

The Demise of the International Liberal Order and the Future of the European Project

by Nathalie Tocci

Many mourn the growing malaise if not the outright demise of the international liberal order. Some lament the sorry state of such order, while remaining persuaded that not all is lost. Like a beautiful garden left un-kept, the liberal order could bloom once again if only liberal democracies, first and foremost the United States, looked after it with love and care.¹

Others are far gloomier. These tend to solemnly consider the liberal order as dead and buried or, at the very least, as struggling in its final death throes.²

The profound structural transformation of power at the global level suggests that rewinding the clock backwards is unlikely if not impossible. Yet this does not automatically imply long-term

disorder, characterized by the demise of multilateralism, a Hobbesian struggle between great powers and a sprawling mass of ungoverned spaces marked by conflict, violence and displacement.

Multilateralism, including its key liberal elements, can survive so long as it transforms. The European Union, whose existence depends on it, cannot but be at the forefront in spurring such a transformation of global governance.

Power at the global level is undergoing a profound structural transformation. The story of the global power shift is well known. By the late 2000s, with the onset of the global financial crisis, the rise of China and other emerging powers and the resurgence of old ones, talk about US unipolarity began to fade. In parallel with this global power shift from West to East, alternative visions of world order started surfacing.³ Many

¹ Robert Kagan, *The Jungle Grows Back. America and Our Imperiled War*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2018.

² Richard N. Haass, "Liberal World Order, R.I.P.", in *Project Syndicate*, 21 March 2018, <http://prosyn.org/fnW8aJB>.

³ Graeme P. Herd (ed.), *Great Powers and Strategic Stability in the 21st Century. Competing Visions*

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referred to an emerging multipolar system, in contrast with the bipolar system of the Cold War era and to the ephemeral unipolar moment in the 1990s and early 2000s.⁴

Others talked of non-polarity or inter-polarity as alternative concepts to capture the ongoing geographical power shift.⁵ But irrespective of whether the future will be multipolar, inter-polar or non-polar, by the first decade of the new century the debate converged on the notion of multiple centres of authority within and beyond the West as a key feature of 21st century international politics.

Today, few would object to the claim that our century will witness a continued erosion of US hegemony and instead feature a prominent Chinese role. The US and China may lock themselves in a bipolar power struggle,⁶ they could coexist peacefully or could interact both peacefully and conflictually, along with other powers. While all options remain possible, a return to the past seems unlikely.

of World Order, London/New York, Routledge, 2010; Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World*, New York, W.W. Norton, 2008.

⁴ Charles A. Kupchan (ed.), *Atlantic Security. Contending Visions*, New York, Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1998.

⁵ Richard N. Haass, "The Age of Nonpolarity: What Will Follow U.S. Dominance", in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 87, No. 3 (May/June 2008), p. 44-56, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2008-05-03/age-nonpolarity>; Giovanni Grevi, "The Inter-polar World. A New Scenario", in *EUISS Occasional Papers*, No. 79 (June 2009), <https://www.iss.europa.eu/node/602>.

⁶ Graham Allison, *Destined for War. Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?*, Boston/New York, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017.

This global power shift is significant. It is also relatively easy to grasp intellectually. Over the course of history, the centre of gravity has often swung with empires rising and falling, impacting the broader international system they had contributed to build and maintain. While not tantamount to an empire, the United States was the global hegemon for much of the 20th century, establishing and sustaining the institutions, rules and regimes that constituted the so-called international liberal order.

With the US's relative decline, alongside the rise of other powers, the international order underpinned by US hegemony is bound to change. In many ways, we have seen this happening over the last decade. While representing polar opposites, both the Obama and the Trump administrations can be viewed as post-imperial presidencies. In the case of the Obama administrations, an unquestioned commitment to the international liberal order alongside the recognition that the US could no longer sustain it alone, generated the conviction that such order could be maintained only by redistributing responsibilities around the world.

From the attempted "Asia pivot" to the failed "Russia reset", from the half-baked "leading from behind" in Libya to the historic Iran nuclear deal, Obama's foreign policy was marked by the belief that world order could be maintained only through a redistribution of international responsibilities and the establishment of sustainable regional balances.

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In the case of Trump, there is not only the inability but also the unwillingness to sustain the international liberal order. Trump has no attachment to such order and in fact tangibly despises it. The US's withdrawal from UNESCO, the Paris Climate agreement, the Trans Pacific Partnership and Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action – the technical name of the Iran nuclear deal – are obvious cases in point.

The administration remains confident about US power, well aware that it can still extract maximum benefit from the system, as evident in its ratcheting up of tariffs, the imposition of secondary sanctions on Iran, or the implicit questioning of the US's commitment to NATO. If the price to be paid is the wrecking of the UN, of the World Trade Organization (WTO) or of NATO so be it. Perhaps, for some in the White House such eventualities are not considered a price after all.

What complicates matters at this historical juncture is the fact that alongside this geographical shift, power has also been diffusing beyond the boundaries of the nation-state as a consequence of globalization, while concomitantly flowing between actors rather than residing within them due to rising connectivity and the digital revolution.

Corporate giants, civil society and regional organizations are all playing greater roles, with global impact being determined by the flows between an ever changing mix of state and non-state actors. Seeking global solutions to distinctively transnational issues such as cyber, migration or climate

change without the active involvement of government and non-governmental actors is today unthinkable.

This makes the transformation of power not simply complicated, but complex. In other words, change at the global level is not linear, but rather entails the non-linear coevolution of different phenomena and systems, making the overall impact on the international (dis) order fundamentally uncertain. What can be tentatively posited, however, is that the future (dis)order will be less normatively convergent but more inclusive, less institutionalized but more flexible and less stable but more resilient.

First, with illiberal powers on the rise, be it economically – China –, or strategically – Russia –, and liberalism challenged by a nationalist-populist wave within liberal democracies, the future international system is likely to be less normatively convergent. Liberal and illiberal values may in fact end up coexisting in this system. This naturally opens the scope for greater conflict and contestation. But at the same time, it also reflects the fact that the future (dis) order will be less dependent on a single power and more inclusive of multiple voices.

Second, in virtue of a decades-long transformation of power, the future (dis) order is unlikely to be marked by highly institutionalized settings but rather by more flexible forms of interaction. Given that global challenges and opportunities require the coming together of constantly changing constellations of state and non-state actors, fixed intergovernmental

institutions are unlikely to represent the principal arena of global governance. Overlapping and flexible mini, multi or maxi-lateral formats are likely to better reflect the power transformation at the global level.

Third, and in virtue of the previous two points, the future (dis)order is likely to be less stable, with conflict and contestation being embedded within the world (dis)order rather than existing outside it. Yet, this is precisely what can make this order more resilient and thus able to withstand shocks and crises.

The inherent uncertainty of complex international shifts suggests that disorder could prevail and/or multilateralism could be doomed. But it could also mean the contrary, and thus that there is a new multilateral order to be fought for, one that could be more inclusive, flexible and resilient than the international liberal order of the past. It would be so while at the same time retaining the three key prerogatives of multilateralism, namely a shared acknowledgement of common public goods, a degree of shared principles and diffused reciprocity.⁷

The EU has no choice but to strive for such a multilateral order. To do so, two aspects are essential.

First, if tomorrow's world is to be shaped by the interaction between different actors, then the EU must be cohesive enough to be considered one of them and thus deserve a seat at the

table. Today the EU is a united actor in policy domains such as trade and development, but far less so in the more traditional areas of foreign policy such as defence and diplomacy, as well as in emerging domains such as cyber, migration or energy.

The logic of European integration in the 21st century has at its heart this "global" rationale. No longer driven only by the ideal of peace on the continent or the prosperity of the single market; today the European project is a necessity if Europeans are to protect and promote their fundamental interests at home and abroad.

This goes a long way towards explaining why, over the past three years and notwithstanding the existential crisis the Union is living through, foreign policy – and defence in particular – has gone from being the ugly duckling of European integration to one of its most promising dimensions. It also explains why, despite the budgetary implications of Brexit, the European Commission has proposed to increase the budget devoted to foreign policy by 25 billion euro in the next Multiannual Financial Framework. Europeans may not be as enamoured with the Union or with one another as they once were, but they recognize more than they ever did how much they need each other in the wider world.

Second, the EU must defend multilateralism by actively spurring its transformation. This entails supporting the reform programme of the United Nations launched by its Secretary General António Guterres as well as initiating and participating in mini-

⁷ John Gerard Ruggie, "Multilateralism: The Anatomy of an Institution", in *International Organization*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (Summer 1992), p. 561-598.



multi- and maxi-lateral formats across different policy fields. In cases such as trade, this entails building on bilateral and plurilateral trade agreements, thus strengthening inter-regional relations without losing sight of the broader goal of reviving the WTO. The acceleration of the EU's trade agenda in recent years – with Canada, Japan and ongoing negotiations with Mercosur, Australia and many more – goes precisely in this direction despite the general pushback against free trade.

In areas such as non-proliferation, it means fighting tooth and nail for the survival of the Iran nuclear deal in the mini-lateral framework of the E3/EU + 2. In cases such as cyber, climate or migration it requires the more creative effort of spurring flexible formats featuring states, international organizations as well as the private sector and civil society. In each and every case, the starting point has to be the principled goal: the global challenge or opportunity to which the EU seeks a multilateral solution.

Finally, the Union must be driven by pragmatism. There is no longer a fixed group of like-minded actors the EU will see eye-to-eye with in each and every case. The constellation of partners will change according to time and place and the EU will thus need to actively pursue its international relationships across all continents keeping an eye to the wider goal of building, defending and transforming multilateralism.

Doing so is an existential prerogative for the European Union. As an entity that constitutes the most radical form of multilateralism worldwide, the

EU cannot exist in an international system not marked by multilateralism. Multilateralism is to the Union what air is to humankind: taken for granted when it is there, but gasping for survival when it starts thinning.

19 November 2018

Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

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