

# Pluralist Strategic Narratives and US Foreign Policy

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## Abstract

This article explores the implications of a pluralist strategic narrative for contemporary US foreign policy. Despite US adherence to a grand strategy of primacy, alternative approaches for achieving national interests have recently emerged that account for the Eurocentrism of US hegemony and liberal world order. These include great power concert, a strategy that can preserve internationalism through a consciously created balance of power. I argue that a concert strategy can produce a stable world order if articulated in the context of a pluralist strategic narrative about US identity and the world system. Based on Chantal Mouffe's radical democratic theory, I argue that pluralism can enable the United States to resolve the struggle for recognition in world politics and provide ontological security for its revisionist rivals. By recognizing competitors as adversaries and not enemies, the United States can signal status quo intentions and dampen security competition. A pluralist narrative can also enable the United States to revive the rules-based governance of the global economy. By treating state and non-state actors as members of a global public, the United States can pursue global economic regulation while allowing for the flexible diffusion of social democratic norms through norm localization and subsidiary.

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## **Introduction**

The Donald Trump presidency has created an existential crisis for American foreign policy. Since his inauguration in January 2017, President Trump has systemically challenged almost every principle of liberal internationalism, the foreign policy framework which guided the United States to become an unrivaled unipolar hegemon by the early twenty-first century. The United States is on the verge of abandoning its allies in Europe and East Asia, has renounced trade openness in favor of protectionism, and turned its back on international institutions and collective agreements on global problems like climate change. Instead, Trump has pursued more transactional diplomacy with authoritarian regimes in Russia and North Korea while eroding domestic democratic norms and the rule of law, all consistent with his ethnonationalist populist rhetoric and “America First” foreign policy.

The US foreign policy community has reacted in horror. For example, Robert Kagan (2018) has argued that Trump’s nationalist approach to international affairs marks the endpoint of American global leadership. Richard Haass (2018) goes one step further by claiming that the Trump administration has effectively given up on the liberal world order, the set of liberal arrangements for governing relationships among sovereign states that maintained peace and prosperity since 1945. Rather than allow Trump to dismantle the liberal order, many policymakers have organized to directly oppose his foreign policy initiatives. Former Clinton and Obama officials created a new advocacy group called National Security Action, which opposes “the reckless policies of the Trump administration that endanger our national security and undermine U.S. strength in the world” (National Security Action 2018). This increasingly polarized US foreign policy discourse matches the intense domestic competition between right and left political movements in the United States. By claiming leadership of the opposition to

Trump's foreign policy, these establishment voices propose to restore the old liberal internationalist consensus after Trump leaves office.

There are, however, a number of observers and scholars who question this orthodoxy. Many argue that the progressive story about US global leadership used to justify the restoration of liberal internationalist foreign policy is revisionist history. Rapp-Hooper and Lissner (2018) show that the liberal order was never a uniform set of rules, norms, and institutions that seamlessly applied to all states around the world and enabled the benevolent use of US power to benefit all humanity. According to Stephen Wertheim (2018), Trump's "civilizational" rhetoric and his expansive use of military force are grounded in an American identity in terms of the defense of Western culture from civilizational enemies, a rhetorical framework also employed by President George W. Bush during the War on Terror. The novelty of his foreign policy lies in the rejection of American exceptionalism (Wertheim 2017), not in its pursuit of imperial domination over other nations and peoples (Meaney and Wertheim 2009). If Trump's foreign policy expands on the project of US global dominance rather than mark a short-term break with foreign policy traditions, then a reconsideration of the liberal order is also needed. As Parmar (2018) demonstrates, the US leadership of the liberal order was always a Eurocentric project that rearticulated racial hierarchy and economic exploitation in a form that enabled the co-option of supposedly sovereign elites and the violent subjugation of their domestic rivals. These perspectives all consistent with a growing recognition that the discipline of international relations has historically ignored the perspectives of non-Western peoples while propagating US principles, a tendency that cannot be divorced from US foreign policy (Acharya 2014, Vitalis 2015).

If the liberal order was more malign than truly egalitarian, then foreign policy alternatives to liberal hegemony ought to be considered in response to the Trump administration. In this paper, I explore the basis for one grand strategy, great power concert, to stabilize world order and achieve US national security objectives. Great power concert best suits the United States given the extremely globalized context of world politics, but not only because it enables the United States to create a realist balance of power in a multipolar system. I combine classical realism with recent advances in IR constructivist theory to argue that a concert strategy can provide ontological security, or security of the self and a coherent understanding of one's own identity, and resolve the struggle for recognition in world politics (Mitzen 2006, Murray 2018). US scholars of grand strategy mostly ignore constructivist IR theory except for limited analyses of liberal norm diffusion. In turn, their analyses have yet to account for the constitutive relationship between a) strategic narratives about national identities and discursive representations of world order and b) the foreign policy practices of policymakers. Based on this perspective, I demonstrate how a pluralist strategic narrative, one based on the radical democratic theory of Chantal Mouffe, can enable foreign policy practices of restraint by the United States and its rivals consistent with great power concert. Pluralism resolves the tension between liberal cosmopolitan and communitarian theories of social organization which are characteristic of dominant US approaches to international affairs and instead recognizes the diversity inherent in contemporary world politics (Reus-Smit 2018). By defining US identity in terms of the right to participate in deliberations about public problems on the basis of one's particular cultural identity, a pluralist narrative constitutes the United States with restrained tolerance of the norms and rules of political order characteristic of other nations. Pluralism makes possible restrained foreign policy practices of concession and accommodation that resolve

disputes with other great powers on the basis of mutual coexistence and respect for their identities and interests.

A pluralist-inspired great power concert also enables the revival of the rules-based international order. As the United States recognizes the claims of other states on the basis of the validity of their cultural foundations, it makes possible an open-ended process of norm contestation and the subsequent development of legitimate robust rules and international institutions without a hegemonic US posture. The resulting system of global governance would be consistent with a constitutional order and allow states to address their intense economic and ecological interdependence through robust cooperation. Because a pluralist strategic narrative is constitutive of a global public, it enables states to contemporary crisis of globalization and functionally scale up democratic regulation of the world while still maintaining a (mostly) open international economic system. In this way, the pluralist de-escalation of security competition can enable the de-escalation of economic competition and limit the degree to which global economic flows concentrate economic power and exacerbate various forms of inequality.

My argument proceeds in three parts. First, I review debates about US grand strategy and current US foreign policy in terms of the identities that constitute these strategic approaches. I then demonstrate how a great power concert strategy can successfully achieve a stable balance of power on the basis of a pluralist strategic narrative. Lastly, I demonstrate how a pluralist representations of US identity and world order can enable global constitutionalism and increasingly robust international institutions.

### **The Constitutive Relationship between Identities and US Grand Strategies**

I define grand strategy as the employment of all forms of national power and influence, whether military, political, economic, or cultural, to achieve long-term security. I assume that

achieving security requires fulfilling the following national interests: the absence of great power war, the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, an international economic system that provides prosperity to the American people, and the mitigation and prevention of human-made processes that drive potentially catastrophic climate change. I rely on republican security theory (Deudney 2007) and its twin problematiqués of anarchy-interdependence and hierarchy-restraint to evaluate how grand strategies can achieve these goals. Given intense violence interdependence among multiple great powers with global military capabilities (some of whom possess nuclear weapons), achieving security requires both material and socially constructed restraints on the use of power. Achieving security under these conditions requires complementing anarchy with negarchy, a system whose parts are ordered on the basis of relations of mutual restraint (Ibid., 48-50). Not only should states balance their raw military capabilities against each other, but they must also channel their disputes through commonly-agreed institutional processes that limit their returns to power. In other words, the most successful US grand strategy will combine balance of power and constitutional ordering principles as complementary forms of restraint (Ikenberry 2000, 24). These assumptions about security and international order enable us to evaluate which strategic approach is most appropriate for the multipolar yet highly complex global context. But as I show below, contemporary debates about US grand strategy tend to ignore how US identity undermines their assumptions about restraint and ultimately worsens great power competition.

#### *Liberal Primacy, Offshore Balancing, and the Absence of US Identity*

The dominant approach toward US grand strategy is based on the principle of US military dominance over all other states in the international system, otherwise known as primacy. This strategy builds upon the hegemonic creation of liberal rules and institutions by the United States during the twentieth century as a means of achieving legitimacy among weaker powers. Because

the United States used its power to guarantee an open international system rather than exploit others, weaker states consented to its leadership and were socialized into accepting liberal norms of state cooperation (Ikenberry and Kupchan 1990, Ikenberry 2011). This strategy was initially inspired by Cold War containment against the Soviet Union but was adopted after 1991 to maintain US unipolarity and reorient the international system along liberal norms and rules. Whether described as “deep engagement” (Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth 2013, Brooks and Wohlforth 2016), “responsible competition” (Wright 2017), or “sovereign obligation” (Haass 2017), liberal primacy has been rearticulated as the best strategy to cope with the revisionist aggression of Russia, China, and Iran in their respective Eurasian regions. This strategy combines aspects of restraint in both balance of power realism and liberal internationalism in mutually exclusive ways. Primacy advocates argue that the United States must retain forward deployments of US military forces to reassure allies of its commitments to their security and deter rival great powers from encroaching on their sovereignty. But among its allies and partners, the United States should maintain hegemonic leadership of an open international system without seeking to expand it. The United States continues to govern through the benevolent hegemony of its norms and institutions within the liberal rules-based order but relies on its raw military capabilities to make the costs of revisionism too costly for its adversaries.

The main strategic alternative to liberal primacy is offshore balancing, a strategy that relies on US buckpassing on security commitments to its allies. Offshore balancing advocates posit that revisionist behavior by great powers is caused by the global military commitments and expeditionary deployments of the United States. This strategy relies on the offensive neorealist assumption that great power conflict is driven by states seeking global hegemony as a means of ensuring their own security in an anarchic system (Mearsheimer 2001, Layne 2006). Given the

United States geographic position and its already impressive military capabilities, the maintenance of US hegemony across Eurasia and the expansion of its global influence is unnecessary for achieving national security (Layne 2016, Glaser 2018). Instead, the United States can dampen interstate rivalry by abandoning its security commitments to its allies in Eurasian regions in which no potential hegemon exists (Mearsheimer and Walt 2016). US retrenchment and withdrawal offshore will compel its former security partners to balance against regional threats themselves and limit their own aggressive actions once they lose a US security guarantee. This strategy conceptualizes restraint solely in terms of material capabilities. Rather than pursue global primacy, the United States should merely defend the global commons of shared resource and transportation spaces (Posen 2014). No stable international system is possible if the United States maintains a global military posture that threatens all other states and enables its own revisionist aggression.

Advocates of both strategies strenuously criticize each other. Neorealists argue that primacy strategies are highly costly projects which seek the ideological goal of spreading liberalism around the world rather than rationally guaranteeing the security of the United States. They claim that primacy will always lead to the overextension of US power long military occupations which attempt to create liberal democracy and humanitarian interventions that extend US influence into new regions. The expansionist tendencies inherent in liberal hegemony and subsequent long military occupations always override foreign policy restraint, and the resulting nationalist and sectarian sentiments fuel authoritarian rule and terrorism (Pape 2003, Mearsheimer 2018). On the other hand, primacy advocates claim that retrenchment offshore would generate further aggression on the part of US rivals. They assume that the withdrawal of US security commitments will remove the only deterrent threat to illiberal great powers, whose

revisionism is taken for granted. Power balancing by former allies will lead to both conventional arms races and their proliferation of nuclear weapons (Brands 2015, 16-21). Given the possibility of misperception and private information (Fearon 1994), the risks of war remain everpresent.

A third strategy, great power concert, has sat on the margins of this grand strategic debate. A concert strategy seeks a collective partnership among all great powers which jointly collaborate as equals in maintaining the stability of world order. Its earlier incarnations amounted to a soft kind of hegemony that sought to create an exclusive club for pro-American democracies in a more unipolar context that lacked revisionist great powers or alternatives to liberal globalization (Daadler and Lindsay 2007, Lind 2008). More recent concert strategies account for today's multipolar distribution of power and intentions as well as the cultural diversity of the globalized world system. These are most consistent with another grand strategic idea known as selective engagement (Art 2002). Porter (2013) argues that a concert can establish a stable equilibrium among the United States and its adversaries amid a global shift of power and wealth to the Asia-Pacific region. Rather than engage in the drastic retrenchment of offshore balancing, the United States would remain in Eurasia through limited reassurances of its security commitments to its Eurasian allies and some concessions to great power rivals that signal its status quo intentions. But unlike the early the nineteenth century, today's systemic context of interdependence and inclusion of both state and non-state outside the West makes world order more of a multiplex system of mutual vulnerabilities and forms of cooperation which depart from Western precedent (Acharya 2014). The global scale of the contemporary world system requires that the values of non-Western cultures be included as the basis for an ideational consensus on restraining norms and institutions. A concert strategy thus provides an alternative to both liberal

hegemony and offshore balancing which retains a commitment to foreign policy internationalism but without the imposition of liberal norms upon the rest of the world.

*The Narrative Construction of Grand Strategy*

Acharya's inclusion of both ideas and material power capabilities in his consideration of great power concert is relatively rare within grand strategic debates. Evaluations of both liberal hegemony and offshore balancing are strikingly conventional in their reliance on neoliberal and neorealist IR theory and have never truly incorporated constructivist frameworks that explain foreign policy by focusing on intersubjective ideas. Early constructivist theorizing demonstrated that actual state behavior is driven less by rational cost-benefit analysis and more by the shared understandings of reality held by foreign policy officials which determine how they should relate to the external world (Hopf 1998, Ruggie 1998). A focus on ideas provides us with another way to analyze US strategic debates by comparing how policymakers actually behave and implement different strategic proposals. For example, ideas shared among all post-Cold War US policy officials (including the Trump administration) lead them to habitually adopt strategies of foreign policy primacy and policies that enact US dominance in world politics (Porter 2018). Ideas clearly make possible some strategic choices but also preclude others, such as those of restraint, and thus must also be accounted for when analyzing grand strategy. One way to do so involves analyzing strategic scripts (Freedman 2013: 619) or strategic narratives (Miskimmon, et. al. 2017). These are the stories publicly told by policymakers that define their national identity, their desired world order, and provide a template for future action to achieve their goal. Narratives thus structure the strategic behavior of states and make possible their agency even as they are a creation of them as well (Ibid., 42-43). A mere cursory analysis of US strategic narratives suggests that crafting a strategy composed of stable restraints cannot ignore the ideas which

logically enable it to be actualized. For ease of reference, I illustrate which ideas about identity and world order embedded within strategic narratives enable the realization of the above three grand strategies and subsequent policies on trade in Table 1.

Grand Strategy	Liberal Hegemony	Offshore Balancing	Great Power Concert
Vision of World Order	One-world cosmopolitanism	Clash of civilizations	Multiplex
National Identity	Liberal exceptionalism	White ethnonationalism	?
Origin of Rules and Norms	Hegemonic socialization	Pure transactionalism	?
Trade Policy	Golden straitjacket	Mercantilist/protectionism	?

First, consider the identity espoused by mainstream advocates of liberal hegemony. Both US policymakers (every US president from George H. W. Bush to Barack Obama) and grand strategic theorists implicitly assume that the United States is an exceptional nation based on its geography, egalitarian liberal culture, and refusal to impose classic forms of imperial dominance on other nations (Mandelbaum 2004, Mandelbaum 2009). Exceptionalism endows the United States with a mission to remake the world in its own liberal image and realize human progress by extending a universal community to across the globe on the basis of individual freedom, one realized with Fukuyama's end of history (1994). It also requires that the United States maintain a preponderance of military power and use it to uphold the liberal international order (Kagan 2004, Kagan 2012, Kagan 2014). Although the mainstream foreign policy elites of the Clinton, Bush, and Obama may differ regarding the degree of unilateral or multilateral diplomacy necessary for maintain the liberal order, they ultimately rely on the same liberal exceptionalist story initially told by President Woodrow Wilson to justify democracy promotion, the global expansion of free markets, and the creation of liberal institutions (Smith 2011). Given this liberal identity and ideology espoused in a hegemonic narrative, restraints on the hegemonic use of US power to enlarge the liberal order are often overridden (Desch 2008, Musgrave and Nexon 2013).

As for offshore balancing, the identity narrative which it makes possible is less obvious because of its purely neorealist material assumptions but becomes quite apparent when we look at the Trump administration. Both Trump's rhetoric and his national security strategy of "principled realism" are suffused with criticisms of liberal hegemony and free-riding allies consistent with offshore retrenchment. However, Trump frames his policies of buckpassing within a populist ethnonationalist identity inspired by Andrew Jackson (Cha 2016, see also Mead 2001). He represents the US nation as under extreme threat by unfettered economic globalization and migration by non-white peoples across national borders (Jones and Khoo 2017). This exclusivist identity informs his "clash of civilizations" (Huntington 1994) vision of world order, one that makes necessary the ruthless exploitation of other states and peoples to ensure the cultural survival and political autonomy of the United States. The result is a blend of nationalism and unilateralism otherwise not seen in modern American foreign policy. His strategic narrative combines the core aspects of offshore balancing with a new kind of American primacy consistent with the purely material assumptions about power politics held by structural realists and their subsequent policy prescriptions, including mercantilist protectionism. Although some might object that renewed US support for its Middle East allies and confrontation against Iran is antithetical to retrenchment offshore, even Walt and Mearsheimer (2016: 72-73) allow for more direct counterbalancing against a power on the verge of dominating a region. But their assumption that the United States should focus on China to deter it from a power transition war fails to account how states identify threats on the basis of ideas about Self and Other (Rousseau 2005). Given Trump's Islamophobic discourse against political Islam and the Islamic Republic of Iran, a nationalist foreign policy that combines buckpassing in Europe and East Asia and raw escalation in the Middle East should not be unexpected.

What kinds of ideas make possible the realization of a concert strategy, and can they enable foreign policy restraint? We actually do not know the answer to this question because great power concert has yet to achieve prominence in the United States. However, classical realism's inclusion of morality and ethics as ideational factors that produce a stable balance of power provide a starting point for answering this question (Williams 2004). Morgenthau's analysis of the early nineteenth century Concert of Europe relied heavily on a "moral consensus" (1948: 215-219) shared by the great powers, all of which recognized each other as members of Western civilization and in possession of a common cultural background. Given this shared identity, they limited their use of power against one another and established a stable balance of power system that preserved each state's autonomy within the informal institutional setting of the Congress of Vienna. Ideas and the distribution of power were two sides of the same coin for Morgenthau, and both were essential for the creation of restraints that served the collective interests of all participants. It should be no surprise, then, that order-maintaining norms and institutions will not be successful if they are built on a foundation which lacks a stable balance of power as well as ideas about legitimacy which are shared by all participants (Carr 1939).

### **Pluralist Strategic Narratives and the Ethos of Citizenship**

If ideas can enable a successful concert strategy, we must also explain which "underlying ethos" (Porter 2013: 13) will de-escalate great power competition by converting the intentions of US rivals from revisionism to status quo while providing the normative grounds for resolving disputes through international institutions. To do so requires a critical approach to strategic interaction in which states reflexively share ideas about self and other that enable security cooperation and the adoption of restraint, even if that means abandoning previously held identities and habitual practices (Wendt 1992: 419-422). In this section, I extend my initial

constructivist analysis of strategic narratives to conceptualize security in terms of the interactive and intersubjective of process of identity formation. I argue that a narrative which frames US identity and world order in terms of Chantal Mouffe's agnostic pluralism can resolve the struggle for recognition and provide ontological security among great power rivals. Mouffe's understanding of world order as a "pluri-verse" (Mouffe 2013: xv) of cultural contexts which can produce a variety of legitimate democratic institutions neatly complements Acharya's multiplex order and provides a normative foundation the adoption of restraint on the basis of the principle of citizenship. A pluralist strategic narrative can thereby enable the United States to successfully create a great power concert and a stable balance of power.

#### *Securing Identities in the Struggle for Recognition*

Our understanding international security competition is ultimately incomplete unless we explain how identities and norms enable produce not just state behavior but also define their very existence. The theoretical advancements of IR constructivists over the last twenty enable us to conceptualize this process. Contemporary scholars no longer rely on the Wendtian assumption that states are ontologically real aspects of reality whose social roles are the only element of their identity which may be transformed through social interaction. Instead, they assume that social ties and discursive structures make possible states' corporate identity, or their internal attributes, boundaries, behavioral limits in relation to one another (Cederman and Daase 2003, Nexon and Jackson 1999, Jackson 2006, Nexon 2009). In fact, ideas shared through social relationships are essential for states to maintain their own sense of self. In their absence, states lack any sense of *who* they are, *what* they are, or *how* to think about their self-interests.

These constructivist assumptions about states enable us to reconsider how they understand and pursue security. Mitzen (2006) and Murray (2018: Chapter 2) argue that states

pursue ontological security, or security of the self, and struggle to gain recognition of their own biographical narrative by other states. Ontological security is a function of a state's routinization of social ties with other actors in which their own sense of self is constantly re-affirmed. These relationships and practices can be either cooperative or competitive, leading states to maintain them even if they generate physical insecurity. The need for ontological security and relationships that provide it is thus the true driver of the security dilemma (Jervis 1978), and the struggle to have one's identity recognized by another rival can lead states to build institutions and military capabilities which serve no rational purpose but merely escalate conflict.

For example, a focus on identity explains why Wilhelmine Germany's need to be recognized as a great power prior to World War I and subsequent naval buildup despite the absence of a threatening naval posture by the United Kingdom (Murray 2010). This perspective also fits neatly with Porter's explanation of the habit of primacy. Because US policymakers define themselves as a global power with a right to either use force as they see necessary or extend its system of rules across the world, they cannot imagine relationships with other states that deviate from their exceptionalist or nationalist identity. As for US rivals (like Russia, China, and Iran) whose desired identity as a great power is directly challenged by US primacy, they can only respond with their own revisionism and stabilize their identity with hostility.

#### *A Pluralist Narrative of Citizenship in a Multiplex World Society*

If security competition is really about identity, then achieving a stable world order requires a strategic narrative that can provide ontological security to US rivals and de-escalate power politics. I argue that Chantal Mouffe's agnostic pluralism, a theory of radical democracy

that respects political conflict as a formative element of legitimate rule, can do precisely this.<sup>1</sup> Mouffe's agnostic understanding of "the political" is rooted in the assumption that the boundaries of society, including the definition of the identities of individual persons and shared qualities which make them part of a single collective, are never truly fixed and are always under social construction. Since these basic qualities of ourselves and our communities are potentially fluid, politics is a struggle among actors to define the terms of communal inclusion and exclusion (Mouffe 2013: 6-7). This open and indeterminate aspect of politics makes the creation of a truly democratic system of governance dependent upon reconciling the tensions between cosmopolitanism and communitarianism. Democracy requires that we respect every individual's legal freedom from state interference while also cultivating civic participation in order to develop the moral obligations that members of a community have toward each other. Realizing democracy requires that we act in way that creates a *respublica*: we must engage in "a practice of civility specifying not necessarily normatively appropriate performances, but the "conditions to be subscribed to in choosing performances" (Mouffe 1993: 67). Those very conditions of civil action define citizenship within a democratic community and serve as its ethical and moral basis. Anyone can be a member of the community, regardless of their identity, once they commit to the practical respect of liberal and equality for all for all other citizens (Mouffe 2005: 102). Once this civic-oriented principle is accepted, all persons can offer their own interpretation of communal norms based on their particular identities so long as they respect the right of others to do the same. This kind of plural community is one whose rules are never truly fixed and always contains the potential for change on the basis of political action, but also enables different peoples to consensually participate in governmental rule-making as legitimate political

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<sup>1</sup> Like IR constructivists, Mouffe (1993: 11-12, 2005: 26-34) assumes that democratic political systems (including their boundaries and norms of appropriate behavior) have no ontologically "real" foundation because they are socially created on the basis of shared ideas and thus always open to contestation by political actors.

adversaries rather than enemies who owe nothing to each other. Democracy can thereby succeed because it enables agonistic conflict without violent antagonism (Ibid., 102-103).

In her later work, Mouffe applies agonistic pluralism to post-Cold War international relations. Based on the need for every political community to have boundaries separating inside from outside, she argued that the universal liberal order created by the United States at the height of its unipolar power would always fail and collapse into a clash of civilizations (Mouffe 2005), the precise condition which we have today. The only way to convert antagonism to agonism is for world powers to accept each other's differences and coexist in a multipolar world order. By applying the ethic of citizenship in foreign affairs, states can create the institutional conditions for their conflicts to be resolved peacefully as limited struggles between rivals rather than enemies who seek each other's destruction. (Mouffe 2013: 41).

Mouffe's agonistic pluralism provides a point of departure for considering which grand strategy can be employed by the United States to stabilize world order. As required by republican security theory, I argue that a pluralist strategic narrative can function as the ideational complement to a material balance of power and enable the enactment of a great power concert strategy. A pluralist narrative would define US national identity as pluralist rather than liberal exceptionalist or ethnonationalist. World order would be normatively represented as a multiplex rather than cosmopolitan or a clash of civilizations. By representing reality in this way, the United States would structure its own foreign policy behavior in ways consistent with great power concert by adopting the ethos of citizenship within a global *respublica* that includes all sovereign states. Much like the Concert of Europe, a pluralist narrative can enable the realization of collective intentions among many different actors who nonetheless share an identity as members of international society (Mitzen 2013: 41-42). They become a plural subject and

commit to the joint maintenance of global stability by adopting the norm of defensive power balancing. The collective agency articulated in a pluralist narrative would certainly be broader than the Congress of Vienna. Here, we can envision a global humanistic identity in which all states were bound to each other yet still preserved difference and cultural multiplicity among each political unit and their civilizational identities.

For a pluralist narrative to be successful, it has to justify policy changes that enable physical security while providing ontological security for both the United States and its rivals by activating the mechanism of routinization (Subotic 2016). Stability of one's self-understanding is possible amid shifts in policy if the narrative justifying those actions builds upon existing cognitive categories used to define national identity. While a pluralist narrative does shift away from both liberal exceptionalist and nationalist US identity, it builds upon the long-standing democratic aspects of US identity and an internationalist role in the world. The notion that democratic citizens must respect each other's right to contest the terms of governance is a core aspect of the American political tradition. Pluralism thus enshrines tolerance as a restraint-producing norm, although it does so on the basis of respect for communally constituted identities and rather than the liberal individualist exclusion of communal values and judgments about right and wrong (Mouffe 2005: 102). It further justifies policy change in such a way that is consistent with the liberal internationalist tradition in US foreign policy. The notion of working with other great powers as equals served as the basis of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's "Big Three" alliance in World War II and plans for postwar global stability (Hendriksen 2008, Costigliola 2013). A concert strategy is also analogous to a "post-hegemonic" version of liberal internationalism which the United States gives up hierarchy in favor of a more horizontal international system in which global governance is treated as a public matter of all affected states (Ikenberry 2009).

Since a concert strategy can be framed in terms of the core concepts of American liberal democracy and liberal internationalism but slightly modifies them, US policymakers can adopt it while maintaining a stable sense of self.

Just as important as US ontological security is the ontological security of its rivals. A pluralist strategic narrative can successfully achieve US security interests if ensures that its rivals adopt status quo intentions rather than revisionism and shift their identities accordingly. Pluralist representations of US identity and world order can enable this outcome because it allows for recognition of Eurasian regional hegemons as great powers and co-equals in maintaining international order. The United States would refrain from pursuing zero-sum security advantages at the expense of its rivals and instead take into account their security concerns in any dispute settlement. As Jervis (1976) reminds us, these status quo intentions can be signed with a concession that breaks an escalation spiral. But it must also be accompanied by recognizing the three core practices of great power status as legitimate when enacted by its adversaries. These are a right of deliberation about the arrangement of regional and world order, a right to possess military capabilities associated with great power status, and a hierarchical position over weaker states within their respective regions (Murray 2018: Chapter 2).<sup>2</sup> Once its rivals' practices are acknowledged as normatively appropriate along with their great power identity, the United States can resolve their uncertainty about who they are and routinize defensive balancing. The only strategic narrative which can enable these shifts of identity and intentions is one defined by agnostic pluralism and the tolerance of different Others.

One possible criticism of my constructivist analysis is rooted in the core fear driving the prisoner dilemma, that a US concession intended to signal status quo intentions and a desire for

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<sup>2</sup> Murray identifies these three practices (great power voice, exemplary military power, and the establishment of a sphere of influence) as necessary for recognition as a great power. When a state's great power identity is not recognized by others, they enact these practices in more unilateral ways that increase competition in world politics.

cooperation leaves oneself vulnerable to defection by an adversary who maintains revisionism based on their own concerns of exploitation. However, aggression in the face of a pluralist narrative can make revisionism highly costly due to its representational force (Mattern 2004). By recognizing Eurasian rivals as possessing a right of great power voice, the US establishes a common normative responsibility to uphold subsequent agreements and maintain the status quo. Rivals that persist in revisionism risk losing the support of their domestic and regional audiences which may reject its justifications for aggression based on its past framing of itself as a great power and the discursive boundaries established by that narrative (Krebs and Jackson 2007). The very fact of extreme globalization makes shielding domestic audiences from the contradictions of one's revisionist actions and great power narrative even more difficult. Not only does the contemporary world contain a multiplicity of cultures and identities, but individual human beings can define their own identities in terms of membership in overlapping formal or informal communities, some of which are transnational (Erskine 2002). As people increasingly move across borders and develop multiple definitions of the self, revisionism by a state leader may lead its citizens to experience contradictions between their national and transnational identities, leading to a loss of legitimacy. In this context, revisionist intentions and a subsequent identity narrative that rationalizes such actions will fail to achieve ontological security.

### *Reinterpreting Sovereignty, Democracy, and Intervention*

Assume that the United States does adopt pluralism and great power concert. What would these ideas and strategy mean for state sovereignty? I argue that the de-escalatory effects of a concert strategy would produce a more stable international states system and more stable nation-states. Since meaningful sovereignty depends on external recognition (Weber 1994, Biersteker and Weber 1995), US recognition of the great power status of other regional rivals would enable

them to negotiate agreements about the boundaries and forms of authoritative rule within second and third-tier states rather than engage in the competitive power politics of political mobilization within them (Goddard and Nexon 2016). The removal of great power competition can further reduce domestic political competition as well. If both the United States and its rivals refrained from interfering in the domestic politics of weaker states, they can remove structural opportunities for domestic actors to engage in extreme competition against their opponents. In this way, equilibrium among the great powers can further enable local balances of power within various sovereign states.

But sovereignty would not just be subject to great power agreement. A pluralist narrative also allows the United States to acknowledge other governments' exclusive right to authoritative rule without demanding that they conform to an US liberal understandings of legitimate government. This approach would enable the United States to account for the implicit liberal bias inherent in its democracy promotion activities and acknowledge the contested nature of the concept of democracy (Kurki 2015). Rather than promote procedural democratic institutions on the basis of liberal individualism, the United States can recognize governments which depart from its own ideals and match those of the cultural norms and values held by their citizens. The diverse range of legitimate forms of rule in world politics would be appropriate, including collective forms of legitimate authority found in non-Western cultures. The US definition of legitimate government which informs its recognition of other sovereign states would thus complement how it acknowledges a legitimate right of participation to all its citizens, regardless of the cultural foundation of their political claims.

The acceptance of multiple forms of state sovereignty and the need to preserve a balance of power requires that the United States abandon most forms of military and political

intervention. While a liberal exceptionalist narrative justified these violations of state sovereignty as a means of spreading the liberal order and defending a liberal interpretation of human rights, they are generally inconsistent with agnostic pluralism and great power concert. These interventions, including state building, regime change, humanitarian interventions and interference in domestic democratic elections, expand US power and influence at the expense of its regional rivals and prompt counter-escalatory measures by them. Instead, pluralism requires that the United States completely renounce regime change and electoral interference. State building and humanitarian intervention can still be possible, but only in concert with other great powers, prominent regional actors, and international institutions. They cannot be undertaken in any way that upsets the balance of power or violates the security interests of other states. Given these conditions, we should expect that these kinds of interventions will be rare. But they should also be much less necessary. Deescalation in both world politics and domestic politics should make practice of mass atrocities in civil wars much less frequent.

#### *Recognition and Rivalry in the US-Russia Relationship*

To illustrate how a pluralist narrative can stabilize great power relations consistent with a concert strategy, I briefly explore the dynamics of the contemporary US-Russia rivalry. Under the leadership of President Vladimir Putin, Russia has adopted revisionist intentions since its August 2008 war with Georgia as a reaction to US-European Union democracy promotion in Eastern Europe. It sought to undermine the increasing influence of Western institutions over states in its near-abroad using its control over oil and gas over East European neighbors and develop local clients in their protracted conflicts (Babayana 2015). Russia's most aggressive actions involved the annexation of Crimea following Ukraine's Euromaidan revolution, which

Putin framed as a necessary response to the West's refusal to recognize Russia's great power status in Eurasia and acknowledge it as an equal to the United States and the European Union (Tsygankov 2015). Russian grievances were not limited to the potential loss of influence over Georgia and Ukraine, but also the 1998 air campaign against Serbia and subsequent state building intervention in Kosovo and 2011 air war against the Libyan regime of Muammar Gaddafi. These revisionist actions and Putin's articulation of a revisionist great power identity can all be understood as a way to routinize Russian relationships with others, especially the United States, in such a way that stabilizes its narrative as a great power after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

How should the United States respond? Some proponents of liberal hegemony argue that the United States should strengthen its ties to NATO through increased military commitments while offshore balancing advocates call for a US withdrawal from the alliance system that would force European states (especially Germany) to pay for their own deterrent capability. A pluralist narrative that recognized Russia as a great power would rationalize a different posture, namely a moratorium on the expansion of NATO and the treatment of non-member states as neutral (O'Hanlon 2008). By making this concession, the United States would recognize the validity of Russian security interests regarding Western expansion into its near-abroad and resolve Russian uncertainty about its great power status created by the prospect of Ukraine and Georgia becoming members in Western multilateral institutions. Russia's great power voice and hierarchical role in leading a sphere would be recognized by the United States. A moratorium of NATO expansion would further set the stage for renewed negotiation regarding the exemplary military capabilities of both powers, namely arms control agreements such as the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) and Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) frameworks. This strategic

narrative and subsequent policies would not necessarily resolve all issues between the United States and Russia, but it would establish a common cognitive frame which serves as a basis for future negotiations and debates about the implementation of problems rather than the nature of entire relationship. In sum, limiting NATO expansion would enable the routinization of US-Russian recognition of each other's security claims as legitimate enable and each great power to develop ontological security and status quo intentions. The result would be a stable balance of power and slow, gradual reduction of potentially offensive military deployments by both powers.

One argument against the above proposal is that Russia's revisionist intentions cannot be changed and that Putin will never accept a stable frontier with NATO. This position assumes that state identities and their subsequent preferences are fixed and ignores the constitutive relationship between international diplomacy and domestic politics. Putin's confrontational foreign policy and great power identity complement his claim to domestic political legitimacy and the necessity of a strong nationalist and authoritarian ruler who can reinvigorate Russian society and defend it from foreign threats. If the United States adopted a moratorium on NATO expansion and recognized Russia as a great power, it would remove the threat to its physical and ontological security that allows it to routinize revisionism. Continued Russian aggression in the context of a US pluralist narrative which recognizes its great power identity would lead Russia to contradict its own story about itself. For example, assume that Russia continued to engage information operations during subsequent US elections. Since great power status normatively requires that a state follow dispute resolution norms based on mutual consensus, continued revisionism would violate its assumed identity. In such a situation, the United States should certainly retaliate in limited ways, perhaps with economic sanctions targeting leaders of Putin's

regime, to demonstrate that revisionism will not be tolerated.<sup>3</sup> But defensive escalation in the context of a pluralist narrative and a US commitment to abandon all future election interference will limit the degree to which such actions can be interpreted as offensive revisionism rather than a defensive attempt to maintain the status quo. Ongoing aggression by Russian leaders would then make them vulnerable to a loss of legitimacy among their domestic audience. The costs of and question their lack of focus on Russian domestic political challenges when no external threat exists.

### **A Pluralist Revival of Global Economic Governance**

Advocates of liberal hegemony argue that any accommodation of great power rivals by the United States, whether offshore balancing or great power concert, runs the risk of the allowing the open-rules based world order to degenerate into closed spheres of influence (Wright 2017). But as classical realists remind us, power balancing in the political domain is part of a broader strategy of achieving a mutually reinforce balance in other domains, such the economy and the environment (Williams 2004: 650). Although great power recognition of rivals like Russia does involve acknowledging their preeminent position in a respective region, the successful de-escalation of security competition through great power concert makes possible deeper multilateral cooperation (including second- and third-tier powers) regarding issues which threaten all nations and peoples around the world. I demonstrate below how a pluralist US strategic narrative combined with great power concert enables the democratic revival of global governance and processes of norm contestation by both state and non-state actors. The result would be a more robust rules-based order characteristic of global constitutionalism that enables restraint through regulation of transnational economic exchanges at both the systemic and

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<sup>3</sup> Such limited retaliation would be consistent with a tit-for-tat strategy to signal status quo intentions in the prisoner's dilemma. See Axelrod 1984.

regional levels of analysis. By reducing economic competition among states and creating hard limits on the negative externalities of economic activity, the pluralization of rules-based global governance processes can fulfill US national interests in economic stability.

*Economic Pluralism, Global Constitutionalism, and the Diffusion of Regulatory Norms*

Ruggie's (1982) "embedded liberalism" variant of hegemonic stability theory has been the core explanation of US economic leadership since World War II. The United States used its economic influence to create an open multilateral trade system while allowing its allies in Western Europe and Asia to keep some national economic controls consistent with Keynesian planning to maintain domestic stability. But that compromise broke down as Anglo-American democracies developed neoliberal norms of economic governance and socialized other states into accepting a universal policy package applicable to all states which enabled the integration of the national economies and the removal of their barriers to trade (Swartz 2003, Friedman 1999). Today, these norms are no longer seen as legitimate by wide swaths of developed country populations due to the decline of middle-class incomes, global labor competition, and the perceived loss of national identity due to immigration flows. In the United States, support for free trade is no longer guaranteed and now covaries with political party affiliation (Jones 2017). These public opinion trends have emerged as US inequality has grown substantially with political influence largely accumulating in the hands of the most wealthy Americans (Winters and Page 2009, Gilens and Page 2014). Discontent with trade openness has led ethnonationalist authoritarian leaders, including President Trump, to regularly disparage globalization in favor of economic protectionism as a means of retaking control over national economies from technocratic global elites. These two approaches toward the global economy – international free-trade and nationalist protectionism – define the current debate about globalization in the United

States, yet neither can combine liberal political and economic principles in ways that maintain domestic stability. Just as Karl Polanyi forewarned (1944), some limits to the exploitative tendencies of capitalism remain necessary to prevent liberal democracy from collapsing into autocratic rule.

A third economic alternative exists which is consistent with both Polanyi's need for institutions that moderate the effects of intense interdependence and also the balance of power principles inherent in classical realism and republican security theory.<sup>4</sup> Dani Rodrik argues that regulation of these transnational economic flows is possible through enhanced forms of global governance and the development of rules based on deliberation among states as a global public (Rodrik 2010: 212-214). It also necessitates the creation of transnational institutions that can regulate the global economy rather than just enable market openness. Since economic transactions take place beyond the boundaries of any one state yet affect the economic survival of all states and their citizens, then sovereign governments have an interest in working together to restore an equilibrium between the opposing economic demands of capital and labor. The notion of democratizing governance of the global economy is not new and has been long been advocated by cosmopolitan theorists as a form of global social democracy (Held 2004, Held 2010, Archibugi 2009). But their focus on the individual as the sole actor of moral concern ignores both states and national identities, the primary forms communitarian belonging which has been central in the backlash against globalization and the extreme economic competition it has fostered. These political trends suggest that any attempt at reviving economic global governance without enabling states to establish some limits on market forces within their borders will be incomplete.

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<sup>4</sup> Because Polanyi emphasized the need for institutions to tame both power politics and economic interdependence, his theorizing of world politics aligns with classical realists like E.H. Carr. See Dale 2016. I would suggest that it also aligns with Morgenthau as well.

Contra cosmopolitans, I argue that a pluralist approach to global governance articulated in a US strategic narrative can enable the development of more robust rules and institutions that rebalance the global economy. A pluralist US strategic narrative would enable the United States to continue to participate in a multilateral economic system without assuming that liberal norms can be the only basis of international exchange. The same kind of post-hegemonic foreign policy that makes possible great power concert can also enable a more diverse set of values to be the basis global economic regulation. Liberty *and* equality can both serve as the basis of new economic institutions as opposed to prioritizing liberty at the expense of equality. How these principles are combined will be actively negotiated by states on the basis of their particular cultural values while respecting each other's right to participate in economic deliberations as members of a global public. The best way to conceptualize the new institutional framework in markets can be "embedded" global constitutionalism, or the establishment of the legitimate rule of law on the basis of community participation to maintain separation of powers and guarantee the rights of citizens (Lang, Jr. and Wiener 2017: 10-11). Although the pre-Trump economic aspects of the liberal order did have some constitutional features, it was never truly legitimate because it reproduced Anglo-American economic norms that treat the market as outside of state intervention and democratic control (Schöwbel-Patel 2017: 411-412). Instead, a pluralist strategic narrative which recognizes a right of deliberation for all actors in world politics would legitimize regulation of transnational economic activities on the basis of the social and economic dimensions of human rights long denied by the United States in its adherence to first-generation human rights at the expense of second-generation rights (Moyn 2013, Moyn 2017). Rather than prioritize liberty at the expense of equality, a pluralist strategic narrative guided by the ethico-

principle of citizenship would take both seriously as the basis for social democratic governance of the global economy.

The agnostic qualities of pluralism ensure that the creation of social democratic international institutions will always be an open-ended process of norm contestation that manifests itself in unique ways across various world regions and cultures. Although a pluralist narrative would make possible a US interest in global economic regulation, but the constitutional body of laws and agreements produced at the systemic level would be somewhat incomplete and subject to future adjustment (Walker 2017: 441-442). The legitimacy of a constitutional order depends upon this indeterminacy because all actors who participate in it must be able to contest the underlying norms that serve as the foundation for its mutually agreed to rules. (Wiener 2008: 57). Those same actors will challenge and resist norms that are not logically consistent their own particular cultural values drawn from their communities of origins. A pluralist US narrative allows for the United States to diffuse new economic norms but enables the perpetual contestation of economic norms by other states (including weak ones) through the activation of two causal mechanisms. These are norm localization, or the synthesis of foreign and domestic ideas by a by a legitimacy-seeking local entrepreneur, and norm subsidiarity, when regional states reinterpret a global norm in such a way that asserts their autonomy from a higher authority (Acharya 2004, 2011, 2018: 42-51). These mechanisms ensure that no “strict” template of regulatory rules can be diffused to all states while respecting their autonomy. Depending on their cultural values, states will modify social democratic principles as consistent with their own traditions and embrace regional solutions as they see fit.

*Rules and Institutions of Global Social Democracy*

What kinds of institutions and rules should the United States create in pursuit of global social democracy? Rather than build an entirely new institutional architecture, the United States can work with state and non-state actors to repurpose existing international economic institutions and trade agreements for social democratic goals while embracing those it has historically shunned. The most important among these are the World Trade Organization (WTO), the North and Central America Trade Agreements (NAFTA and CAFTA), and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Inspired by US free-market norms of economic efficiency and freedom, these institutions and agreements resolve disputes about investment law between nation-states and multinational corporations through arbitration procedures that often favor the latter. Rather than manipulate the normative framework of core labor standards to accommodate the material interests of multinational corporations (Payne 2001), a pluralist United States would refrain from undermining labor norm entrepreneurs and enable them to achieve equal stature alongside their pro-free market counterparts at both the transnational and national levels of analysis. First, it would create complementary transnational arbitrage mechanisms for labor and environmental standards staffed by experts informed social and economic rights norms. Second, it would embrace legal norms that extend international labor rights to trade agreements, thereby redefining how the formal texts of such agreements can be interpreted by national courts (Tucker 2018). The actual norms which serve as the basis for these processes will differ among countries and regions due to norm diffusion mechanisms, but a pluralist narrative and US identity would enable it to negotiate more legitimate rules for labor. Pluralism would also justify US participation in institutions which have always deviated from norms of economic liberalism. These include the International Labour Organization (ILO), whose Core Conventions the United States as never signed, and the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), an

institution associated with the New International Economic Order (NIEO) promoted by developing countries in the 1970s to rebalance the international economy in their favor. A pluralist approach to the world economy would treat these institutions and the norms that informed their creation as legitimate expectations of global economic governance. The United States would actively participate in these institutions and support greater protections against laborers as well as rules of trade that treat developing countries fairly.

Another area of global economic regulation involves business practices. The United Nations already developed a corporate social responsibility framework known as the UN Global Compact (UNGC) in 2000 which enables multinational corporations to learn from each other as well as labor and civil society organizations to conduct business in ways consistent with human rights (Ruggie 2001). This voluntary framework was created rather than a true regulatory system because the UN General Assembly lacked agreement on regulatory principles which enabled codification as well as resistance by multinational corporations (Ibid., 373). Although an inability to include non-free market normative principles can largely be attributed to the hegemonic socialization of US free market norms, the dominance of those ideas has now waned. Today, non-Western states, namely Ecuador and South Africa in conjunction with the G-77, have initiated a new negotiation process for a binding treaty framework to regulate global business activity on the basis of human rights law. The core debate regarding treaty language involves which normative obligations are more important – those respecting human rights or trade and investment treaties (Seitz 2018: 4). Largely consistent with its promotion of free-market norms, the United States has always sought to undermine the treaty process, first by attempting to obstruct its initiation in 2014 and refusing to participate. A pluralist strategic narrative would constitute the United States with an interest in participating in negotiations and recognize the

validity of norms which promote economic equality because they balance expectations of economic liberty.

A final policy area in which a pluralist United States can engage is economic redistribution. Liberal economic norms inspire lower taxation policies and the removal of minimum wage floors to increase investment competitiveness. But the promise that economic growth would trickle-down has not been realized. Instead, inequality within developed countries like the United States has grown quite large. Piketty (2014) argues that this outcome is quite expected since the returns on capital tend to exceed overall economic growth. He argues that a global wealth tax can reverse this tendency toward inequality and treat concentrations of wealth as a matter of public concern. A pluralist strategic narrative that balances economic liberty with a right of economic equality would enable the United States to not just consider but also promote such a policy and support institutions that can realize it. Another redistributive policy involves the incorporation of minimum wage floors negotiated among states as part of regional trade agreements. By increasing wages in developing countries which pay the least amount to their workers, minimum wage floors would reduce competition between workers in different countries while also stimulating economic demand without relying on increasing debt that makes possible new economic crises (Palley 2013). This internationalist solution to the problem of inequality has recently been proposed by Canada in the ongoing NAFTA negotiations to raise wages for Mexican auto workers (Bryden and Smith 2017). If enacted, this policy would benefit wage earners in all three NAFTA countries and would be consistent with the economic human rights long ignored by the United States. A pluralist strategic narrative would make it normatively plausible.

Finally, I return to Table 1. A pluralist strategic narrative allows us to fill in its missing elements and develop a comprehensive grand strategic approach around great power concert as an alternative to liberal hegemony and offshore balancing. This is displayed in Table 2.

	Liberal Hegemony	Offshore Balancing	Great Power Concert
Vision of World Order	One-world cosmopolitanism	Clash of civilizations	Multiplex
National Identity	Liberal exceptionalism	White ethnonationalism	<b>Pluralist</b>
Origin of Rules and Norms	Hegemonic socialization	Pure transactionalism	<b>Norm contestation</b>
Trade Policy	Golden straitjacket	Mercantilist/protectionism	<b>Global regulation</b>

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have argued that a pluralist strategic narrative can help us rethink American foreign policy, grand strategy, and global governance. By embracing pluralism and a great power concert, the United States can generate a stable balance of power and resolve the dilemmas of ontological security in faces in conjunction with its great power rivals. Pluralism can also enable the United States to revive global economic governance in ways that reduce economic competition worldwide for the benefit of its own citizens. By acknowledging the cultural diversity of world politics through agnostic pluralism, the United States can adopt the forms of restraint necessary to achieve its national interests.

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