

A Book Worthy of Serious Discussion

Discussion Questions

***The Jungle Grows Back* by Robert Kagan**

QUESTION #1—A World Order

A world order is a set of ideas about how the world should be and a roadmap for a country's foreign policy. The present world order is characterized by liberalism, democracy, and capitalism, not because this is good, right, or better; but because the most powerful nation in the world since 1945 has been a liberal democratic capitalist country.

The liberal world order is precious; it is not preordained, not destined by higher powers, not assured, ensured, or insured. The real choice, according to Kagan, we Americans face is between maintaining the liberal world order, with all the moral and material costs that entails, or letting it collapse and courting the catastrophes that must inevitably follow.

Maintaining the liberal world order is not free. The tragic reality is that it is impossible to wield power, even for the best of causes, with clean hands.

So how do we think about this dilemma?



Question #2

In 1848 the only clear, stable, and widely recognized democracy in the world was the United States. The Revolutions of 1848 in Europe brought some democratic experiments but they largely failed. By 1900, the United Kingdom has joined the democratic ranks; and by 1940 there were nine. Since 1945 the number of democracies peaked at 96 in 2017, and today the best estimate is 88.

This 10% decrease could be viewed as an indication that democratic governments are in retreat. Also, it could be viewed as a pullback from the arduous work of tending the liberal world order by America.

In *The Jungle Grows Back* Robert Kagan argues persuasively that to preserve the freedom, prosperity, and general peace we currently experience, we have to push back. He challenges the reader to understand that the historical norm has always been toward chaos toward the overgrown jungle. The last 80 years of liberal world order are the aberration, requiring a novel approach to world order.

Consider:

- An imperfect liberal order is preferable to one dominated by liberalism's opponents
- Transforming ambitious, autocratic, military powerhouses into pacific, democratic, economic power houses is arduous work
- The tragic reality is that it is impossible to wield power, even for the best of causes, with clean hands

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Kagan clearly describes the present day challenges to the liberal world order.

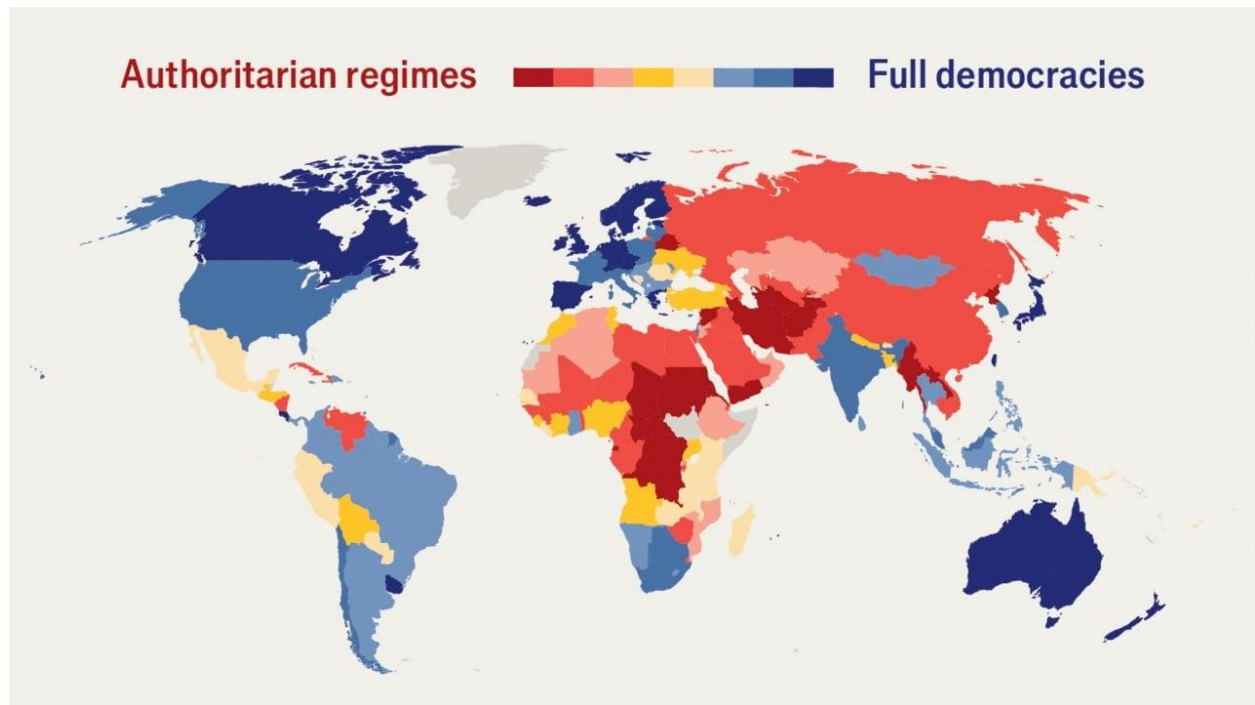
Consider:

- Russian greatness cannot be achieved in a world that is secure and stable. Russia during the Cold War was a global superpower; today Putin dreams of regaining that global status
- China, probably the greatest benefactor of the liberal world order, today desires to return to regional and global dominance by displacing the American led liberal order.
- Iran champions the Radical Islam to elevate the House of Islam over all people

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In summary, who is going to drive the bus?

What do you think?



QUESTION #3.0

The way a country views itself and its past have profound implications on how it operates in the present.

For example, lacking any physical geographic barriers, Russia has endured countless invasions, including the devastating Napoleonic 1812 and the destructive Nazi 1941 invasions. Insecurity is the quintessential Russian national emotion. In addition, Russia, since 1620 when Peter the Great came to power and more or less since then has been a power to be dealt with. Indeed, during the Cold War, it was considered a Superpower. Since the end of the Cold War in 1989, Russia has been geographically reduced. Russian greatness, as idolized by the 18th century, cannot be achieved in a world that is secure, stable, and not open to renewed conquest.

The present world order affords Russia the chance to be more secure than at any time in history. But in this world order Russia cannot be a superpower.

Kagan uses the metaphor of the garden and the jungle to describe the ongoing conflict the liberal world order faces. Of course, there is the war in Ukraine, but also there is a battle in Hungary.

“Prime Minister Viktor Orban said on Sunday the 2026 election would offer Hungarians a choice between a party prepared to go-it-alone or one that would usher in ‘chaos and poverty’ by aligning Hungary more closely with the European Union.

In power since 2010, the Euroskeptic nationalist faces what political analysts say could be his toughest election next year, with the economy stagnating and stubborn inflation preventing interest rate cuts from the EU’s join-highest 6.5%.

Orban, who said the Eu was at risk of falling apart over the next decade, is looking to fend off a challenge from center-right challenger Peter Magyar with tax cuts for families, food vouchers for pensions and cheap loans for first-home buyers

‘Hungary has only two choices in a strategic sense,’ Orban told supporters of his right-wing Fidesz party. ‘One choice is that we join the politics of Brussels. This, in my view, would be catastrophic, with consequences pushing us into chaos and poverty.’

Orban has repeatedly clashed with the EU over the rights of migrants, the LGBT community, freedom of courts and academics, and support for neighboring Ukraine since Russia’s invasion in February 2022.

Early on Sunday, Magyar, a former government insider whose Tisza Party is ahead of Orbán's Fidesz in most polls, said Hungary was mired in multiple crises at the same time, including the cost of living, public trust, and democratic standards.

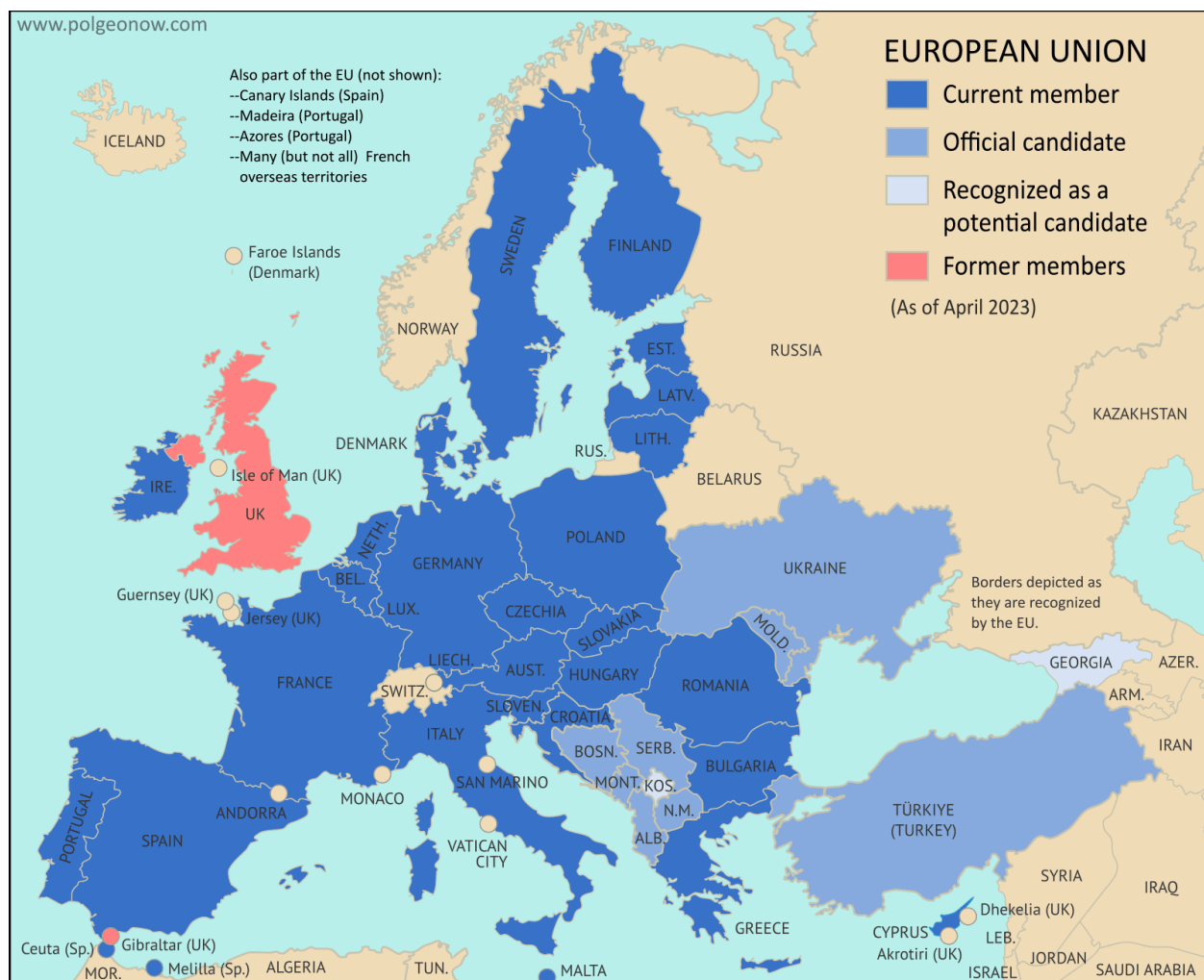
If elected, Magyar said he would revive Hungary's economy by unlocking billions of euros of EU funds suspended over Orbán's rule-of-law reforms, stamping out corruption and launching a wealth tax, while cutting taxes on lower incomes.

'Our country will again be an active, credible member of the European Union and NATO. Not a stick between the spokes but a valued and constructive ally,' Magyar said.

From Reuters September 7, 2025

The visible prosperity of Russia's contiguous former subordinates is the real threat to the Russian regimen, not an invasion by NATO.

What do you think about that?



QUESTION #4.0—China

China, protected by the Pacific Ocean on the east and barrier mountains on the west, was dominant in the region for millennia. Consider the Chinese conviction dating to 221BC, that every known society exists in some kind of tributary relationship with China. Today, China regards its contemporary resurgence as a correction to Western preeminence since the Industrial Revolution. It is true that the scale and rapidity of its ascent to world prominence over the past 35 years, are indisputable. This has occurred under the protection of the current liberal world order.

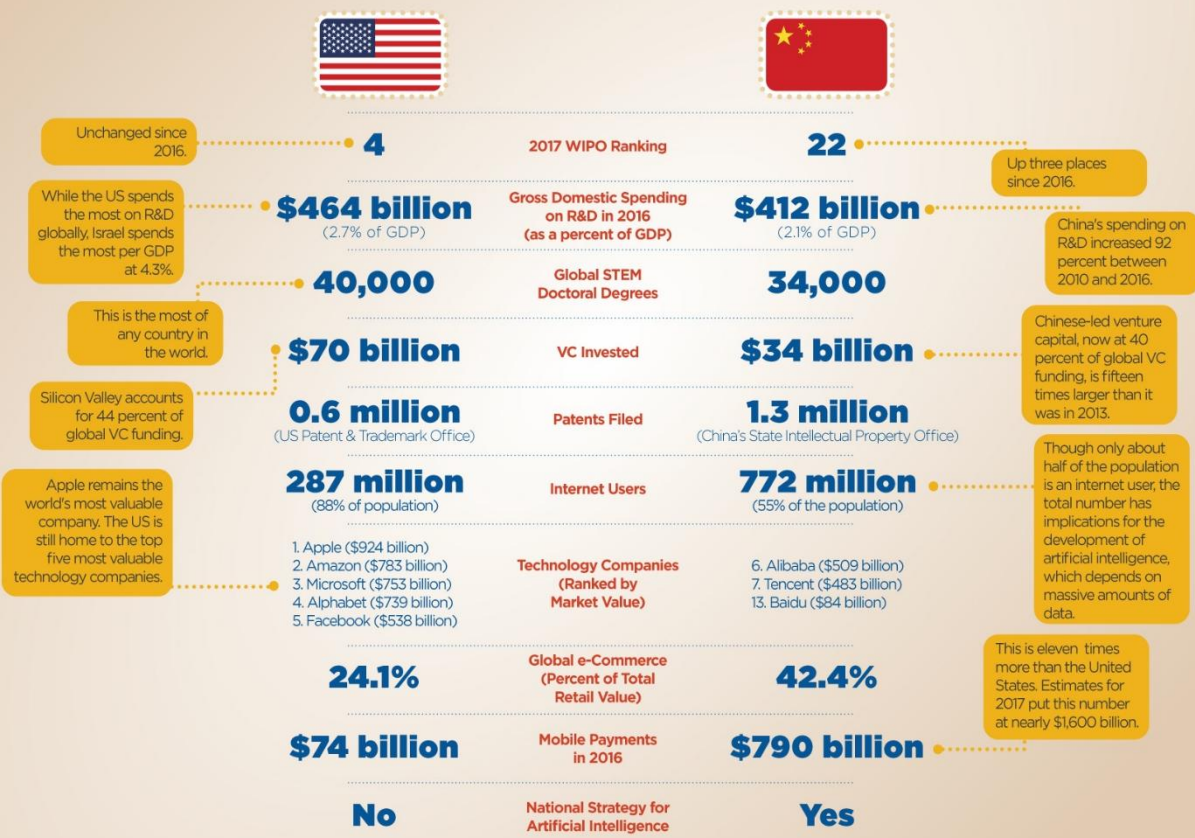
There are many moving parts concerning the China situation (Taiwan, South China Sea, global trade, tariffs, America's naval capability); but what has become difficult is China's authoritarianism which is enjoying a renaissance, fueled by the ferocious economic growth in the last 30 years. Moreover, China is intent on challenging America's hegemony in the Pacific and in disrupting the American led alliance.

It can be helpful to look at a map. China is about the same size as the United States, has three times the population and half the arable land. It is driven by the need to secure its economic needs, including energy, raw materials to feed manufacturing, and food.

What do we think about this? Who is going to provide the leadership in eastern Asia?



The United States and China: The Current Global Innovation Landscape



Read more in **The Global Innovation Sweepstakes: A Quest to Win the Future.**

QUESTION #5.0

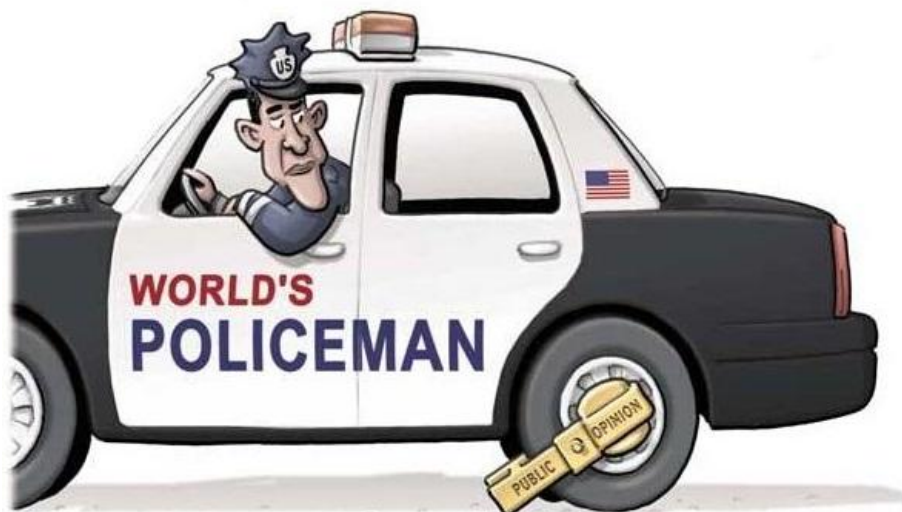
Then there is this new entity. The United States, protected on both the east and west by vast oceans, is usually congenial with its northern neighbor Canada, and often ignores its southern neighbor. This entity upset the global order with a new form of government, a democracy. Blessed by its geographic location, natural resources, fertile agriculture, the country maintained a hands off attitude to the rest of the world. Only after World War II, as the only country not in shambles, did the need to sustain the liberal order become apparent.

What most critics and skeptics of American foreign policy today want is for the United States to act more like a normal nation. And it is true that for more than seven decades the United States has not been acting like a “normal” country. No nation in history has ever been more deeply involved in the affairs of the world nor accepted more responsibility for the state of Humankind than the United States since the Second World War.

Americans were certainly unready for the moral complexity of wielding such great power. They never reconciled themselves to the tragic reality that it was impossible to wield power, even in the best of causes, with clean hands. American liked to believe they were on the side of the good, but power is power and killing is killing, no matter how virtuous the objective.

Yet, Kagan shows throughout the book why support to the liberal order is a crucial factor for the world’s stability and WHY America still needs to care.

So, what do you think?



QUESTION #6.0

Can America go it alone?

Can the World go it alone without America?

Americans, blessed by their favorable geography and wealth, still believe they have a choice between engaging the world and letting the world fend for itself. There has been no shortage of realists, idealists, progressives, and conservatives tell them that substantially disengaging from our alliances and overseas commitments is possible and cost-free. But the real choice we face is not between the good and the bad, but between the bad and the worse.

What do you think?



QUESTION #7.0

In closing Kagan reminds us:

Americans, it is fair to say, have not enjoyed power too much. These days they would prefer to wield it less. Yet, the struggle for power in the international system is eternal, and so is the struggle over beliefs and ideals. If it is not our system of security and our beliefs shaping the world order, it will be replaced.

Because the challenge of keeping the jungle at bay, as we have done for decades, will always be there is an insufficient reason to despair. The liberal order is as precarious as it is precious. It is a garden that needs constant tending lest the jungle grows back and engulfs us all.

If it is not the liberal world order, then what?

