Director of National Intelligence James Clapper spoke for many policy and intelligence professionals when he recently described the current international security environment as “the most complex and diverse array of global threats” he has faced in his 53 years in the intelligence business. American victories seem rare, painfully won, and often fleeting. In contrast, Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea have been mounting multipronged assaults on cyberspace, outer space, and in the gray zones around Central Europe and the South China Sea with seeming impunity. Meanwhile, globalization has unleashed the specter of climate change and pandemics that would be beyond the ability of single governments to control. And just when the world’s leading democracies should be rallying to these new challenges, they are hobbled at home by a new wave of nativism and populism as domestic institutions continue to disappoint populations struggling with growing inequality and the diminishing returns of the social welfare state.

Are the foundations of the current U.S.-led global order themselves at risk in this more challenging environment? Over the past 70 years, the United States has underwritten international stability and prosperity by leveraging the capacity and willpower of the American people; a global network of bilateral and multilateral alliances; the gradual expansion of human freedom; and a global institutional architecture that has encouraged trade, growth, and the incorporation of rising powers. As John Ikenberry of Princeton has noted, the United States is a “liberal leviathan” that has sustained leadership by sharing leadership—even as the American share of global GDP has slipped from 50 percent after the
leadership is in fact much more resilient than the current alliance system. Building leverage, or actually reflecting disregard for the allies by one candidate in particular. It remains to be seen whether these attacks by President-elect Donald Trump on America’s closest allies, including Japan and Australia, increasingly see the United States in decline. Gains made in the “rebalance” to Asia are being offset by the recent hedging and defections by countries like the Philippines, Thailand, and Malaysia. Internal populism and nationalism are playing a role in these countries, but so too are the doubts being sown by America’s slow response to coercion in the South China Sea, the sudden opposition to the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) by both presidential candidates, and the outright attacks on allies by one candidate in particular. It remains to be seen whether these attacks by President-elect Trump are merely campaign rhetoric, an attempt to build leverage, or actually reflect disregard for the current alliance system. Yet there are compelling reasons why American leadership is in fact much more resilient than the growing narratives at home and abroad suggest. The first is economic. In 2001 Goldman Sachs issued its first “BRICS” report arguing that Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa would dominate global growth and investment in the coming decades. In the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis that prediction seemed likely to accelerate, but in 2015 Goldman Sachs shut down its “BRICS” investment fund as the United States remained in the commanding position of top host for foreign direct investment globally thanks to unmatched innovation and energy self-sufficiency, while the BRICS countries struggled with corruption, lower energy prices, and stifling obstacles to innovation. Of course, the confidence of international investors in the U.S. economy is not matched by the American public, which feels growing disparities in income distribution and thinks the country is going in the wrong direction by a two-to-one margin. Still, the internationalism of the American people has been far more resilient than the current political cycle suggests. Recent polls show that a majority of Americans still support free trade and it is likely that the intensity of key interest groups with respect to trade has amplified the opposition to TPP in this presidential election year, without necessarily reflecting a broader or irreversible turn against international economic engagement in the country. President-elect Trump’s criticism of U.S. allies, meanwhile, could be derivative of broader dissatisfaction with the political establishment, but it is hardly the expression of some popular new groundswell against standing side-by-side with historic democratic allies on the front lines. More Americans than ever believe that the United States should defend Japan or Korea if they are attacked in Asia. Only about half of Americans have positive views of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), but that has been a fairly consistent number since the end of the Cold War. Meanwhile, though American alliances have been badly shaken by more nativist and populist politics at home and some uncertainty about American willpower in the South China Sea, the Persian Gulf, and Central Europe, the trend lines are still largely positive. Public support for alliances is generally higher among America’s leading treaty partners around the world (even the Philippines) and most of the major security relations are becoming more joint and interoperable. Japan has revised its interpretation of Article Nine of the Constitution to strengthen “seamless” operations with U.S. forces; Korea has put off reclaiming wartime operational control from the United States and is instead focusing on more effective joint planning for responses to escalations by the North. Though slow off the dime, NATO is now bolstering forces in the Baltics and Eastern Poland to counter a more assertive Russia. The United States is also enjoying deeper defense cooperation with India, and in East Asia the system of bilateral alliances established in the 1950s is increasingly networked as Japan, Korea, Australia, India, and others deepen their respective bilateral and trilateral security cooperation. These increasingly networked, interoperable, and integrated alliances are a response to our allies’ growing concerns regarding regional rivals like Russia or China that are using coercion to change the status quo. The question is whether the enhancement of security alliances and partnerships is sufficient. Jointness is arguably as important to deterrence as aggregate spending on military capability, but that said, only 5 of NATO’s 28 countries have met the alliance’s agreed 2 percent of GDP spending on defense. And while Japan has increased defense spending in recent years, it still spends less than 1 percent of GDP on defense. Since 2011, China and Russia have increased defense spending by about 30 percent, while the United States has cut defense spending by about a fifth. The United States and its allies still enjoy a significant qualitative edge over any potential regional adversary, but have lost leverage as these regional competitors have demonstrated greater aptitude at asymmetrical targeting of forward bases, space and cyber networks, and a higher tolerance for risk in gray zone tests of will than the United States or our allies have been able to muster. Then there is the additional challenge posed as North Korean nuclear developments threaten the credibility of American extended deterrence and readiness for risk in response to military provocations short of war. Yet it is important to reiterate that none of these more emboldened regional players has any aspiration or capability to assume the mantle of global leadership—or in most cases even regional leadership. Russia is a declining power that is using the fissures in the Western alliance and its own asymmetrical cyber and paramilitary capabilities to sow limited chaos in Western political systems and to block former Soviet states from consolidating their security and economic relationships with NATO. China, like rising powers throughout history, is free-riding on American leadership globally while engaging in limited revisionism regionally. Beijing
The revisionist powers in each region are cooperating with each other only superficially because they all see potential existential threats from each other.

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House reports the lowest level of press freedom in 12 years. Meanwhile, spending by the United States and Europe on assistance for governance and democracy abroad has dropped since 2009 while public opinion surveys show that Americans have deemphasized support for democracy as a foreign policy priority over the same period. In a 2014 survey of elite opinion, CSIS found that American experts were second only to Chinese experts in their skepticism about democracy and human rights promotion in Asia, even though support for those objectives went up in the rest of the region. These trends may reflect American frustration with the democratic process at home and the impact of the wars in the Middle East, but they also echo the decreasing emphasis of democratic norms by leaders in the United States and Europe.

In the postwar period the Bretton Woods system and later the EU, the G-5 and the G-7 reinforced support for open societies and economies. This institutional architecture had to expand and “democratize” itself with the rise of the BRICS and the 2008 financial crisis, most notably with the establishment of the G-20. The G-20 played a critical role in rebuilding an international consensus toward protectionism in the midst of the financial crisis, but the grouping has proven too large and ideologically diverse to set a proactive global economic agenda the way the G-7 had. In Europe the EU seemed poised to establish a Europe whole and free, but BREXIT demonstrated the weak popular support for those objectives went up in the rest of the region. Moreover, the EU and to a lesser extent ASEAN continue to define the terms of entry into European and Asian regionalism in ways that potential revisionist powers cannot. In addition, there is no organizational alternative to the EU in Europe while in Asia the closest thing to a non-U.S. regional grouping is the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), but RCEP includes U.S. allies like Japan, Korea, and Australia and is still far behind the trans-Pacific TPP process in terms of rule-making and liberalization. Indeed, both RCEP and TPP are understood by the United States and China as falling under a broader inclusive integration effort agreed to at APEC in 2007. Similarly, China’s AIIB may look and operate differently from the World Bank or Asian Development Bank, but it is now closely cooperating with both institutions.

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far from crumbling. That then leads to the new sources of entropy in the international system that were never conceived when the postwar order was being constructed: namely, the global threats that emanate from globalization and nonstate actors. Interestingly, the Bush and Obama administrations both argued in their first National Security Strategy documents that global challenges could unite geopolitical rivals and stabilize international order. For Bush, of course, it was the common front against terrorism, and for Obama it was cooperation on the threat of climate change. Both administrations were correct in part. Great power relations did stabilize somewhat because of the global war on terror, while one of the few positive areas of cooperation in U.S.-China relations today is in the area of climate change. The Bush administration also built greater international cooperation and trust around the international cooperation to meet the avian influenza threat and the Obama administration rallied international support to deal with the Zika virus. At the same time, it is clearly not the case that cooperation on global challenges fundamentally changed geopolitics as the current tensions in U.S.-China relations demonstrate. To date these global challenges have neither weakened nor strengthened the foundations of the U.S. international order in any significant way. On the other hand, there could be catastrophic impact on global order should climate change cause fights for scarce water resources or destabilize whole states—or should animal-to-human transmission of a deadly virus force the closure of international flights and trade in the event of an unprecedented international pandemic. Technology also accelerates the impacts of globalization as nuclear and especially biological weapons become more accessible, while the internet of things and thus the global economy itself becomes more vulnerable to cyberattack.

What is one to think of global order given these new scenarios? It would not be accurate to say that the foundations of the U.S.-led global order are crumbling as a result of globalization and technology. These are still largely hypothetical scenarios after all, despite the reality of the technology that could drive them. Indeed, information technology could accelerate change in other directions as well. 3-D printing could re-concentrate economic competitiveness around the United States, for example, and social media penetration could ultimately tip the scales in favor of freedom even if authoritarian governments have skillfully used the internet to create an impasse for now.

Yet the conclusion for policymakers and strategists should be the same either way. The foundations of the neoliberal order are not crumbling, but they have been shaken from within and without and they could be destroyed in the most cataclysmic scenarios resulting from globalization and diffusion of advanced technologies. The answer is to begin reinforcing resilience and strengthening from within. If the core is American capacity and willpower, there is still much to work with, but it will require rebuilding the case for international leadership in the wake of this very damaging election. The next concentric circle is the U.S. network of bilateral and regional alliances, bound by common interests and values. This second ring must be reinforced with greater jointness, interoperability, and common purpose within and among U.S. alliances, including renewed efforts at defense modernization, trade liberalization, and collective global support for democratic rules and norms. The ability to dissuade revisionism by nondemocratic powers will in turn depend on solidarity within what was once known as the “West”—but now includes many more democratic partners in the Far East. Ultimately, the U.S.-led regional order will depend on sharing power with a rising China and India—just as it depended on sharing power with a rising Japan and German in the twentieth century. But strengthening the core of the international system must come before compromises are made to the rules and norms that make that system function.

Ultimately, it will depend on leadership. When we needed Truman, Adenauer, and Yoshida, we had them. When we needed Reagan, Thatcher, Kohl, and Nakasone, we had them once again. We now need leaders who can harness their citizens to defend and expand freedom and prosperity, yet liberal democracies are serving up a disappointing mix of transactional, populist, and ineffective heads of state. History suggests that there is nothing permanent about the nature of leadership, though. New leadership may emerge precisely because the liberal democracies have something fundamental their citizens will want them to defend. Making that point is the first task of the next generation of leaders we need.