

THE RULES-BASED ORDER IS Gone. Let's Not Bring It Back.

Trump has destroyed a global system that mostly benefited the rich and powerful. We need to create something completely different in its wake.

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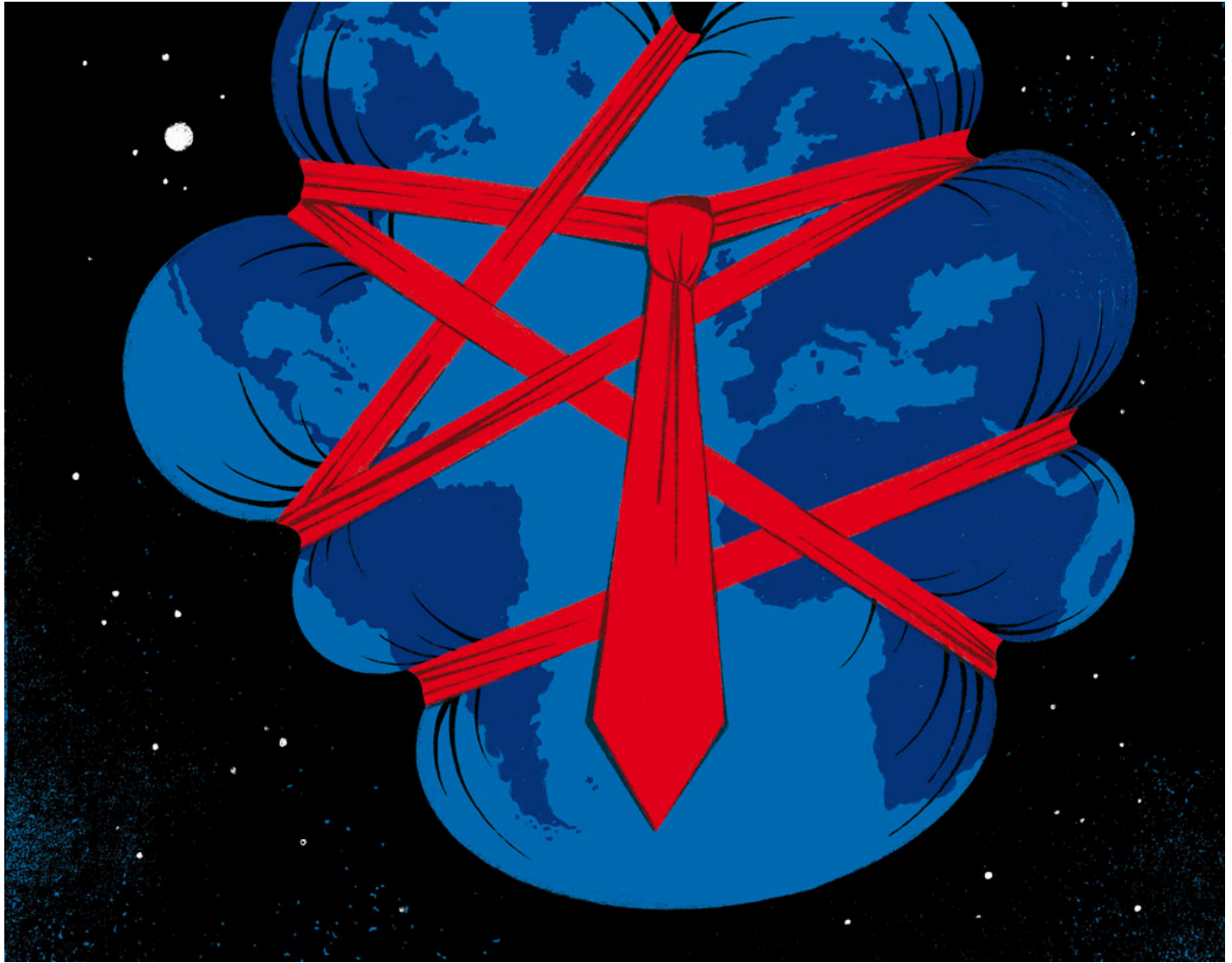


Illustration by Adrià Fruitós.

The foreign-policy establishment—what the former Obama speechwriter Ben Rhodes dubbed “the Blob”—erupted in fury. Trump was trampling the so-called rules-based international order. “Territorial integrity and sovereignty are fundamental principles of international law,” lectured Ursula von der Leyen, the president of the European Commission. Trump was endangering what Iraq War champion Bill Kristol called our “relatively benign order,” one that, neoconservative nabob Robert Kagan sermonized, was held together in part by “America’s reputation for morality and respect for international norms.”

There’s no question that Trump’s erratic, even demented, global policies— “Liberation Day tariffs,” dubbing NATO allies the “enemy within,” whining about a Nobel Peace Prize snub while bombing seven countries as well as fishing boats in the Caribbean, kidnapping Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro, pulling out of international organizations, and more—have stripped the mask off of American predation.

But Trump’s manic disruptions should not feed a romantic nostalgia about the “rules-based order.” The very same European leaders and anointed members of the Blob expressing outrage about Greenland were largely silent or supportive as Trump bombed Iran and Nigeria,

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Nor should Trump's follies whitewash the history of the rules-based order. His villainy may not be masked, but the reality is that the United States has always made the rules—and served as global policeman, judge, jury, and executioner.

Post–World War II America has been at war virtually nonstop, with more than 200 military interventions since 1950. We've launched wars against Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, among others. Barack Obama, that Nobel Peace Prize–winning champion of democracy, ran what was essentially an assassination bureau out of the White House while bombing seven countries.

South. Since World War II, we've launched regime-change operations—overt and covert—all over the world, from Indonesia to Iran to Guatemala, Chile, Panama, Nicaragua, and Honduras, to name a few.

The rules-based order did create a dense web of institutions to regulate the global economy, such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization. These largely served the interests of Western multinational corporations and banks, enforcing the free flow of capital and providing protection for property but not for workers.

While defenders of the rules-based order celebrate the rise in living standards in the less-developed world, the predominant source of that increase was China's state-capitalist regime, which played by its own set of rules. The economic prosperity of the rest is best captured by Oxfam's 2026 World Inequality Report, which revealed that fewer than 60,000 people—0.001 percent of the world's population—own three times the wealth of the entire bottom half of humanity.

Trump's rise to power is largely a result of the increasing failure of this order to benefit working people in the US. The "job shock" from the global trade regime wiped out industrial towns across America, and governing elites failed to compensate the victims. Globalization empowered multinationals to undermine wages here and abroad. Endless and futile wars provoked increasing opposition. Global policing came at the expense of investments and reforms that were

AT THE LAST WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM IN DAVOS, CANADIAN FINANCE MINISTER Mark Carney, a former international banker, earned a standing ovation for offering some simple truths. Canadians, he admitted, had prospered for decades while embracing the “story of the international rules-based order,” which they knew “was partially false.” The strongest “would exempt themselves when convenient.” Trade rules “were enforced asymmetrically.” International law applied “with varying rigor depending on the identity of the accused or the victim.”

Carney termed the rules-based order “a pleasant fiction,” a phrase remarkably akin to White House deputy chief of staff Stephen Miller’s scornful dismissal of international law and treaties as “international niceties.” Now, Carney continued, the world was in the midst of a “rupture” from the old system—one stemming less from unprecedented lawlessness than from Trump’s brazen abandonment of that fiction while targeting not just adversaries or developing countries but the core allies themselves.

As Carney noted, the move toward greater and greater predation preceded Trump: “Over the past two decades, a series of crises in finance, health, energy, and geopolitics have laid bare the risks of extreme global integration. But more recently, great powers have begun using economic integration as weapons, tariffs as leverage, financial infrastructure as coercion, supply chains as vulnerabilities to be exploited. You cannot live within the lie of mutual benefit through integration, when integration becomes the source of your subordination.”

believes in. It was time, Carney argued, “for companies and countries to take their signs down.”

That advice, which the Canadian prime minister addressed to the “middle powers,” is doubly true for Americans. It is time to stop living within the lie. The old order has failed Americans. It is time for the United States to develop a new way of living in the world. This won't be easy.



Shrink the empire: The US has over 750 military bases in 80 countries, such as this one as Japan. Reducing this footprint must be one goal of a new foreign

sustaining the imperial myths. Trump's America First policies are criticized as neo-isolationist even as he sustains the United States' commitment to NATO, expands its presence in the Middle East, pledges to police the South China Sea, calls for increasing the US military budget—already the world's largest, and bigger than the next nine largest military budgets combined—by one-third, and targets Venezuela, Cuba, Iran, Gaza, Greenland, and the Arctic, for starters.

A sensible way to begin would be to discard established shibboleths and apply common sense to rethinking the purpose of our national-security policy. Obviously, such a policy should serve to protect Americans and our democracy from actual threats to our security.

So what are the real security threats that Americans face? Clearly, the obscene and growing inequality within our country and the decline of the middle class drive American insecurity. That inequality also threatens our democracy itself, as big money undermines free elections.

This reality calls for a foreign policy that allows us to focus on domestic reform, as well as on the resources needed to rebuild vital public infrastructure and invest in the well-being of our people. President Joe Biden's "foreign policy for the middle class" hinted at that promise but was quickly subordinated to US efforts to police the world, take on China and Russia, and aid, abet, and arm Israel's genocide in Gaza. The foreign-policy establishment, embodied by

What we need desperately is a foreign policy that strengthens our democracy at home, not an economy that supports our imperial pretensions abroad. This means reducing, not reinforcing, our global footprint—particularly our empire of over 750 military bases in some 80 countries—and elevating diplomacy over military intervention. One measure of progress would be whether we return to having more embassies than military bases around the world.

Of the foreign threats that actually impact the security of Americans, catastrophic climate change—which poses an existential threat while causing more destruction each year—must be at the top of the list.

Similarly, global pandemics present direct and growing threats to life, as the loss of more than 1 million Americans to Covid-19 demonstrated. The combination of untrammelled AI and an untrammelled nuclear-arms race threatens to extend ever-increasing perils in an era of great-power jockeying. In January, the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* moved its Doomsday Clock closer to midnight than at any time in its history—reflecting the spiraling nuclear-arms race, the collapse of arms-control agreements, and the cascading violence and instability gripping so much of the world.

Isolationism isn't the answer to dealing with these threats. Neither is Trump's America Alone imperialism. They require greater, not less, international engagement. While curbing the corrosive effects of inequality must begin at home—with progressive taxation, revived



Collective guilt: Presidents from both parties have maintained the United States' role as global policeman, judge, jury, and executioner. (Mandel Ngan / AFP via Getty Images)

Trump's actions, perversely, are exacerbating each of these security challenges. He's eviscerated federal programs addressing climate change while withdrawing from any international cooperation on this critical issue. He's gutted already inadequate US public-health and global-aid programs while withdrawing from the World Health Organization, which monitors and coordinates responses to pandemics. He's ramped up the nuclear-arms race; turned his back on

in a new era of brazen corruption. As Trump pulls the country from 66 international agencies, his risible Board of Peace, designating him as permanent leader of the world, may further weaken the United Nations, but it won't replace it.

Reversing Trump's misrule is necessary but surely not sufficient. A dramatic reordering of American priorities and policies and a rethinking of national security and the political economy are inescapable if Americans are to deal with the polycrisis we now face. Can we build rules around the global economy that work for working people and not just for capital? Can we engage the Chinese in a collective effort to address catastrophic climate change and join them and the Russians in beginning to dismantle nuclear arsenals?

Trump's erratic policies—what Carney called the “rupture”—have insulted our allies, torn up our international commitments, weakened the dollar, and exposed the lie of the rules-based order. The question is whether this rupture will inspire us to begin a turn to a more sensible security framework that addresses the real threats before us.

Trump's assault on our democracy must be stopped, but a return to the old order offers no way forward. The change won't come from entrenched interests or established voices, from politicians or elites. It will come from creative thinking, hopefully by a new generation aroused by the reality it confronts, but only if popular movements—on

The odds against this are as long as the interests against it are formidable. But in previous times of “rupture”—the Civil War, the Great Depression, the battle against Jim Crow, the war in Vietnam—popular movements pressured, and then empowered, bold leaders to change course and chart a better path. And that, at the very least, provides the basis to keep hope alive. **N**

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Even before February 28, the reasons for Donald Trump’s imploding approval rating were abundantly clear: untrammelled corruption and personal enrichment to the tune of billions of dollars during an affordability crisis, a foreign policy guided only by his own derelict sense of morality, and the deployment of a murderous campaign of occupation, detention, and deportation on American streets.

Now an undeclared, unauthorized, unpopular, and unconstitutional war of aggression against Iran has spread like wildfire through the region and into Europe. A new “forever war”—with an ever-increasing likelihood of American troops on the ground—may very well be upon us.

on Iran, the administration is also spreading the lie that the upcoming midterm elections are under threat from noncitizens on voter rolls. When these lies go unchecked, they become the basis for further authoritarian encroachment and war.

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