a post-February 24 security order that can attract support across the geopolitical spectrum.

Robert Gates served as the 22nd secretary of defense (2006-2011). He is the only secretary of defense in U.S. history to be asked to remain in office by a newly elected president. Dr. Gates served eight U.S. presidents across both parties. On Dr. Gates’s last day in office, President Barack Obama awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom, America’s highest civilian honor. Before becoming secretary of defense in 2006, he was the president of Texas A&M University, one of the nation’s largest universities. He served in the CIA for nearly 27 years, culminating his service as director of Central Intelligence from 1991 until 1993. He is the only career officer in CIA’s history to rise from entry-level employee to director. He spent nearly nine years on the National Security Council at the White House, serving four presidents of both political parties. Dr. Gates has been awarded the National Security Medal, the Presidential Citizens Medal, has three times received the National Intelligence Distinguished Service Medal, and has three times received CIA’s highest award, the Distinguished Intelligence Medal. He currently is a partner in the consulting firm Rice, Hadley, Gates & Manuel, LLC, with former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and former National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley. He is a member of the NCAA Board of Governors, currently serving as one of its five independent members. Additionally, he is a member of the national executive board of the Boy Scouts of America and is Chancellor of William & Mary, his alma matter. He is a member of the Aspen Strategy Group.