The international order is in trouble. For a quarter century, the world has experienced growing global interdependence largely characterized by the absence of geopolitical competition and the leadership of the United States. Now there are several, possibly fundamental, challenges to that order—in Asia, where the rapid rise of China is disrupting relationships across the region; in Europe, where Russia seeks to undo the post–Cold War settlement through aggression; and in the Middle East, where the regional state system itself is breaking down and we have entered a phase of bloody regional competition and a geopolitical proxy war.

The return of geopolitics has been accompanied by a return to competition between democracies and autocracies. China’s rise and Russia’s recovery have generated a new model of “authoritarian capitalism.” This comes at a time when the global financial crisis has put a dent in the credibility of the Western economic model, and the disappointments and consequences of the Arab Spring have led many to question the value of promoting liberal democracy.
also comes amid relative weakness in the Western alliance system, characterized by political nativism in Washington, double- or even triple-dip recession in Europe, and continuing economic stagnation in Japan.

Transnational and global threats also pose deepening challenges both to the United States and its geopolitical competitors. Climate change, pandemic disease, and jihadist terrorism illustrate the human cost and potential risks of weak states in the international order.

All told, we appear to be at one of history’s pivotal junctures, and again the response of the United States will be critical. For all the talk of America’s relative decline, the United States retains more capacity than any other power to impact the calculations and policies of others. But America’s competitors are too powerful and their visions too different to imagine that U.S. leadership alone is a sufficient ingredient to maintain the liberal, rules-based international order that now feels so threatened.

In short, the task is urgent and complicated: how to reinvent the liberal international order in the face of so many centrifugal, chaotic forces so that it can provide greater stability, peace, prosperity, and freedom; and how to do it in ways that encourage cooperation from other world powers, reduce friction generated by competition with them, and if necessary contain or constrain their ability to undermine the order.

For these reasons, Foreign Policy at Brookings has launched a two-year project on “Order from Chaos” with three core purposes: to analyze the dynamics in the international system that are creating stresses, challenges, and a breakdown of order; to define U.S. interests in this new era and develop specific strategies for promoting a revitalized rules-based, liberal international order; and to provide
policy recommendations on how to develop the necessary tools of statecraft (military, economic, diplomatic, and social) and how to refashion the architecture of the international order.

At an earlier juncture in history, as the Second World War came to a close, Brookings played an instrumental role in helping the United States craft a concept of international order and a set of supporting institutions. The highlight of this was a Brookings-drafted program that was introduced by Secretary of State George C. Marshall and became known as the Marshall Plan.

It is to recall that moment and invoke its spirit—the application of policy research to the crafting of effective international strategy—that the Order from Chaos project has chosen to initiate The Marshall Papers. Their purpose is to provide accessible, long-form research on critical international questions designed to stimulate debate about how the United States and others should act in the world to promote international order—an order that adapts to new realities to be sure, but one that continues to foster peace, prosperity, and justice. That is the foreign policy challenge of our time, and the connecting theme of these papers.

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