Liberal World

The Resilient Order

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Decades after they were supposedly banished from the West, the dark forces of world politics—illiberalism, autocracy, nationalism, protectionism, spheres of influence, territorial revisionism—have reasserted themselves. China and Russia have dashed all hopes that they would quickly transition to democracy and support the liberal world order. To the contrary, they have strengthened their authoritarian systems at home and flouted norms abroad. Even more stunning, with the United Kingdom having voted for Brexit and the United States having elected Donald Trump as president, the leading patrons of the liberal world order have chosen to undermine their own system. Across the world, a new nationalist mindset has emerged, one that views international institutions and globalization as threats to national sovereignty and identity rather than opportunities.

The recent rise of illiberal forces and leaders is certainly worrisome. Yet it is too soon to write the obituary of liberalism as a theory of international relations, liberal democracy as a system of government, or the liberal order as the overarching framework for global politics. The liberal vision of nation-states cooperating to achieve security and prosperity remains as vital today as at any time in the modern age. In the long course of history, liberal democracy has hit hard times before, only to rebound and gain ground. It has done so thanks to the appeal of its basic values and its unique capacities to effectively grapple with the problems of modernity and globalization.

The order will endure, too. Even though the United States' relative power is waning, the international system that the country has sustained for seven decades is remarkably durable. As long as interdependence—economic, security-related, and environmental—continues to grow, peoples and governments everywhere will be compelled to work together to solve problems or suffer grievous harm. By necessity, these efforts will build on and strengthen the institutions of the liberal order.

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THE LIBERAL VISION

Modern liberalism holds that world politics requires new levels of political integration in response to relentlessly rising interdependence. But political orders do not arise spontaneously, and liberals argue that a world with more liberal democratic capitalist states will be more peaceful, prosperous, and respectful of human rights. It is not inevitable that history will end with the triumph of liberalism, but it is inevitable that a decent world order will be liberal.

The recent rise of illiberal forces and the apparent recession of the liberal international order may seem to call this school of thought into question. But despite some notable exceptions, states still mostly interact through well-worn

All together now: at the G-20 summit in Hamburg, Germany, July 2017

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institutions and in the spirit of self-interested, pragmatic accommodation.

Moreover, part of the reason liberalism may look unsuited to the times is that many of its critics assail a strawman version of the theory. Liberals are often portrayed as having overly optimistic—even utopian—assumptions about the path of human history. In reality, they have a much more conditional and tempered optimism that recognizes tragic tradeoffs, and they are keenly attentive to the possibilities for large-scale catastrophes. Like realists, they recognize that it is often human nature to seek power, which is why they advocate constitutional and legal restraints. But unlike realists, who see history as cyclical, liberals are heirs to the Enlightenment project of technological innovation, which opens new possibilities both for human progress and for disaster.

Liberalism is essentially pragmatic. Modern liberals embrace democratic governments, market-based economic systems, and international institutions not out of idealism but because they believe these arrangements are better suited to realizing human interests in the modern world than any alternatives. Indeed, in thinking about world order, the variable that matters most for liberal thinkers is interdependence. For the first time in history, global institutions are now necessary to realize basic human interests; intense forms of interdependence that were once present only on a smaller scale are now present on a global scale. For example, whereas environmental problems used to be contained largely within countries or regions, the cumulative effect of human activities on the planet's biospheric life-support system has now been so great as to require a new geologic name for the current time period—the Anthropocene. Unlike its backward-looking nationalist and realist rivals,

liberalism has a pragmatic adaptability and a penchant for institutional innovations that are vital for responding to such emerging challenges as artificial intelligence, cyberwarfare, and genetic engineering.

Overall, liberalism remains perennially and universally appealing because it rests on a commitment to the dignity and freedom of individuals. It enshrines the idea of tolerance, which will be needed in spades as the world becomes increasingly interactive and diverse. Although the ideology emerged in the West, its values have become universal, and its champions have extended to encompass Mahatma Gandhi, Mikhail Gorbachev, and Nelson Mandela. And even though imperialism, slavery, and racism have marred Western history, liberalism has always been at the forefront of efforts—both peaceful and militant—to reform and end these practices. To the extent that the long arc of history does bend toward justice, it does so thanks to the activism and moral commitment of liberals and their allies.

DEMOCRATIC DECLINE IN PERSPECTIVE

In many respects, today's liberal democratic malaise is a byproduct of the liberal world order's success. After the Cold War, that order became a global system, expanding beyond its birthplace in the West. But as free markets spread, problems began to crop up: economic inequality grew, old political bargains between capital and labor broke down, and social supports eroded. The benefits of globalization and economic expansion were distributed disproportionately to elites. Oligarchic power bloomed. A modulated form of capitalism morphed into winner-take-all casino capitalism. Many new democracies turned out to lack the traditions and habits necessary to sustain democratic institutions. And large flows of immigrants triggered a xenophobic backlash. Together, these developments have called into question the legitimacy of liberal democratic life and created openings for opportunistic demagogues.

Just as the causes of this malaise are clear, so is its solution: a return to the fundamentals of liberal democracy. Rather than deeply challenging the first principles of liberal democracy, the current problems call for reforms to better realize them. To reduce inequality, political leaders will need to return to the social democratic policies embodied in the New Deal, pass more progressive taxation, and invest in education and infrastructure. To foster a sense of liberal democratic identity, they will need to emphasize education as a catalyst for assimilation and promote national and public service. In other words, the remedy for the problems of liberal democracy is more liberal democracy; liberalism contains the seeds of its own salvation.

Indeed, liberal democracies have repeatedly recovered from crises resulting from their own excesses. In the 1930s, overproduction and the integration of financial markets brought about an economic depression, which triggered the rise of fascism. But it also triggered the New Deal and social democracy, leading to a more stable form of capitalism. In the 1950s, the success of the Manhattan Project, combined with the emerging U.S.-Soviet rivalry, created the novel threat of a worldwide nuclear holocaust. That threat gave rise to arms control pacts and agreements concerning the governance of global spaces, deals forged by the United States in collaboration with the Soviet

Union. In the 1970s, rising middle-class consumption led to oil shortages, economic stagnation, and environmental decay. In response, the advanced industrial democracies established oil coordination agreements, invested in clean energy, and struck numerous international environmental accords aimed at reducing pollutants. The problems that liberal democracies face today, while great, are certainly not more challenging than those that they have faced and overcome in these historically recent decades. Of course, there is no guarantee that liberal democracies will successfully rise to the occasion, but to count them out would fly in the face of repeated historical experiences.

Today's dire predictions ignore these past successes. They suffer from a blinding presentism. Taking what is new and threatening as the master pattern is an understandable reflex in the face of change, but it is almost never a very good guide to the future. Large-scale human arrangements such as liberal democracy rarely change as rapidly or as radically as they seem to in the moment. If history is any guide, today's illiberal populists and authoritarians will evoke resistance and countermovements.

THE RESILIENT ORDER

After World War II, liberal democracies joined together to create an international order that reflected their shared interests. And as is the case with liberal democracy itself, the order that emerged to accompany it cannot be easily undone. For one thing, it is deeply embedded. Hundreds of millions, if not billions, of people have geared their activities and expectations to the order's institutions and incentives, from farmers to microchip makers. However unappealing aspects of it may be, replacing the liberal order with something significantly different would be extremely difficult. Despite the high expectations they generate, revolutionary moments often fail to make enduring changes. It is unrealistic today to think that a few years of nationalist demagoguery will dramatically undo liberalism.

Growing interdependence makes the order especially difficult to overturn. Ever since its inception in the eighteenth century, liberalism has been deeply committed to the progressive improvement of the human condition through scientific discovery and technological advancements. This Enlightenment project began to bear practical fruits on a large scale in the nineteenth century, transforming virtually every aspect of human life. New techniques for production, communication, transportation, and destruction poured forth. The liberal system has been at the forefront not just of stoking those fires of innovation but also of addressing the negative consequences. Adam Smith's case for free trade, for example, was strengthened when it became easier to establish supply chains across global distances. And the age-old case for peace was vastly strengthened when weapons evolved from being simple and limited in their destruction to the city-busting missiles of the nuclear era. Liberal democratic capitalist societies have thrived and expanded because they have been particularly adept at stimulating and exploiting innovation and at coping with their spillover effects and negative externalities. In short, liberal modernity excels at both harvesting the fruits of modern advance and guarding against its dangers.

This dynamic of constant change and ever-increasing interdependence is only

accelerating. Human progress has caused grave harm to the planet and its atmosphere, yet climate change will also require unprecedented levels of international cooperation. With the rise of bioweapons and cyberwarfare, the capabilities to wreak mass destruction are getting cheaper and ever more accessible, making the international regulation of these technologies a vital national security imperative for all countries. At the same time, global capitalism has drawn more people and countries into cross-border webs of exchange, thus making virtually everyone dependent on the competent management of international finance and trade. In the age of global interdependence, even a realist must be an internationalist.

The international order is also likely to persist because its survival does not depend on all of its members being liberal democracies. The return of isolationism, the rise of illiberal regimes such as China and Russia, and the general recession of liberal democracy in many parts of the world appear to bode ill for the liberal international order. But contrary to the conventional wisdom, many of its institutions are not uniquely liberal in character. Rather, they are Westphalian, in that they are designed merely to solve problems of sovereign states, whether they be democratic or authoritarian. And many of the key participants in these institutions are anything but liberal or democratic.

Consider the Soviet Union's cooperative efforts during the Cold War. Back then, the liberal world order was primarily an arrangement among liberal democracies in Europe, North America, and East Asia. Even so, the Soviet Union often worked with the democracies to help build international institutions. Moscow's committed antiliberal stance did not stop it from partnering with Washington to create a raft of arms control agreements. Nor did it stop it from cooperating with Washington through the World Health Organization to spearhead a global campaign to eradicate smallpox, which succeeded in completely eliminating the disease by 1979.

More recently, countries of all stripes have crafted global rules to guard against environmental destruction. The signatories to the Paris climate agreement, for example, include such autocracies as China, Iran, and Russia. Westphalian approaches have also thrived when it comes to governing the commons, such as the ocean, the atmosphere, outer space, and Antarctica. To name just one example, the 1987 Montreal Protocol, which has thwarted the destruction of the ozone layer, has been actively supported by democracies and dictatorships alike. Such agreements are not challenges to the sovereignty of the states that create them but collective measures to solve problems they cannot address on their own.

Most institutions in the liberal order do not demand that their backers be liberal democracies; they only require that they be status quo powers and capable of fulfilling their commitments. They do not challenge the Westphalian system; they codify it. The UN, for example, enshrines the principle of state sovereignty and, through the permanent members of the Security Council, the notion of great-power decision-making. All of this makes the order more durable. Because much of international cooperation has nothing at all to do with liberalism or democracy, when politicians who are hostile to all things liberal are in

power, they can still retain their international agendas and keep the order alive. The persistence of Westphalian institutions provides a lasting foundation on which distinctively liberal and democratic institutions can be erected in the future.

Another reason to believe that the liberal order will endure involves the return of ideological rivalry. The last two and a half decades have been profoundly anomalous in that liberalism has had no credible competitor. During the rest of its existence, it faced competition that made it stronger. Throughout the nineteenth century, liberal democracies sought to outperform monarchical, hereditary, and aristocratic regimes. During the first half of the twentieth century, autocratic and fascist competitors created strong incentives for the liberal democracies to get their own houses in order and band together. And after World War II, they built the liberal order in part to contain the threat of the Soviet Union and international communism.

The Chinese Communist Party appears increasingly likely to seek to offer an alternative to the components of the existing order that have to do with economic liberalism and human rights. If it ends up competing with the liberal democracies, they will again face pressure to champion their values. As during the Cold War, they will have incentives to undertake domestic reforms and strengthen their international alliances. The collapse of the Soviet Union, although a great milestone in the annals of the advance of liberal democracy, had the ironic effect of eliminating one of its main drivers of solidarity. The bad news of renewed ideological rivalry could be good news for the liberal international order.

CORE MELTDOWN

In challenging the U.S. commitment to NATO and the trading rules of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the World Trade Organization, Trump has called into question the United States' traditional role as the leader of the liberal order. And with the vote to leave the EU, the United Kingdom has launched itself into the uncharted seas of a full withdrawal from Europe's most prized postwar institution. In an unprecedented move, the Anglo-American core of the liberal order appears to have fully reversed course.

Despite what the backers of Trump and Brexit promise, actually effecting a real withdrawal from these long-standing commitments will be difficult to accomplish. That's because the institutions of the liberal international order, although often treated as ephemeral and fragile, are actually quite resilient. They did not emerge by accident; they were the product of deeply held interests. Over the decades, the activities and interests of countless actors—corporations, civic groups, and government bureaucracies—have become intricately entangled in these institutions. Severing those institutional ties sounds simple, but in practice, it is devilishly complicated.

The difficulties have already become abundantly clear with Brexit. It is not so easy, it turns out, to undo in one fell swoop a set of institutional arrangements that were developed over five decades and that touch on virtually every aspect of British life and government. Divorcing the EU means scrapping solutions to real problems, problems that haven't gone away. In Northern Ireland, for example, negotiators in the 1990s found an elegant solution to the long-running conflict there by allowing the region to remain part of

the United Kingdom but insisting that there be no border controls between it and the Republic of Ireland—a bargain that leaving the EU's single market and customs union would undo. If officials do manage to fully implement Brexit, it seems an inescapable conclusion that the United Kingdom's economic output and influence in the world will fall.

Likewise, the initial efforts by the Trump administration to unilaterally alter the terms of trade with China and renegotiate NAFTA with Canada and Mexico have revealed how intertwined these countries' economies are with the U.S. economy. New international linkages of production and trade have clearly produced losers, but they have also produced many winners who have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. Farmers and manufacturers, for instance, have reaped massive gains from NAFTA and have lobbied hard for Trump to keep the agreement intact, making it politically difficult for him to pull off an outright withdrawal.

The incentives for Washington to stay in international security institutions are even greater. Abandoning NATO, as candidate Trump suggested the United States should do, would massively disrupt a security order that has provided seven decades of peace on a historically war-torn continent—and doing so at a time when Russia is resurgent would be all the more dangerous. The interests of the United States are so obviously well served by the existing security order that any American administration would be compelled to sustain them. Indeed, in lieu of withdrawing from NATO, Trump, as president, has shifted his focus to the time-honored American tradition of trying to get the Europeans to increase their defense spending to bear more of the burden. Similarly, major pieces of the nuclear arms control architecture from the end of the Cold War are unraveling and expiring. Unless American diplomatic leadership is forthcoming, the world may find itself thrown back into a largely unregulated nuclear arms race.

The Trump administration's initiatives on trade and alliance politics have generated a great deal of anxiety and uncertainty, but their actual effect is less threatening—more a revisiting of bargains than a pulling down of the order itself. Setting aside Trump's threats of complete withdrawal and his chaotic and impulsive style, his renegotiations of trade deals and security alliances can be seen as part an ongoing and necessary, if sometimes ugly, equilibration of the arrangements underlying the institutions of the liberal world order.

Moreover, despite Trump's relentless demeaning of the international order, he has sometimes acted in ways that fulfill, rather than challenge, the traditional American role in it. His most remarkable use of force so far has been to bomb Syria for its egregious violations of international norms against the use of chemical weapons on civilians. His policy toward Russia, while convoluted and compromised, has essentially been a continuation of that pursued by the George W. Bush and Obama administrations: sanctioning Russia for its revisionism in eastern Europe and cyberspace. Perhaps most important, Trump's focus on China as a great-power rival will compel him or some future administration to refurbish and expand U.S. alliances rather than withdraw from them. On the issues that matter most, Trump's foreign policy, despite its "America first" rhetoric and chaotic

implementation, continues to move along the tracks of the American-built order.

In other areas, of course, Trump really is undermining the liberal order. But as the United States has stepped back, others have stepped forward to sustain the project. In a speech before the U.S. Congress in April, French President Emmanuel Macron spoke for many U.S. allies when he called on the international community to "step up our game and build the twenty-first-century world order, based on the perennial principles we established together after World War II." Many allies are already doing just that. Even though Trump withdrew the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the trade deal lives on, with the 11 other member states implementing their own version of the pact. Similarly, Trump's withdrawal from the Paris agreement has not stopped dozens of other countries from working to implement its ambitious goals. Nor is it preventing many U.S. states, cities, companies, and individuals from undertaking their own efforts. The liberal order may be losing its chief patron, but it rests on much more than leadership from the Oval Office.

THE LONG VIEW

It is easy to view developments over the last few years as a rebuke to the theory of liberalism and as a sign of the eclipse of liberal democracies and their international order. But that would be a mistake. Although the recent challenges should not be underestimated, it is important to recognize that they are closer to the rule than the exception. Against the baseline of the 1990s, when the end of the Cold War seemed to signal the permanent triumph of liberal democracy and the "end of history," the recent setbacks and uncertainties look insurmountable. In the larger sweep of history, however, Brexit, Trump, and the new nationalism do not seem so unprecedented or perilous. The liberal democracies have survived and flourished in the face of far greater challenges—the Great Depression, the Axis powers, and the international communist movement. There is every reason to believe they can outlive this one.

Above all, the case for optimism about liberalism rests on a simple truth: the solutions to today's problems are more liberal democracy and more liberal order. Liberalism is unique among the major theories of international relations in its protean vision of interdependence and cooperation—features of the modern world that will only become more important as the century unfolds. Throughout the course of history, evolution, crises, and tumultuous change have been the norm, and the reason liberalism has done so well is that its ways of life are so adept at riding the tumultuous storms of historical change. Indeed, the cumulative effect of Trump's nativistic rhetoric and dangerous policies has been not to overthrow the system but to stimulate adjustments within it.

Fisher Ames, a representative from Massachusetts in the first U.S. Congress, once compared autocracy to a merchant ship, "which sails well, but will sometimes strike on a rock, and go to the bottom." A republic, he said, "is a raft, which would never sink, but then your feet are always in water." The liberal order and its democracies will prevail because the stately ships of illiberalism readily run aground in turbulent times, while the resilient raft of liberalism lumbers along.