

Can the Liberal International Order Survive the ‘Age of Trump’?

Written by Alan S Alexandroff

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ALAN S ALEXANDROFF, AUG 25 2017

Is it here still; gone? What was it? What is it now? What will it look like; and how will it operate? What I'm referring to here is the liberal international order. We all knew that the election of Donald Trump would be a 'shock to the system'. I suspect that most of us are not surprised by much of what we see. But it is pretty ugly. Trump's disruptive behavior; his inexplicable taste for authoritarians and dictators; and his dismissiveness of allied leaders like Chancellor Merkel and Prime Minister Turnbull have dismayed observers and other leaders in the West.

But we are here now, and the question is what has Trump done to the liberal international order? What will be the consequences? Recently my colleague, Tom Wright at Brookings, examining leaders' actions at the July G20 Hamburg Summit viewed 'darkly' the current global governance architecture. As Tom wrote in *The Atlantic*:

Chris Uhlmann of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation put it pithily: "The G20 had become the G19 plus one." The United States had abdicated its global leadership role and the rest of the world stood aghast, united as one, it seemed.

What Wright really meant was described soon after by him:

That's a compelling picture, but one that obscures more than it reveals. There is no G19; there is no united front. [...] But the divisions in the G20 run far deeper than frustration with Trump: The body itself is a vestige of a world that no longer exists.

It is not hard to see that Wright's story of global governance – beyond the immediate global financial crisis of 2008 – is a narrative of growing disarray in global governance and the rising tensions brought on by the return of geopolitical frictions. And sitting here in the hyperventilation of the Korean crisis – with rhetorical blow after blow from Kim Jong-un and then from his rhetorical equal – the President of the United States, Donald Trump – Tom Wright may be on to something. Certainly, the Korean peninsula tensions and threats of preventive war that raise the prospect of the use of nuclear weapons by the United States or the DPRK reflect international relations far closer to the Cold War than to global governance.

Now some observers suggest that pattern of decline and the loss of leadership, while it may have accelerated with the presidency of Donald Trump, actually has been apparent for some time. Christopher Layne, and others, have been attracted by the consequences of a rising power, most evidently China:

Writing in the *Financial Times*, former Treasury Secretary Lawrence Summers said that London's AIIB [Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank] decision and its aftermath "may be remembered as the moment the United States lost its role as the underwriter of the global economic system."

Summers was both right and wrong. The U.S. role as the hegemonic power in international politics and economics indeed is being challenged. But this did not start when Britain and the others decided to sign-up with the AIIB. America has been slowly, almost imperceptibly, losing its grip on global leadership for some time, and the Great

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Recession merely accelerated that process. China's successful launch of the AIIB and its OBOR [One Belt, One Road] offspring merely accentuates that process. [...] Thus while OBOR and the AIIB don't get the same attention from U.S. grand strategists as does China's military buildup, they are equally important in signaling the ongoing power transition between the United States and China in East Asia. (Christopher Layne *The American Conservative* "Is the United States in Decline? August 8, 2017)

And while it is unquestionable that China has grown powerful, both militarily and economically, and it is flexing, from time to time its power, at least regionally, it seems to me China remains a follower and not yet a leader. On too many global governance matters, the Chinese leadership does not appear ready to shape, and then shepherd the collective efforts of the major powers. The realists are determined to see Chinese and Russian actions, combined with Trump's erratic leadership, as the end of the liberal international order and the emergence, or a return if you like, of a great power 'spheres of influence' world order.

One major dividing line for observers and experts in describing the state of the liberal international order, after six months of Donald Trump is for these experts to see Trump's foreign policy actions as *sui generis*, or to find their origins in Obama's foreign policy, especially in the Middle East. For some the disassembling of the liberal international order emerged with cautious actions of Obama policy especially in the Middle East, and most especially in Syria. Here then is the origin to America's retreat from global leadership.

Today, we are witness to possibly that and worse. We see an American leadership without intelligence or a compass – or at least the rising effort to focus on US national interest, blame other nations for the problems in world and insist on reciprocity, describing in fact America being potentially "missing in action" if support is not forthcoming.

Philip Stephens of the *FT* possibly has described America's current leadership role best in his review of a recent book by two American historians examining 'America First':

The postwar international order — the framework of rules, alliances and institutions that, in broad terms, has kept the peace since 1945 — will not be so readily rescued from Trump's foreign policy. The liberal internationalism that has defined the west has been rooted both in American power and in a shared commitment to freedom, democracy and the rule of law. This president disdains at once US global leadership and the essential values that have underwritten it. [...] To identify shards of consistency, however, is not to imbue Trump's approach with logic or wisdom. Less than a year into his presidency, he now looks out at a world in which America's standing has never been lower. By disdaining alliances, he has weakened the US. By courting Putin, he has damaged US interests. Washington is seen by friends and enemies alike as unpredictable and untrustworthy. Trump can rail against globalism but he cannot undo the reality that America's security and prosperity is intimately tied to the international order he disparages.

The last sentence is particularly pertinent, in my opinion. The global governance system is built on a highly interdependent world – economic and political, both for good and for ill. There are, and have been for some time, two global governance orders. One is deeply damaged; the other possibly not. There is, what I call the 'Liberal Order.' This is the Order built on market openness, rule of law, human rights and liberal or liberalizing powers, described with some vigor in *After Victory* by John Ikenberry. It is a truly liberal world and led by the United States. As described by Tom Wright, the great power collective effort was built on:

The assumption underpinning the G20, which took hold in the 2000s, was that all major powers were converging around a single model of liberal international order. As they traded and interacted with each other, the thinking went, they would become "responsible stakeholders" in that order, sharing challenges and limiting their geopolitical differences. Over time, they would liberalize their political and economic systems, even if some fell short of fully fledged liberal democracy.

It may be that political leaders and experts, especially in the US, but also the West, thought the international liberal order, would over time become the Liberal Order. It was the inevitable future course, some leaders believed, that all states would become liberal democratic ones – a true 'Liberal Order'. This was the ideal, I suppose. But it is clear that it is not the only architecture possible for global governance. There is a second global governance regime – what

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I refer to more generically as the liberal international order. In what some of my colleagues have referred to as the Westphalian order, and what is the contemporary liberal international order, we have great power governance but it is constructed with liberal and illiberal states. It is concerned with the maintenance of the global economy and political stability but it is not particularly concerned about human rights or the advancement of democratic and liberal states. It is apparent that there are states in the liberal international order with little prospect of politically liberalizing any time soon. And it also appears that Donald Trump seems to take little, if any notice, of illiberal tendencies or behaviors among many of these states. It leaves open the question of leadership, relying, it would seem, on democratic values.

Looking at global governance, today, I think the greater harm has been done to the Liberal Order. It will take far greater effort to construct or reconstruct what has been undermined. But the liberal international order is possibly still able to function, though clearly immediately impaired by Trump’s leadership. This order has been periodically constructed over the last two hundred years. And, notwithstanding the confusion of academics and observers, this liberal international order should not be conflated with ‘spheres of influence’ or ‘balance of power’ dynamics or other realist constructs. This is about ‘concert diplomacy’ and international governance.

But we’ll leave that examination for another occasion. Suffice to say, the liberal international order also has been damaged by the Trump oppositionist stance to allies and the hectoring over NATO payments and bilateral trade surpluses and unilateral US withdrawal from the Paris climate change agreement. But collective action at the international level remains more than possible. And notwithstanding that observers and officials reference repeatedly ‘multilateralism’ the major powers have for far too long relied on US leadership – dare I say – hegemony. Now is the time to find out if the liberal international order can indeed operate multilaterally with coalitions and importantly with and without the United States. Nobody suggests that it will be easy. But decrying U.S. leadership isn’t good enough. Others must now step up.

About the author:

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