

THE UNRAVELLING OF LIBERAL GLOBALISM

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

Few Presidents have tried to alter the fundamentals of American foreign policy since the end of the Second World War like Donald Trump has done in the past four years. Mr. Trump broke with the Washington consensus on what western policymakers and strategists call the liberal internationalist order. He put his '[America First](#)' doctrine in the driving seat of his foreign policy wagon. He decried the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), the bedrock of the trans-Atlantic military cooperation, pulled the United States out of international organisations and multilateral treaties, and launched tariff wars with both friends and foes alike.

Barring a series of [normalisation agreements between Israel and some Arab countries](#), Mr. Trump does not have any major foreign policy achievement to his credit. But he is more of a disruptor than an achiever. And he has caused disruptions in America's foreign policy which could outlive his presidency. When Joe Biden assumes the White House very soon, the biggest foreign policy challenge he faces is whether he could unmake the Trump legacy and take Washington back to its liberal international consensus.

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America's isolationism did not start with Mr. Trump. He was rather harping on an old foreign policy doctrine that shaped and drove American policy before the Second World War when he pulled the U.S. back from the stage of global leadership. Before the war, the U.S., an emerging economic and military power, was largely an isolated country that was focused on its own rise and expansion. The economic catastrophe caused by the Great Depression and the losses it suffered in the First World War prompted the American isolationists, including progressives and conservatives, to push for a policy of non-involvement in European and Asian conflicts — a policy Washington had largely followed throughout the 19th century.

The roots of the liberal internationalist order can be traced to the ideals of the 28th American President, Woodrow Wilson. Wilson, who led the U.S. to the First World War, called for a rules-based global order governed by international institutions in which countries could cooperate and achieve peace (what he called "an organised common peace") rather than going to war to meet their goals. The Wilsonian principles on self-determination, rule of law within and between countries, liberal capitalist economic model and freer trade and emphasis on human rights would lay the foundations of the liberal global order which the West would wholeheartedly embrace after the Second World War, but they did not have many takers in the U.S. during the inter-war period. The U.S. was not even a member of the League of Nations.

Washington unearthed the values of Wilsonian globalism only after it suited America's strategic interests during the Cold War. When the world was divided between the capitalist and communist blocs and when the communist and socialist parties (under the patronage of the Soviet Union) started making advances into Asian and European countries, the U.S. turned to liberal globalism and took up the leadership of the western world. It called itself and its allies the "free world", claiming moral superiority over the communist and socialist dictatorships. While this remained the larger narrative, it did not stop them from embracing the dictators who were opposed to the red bloc. Basically, liberal internationalism embodied the transborder cooperation of western democracies and their allies in their fight against the socialist internationalism of the rival bloc. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, many pundits and policymakers saw it as a triumphant moment for liberal internationalism. Some even predicted "the end of history". The

U.S. stepped up its leadership role: It started wars to protect human rights, export democracy and defeat jihadists. But history did not proceed as the end-of-history theorists had prophesied.

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From a normative point of view, the geostrategic charm of the liberal moral argument about freedom has diminished in the post-Cold War world. On the other side, with the rise of religious terrorism, even liberal democratic governments started arming themselves with more powers that often clashed with civil liberties. The liberal promise of 'minimum government' stayed confined to the economic realm, while the security state kept expanding its powers. On the global stage, the U.S.'s repeated military adventures have tested its own hard power superiority. The U.S. effected a regime change in Yugoslavia in 1999, but the campaign eventually led to the disintegration of the country. In Iraq, the U.S. never won a conclusive victory. In Afghanistan, after 19 years of war, the U.S. has struck a deal with the Taliban and is badly looking for an exit. In Libya, the country "liberated by NATO", there are two governments and two armies and many militias backed by rival regional powers. When it comes to Iran and North Korea, the U.S. is not as confident as it was with Iraq and Afghanistan on using force. This inability to win wars and prolonged military campaigns turned foreign interventions unpopular again.

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The biggest blow to the western liberal order, however, came from within. The crisis in capitalism that broke out in 2008, has weakened the U.S. and western Europe (the guarantors of the post-war order) economically, and unleashed political changes. The focus shifted away from human rights and civil liberties to fighting terrorism and stopping immigration in many of these countries. Illiberal, far-right and anti-immigrant Islamophobic parties started rising. They challenged post-war internationalism, mobilised the public based on cultural nationalism and vilified immigration and the flow of refugees (which was in part triggered by the wars the globalists fought in poorer countries).

The rise of Mr. Trump to power in the U.S., the leader of the western liberal order (and the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom) was the sharpest manifestation of this tectonic shift that has been under way. Unsurprisingly, Mr. Trump, a product of the crisis in globalised capitalism, took the U.S. back to pre-war isolationism. It may not be a coincidence that Mr. Trump is the first American President since Jimmy Carter who has not launched a new war.

Mr. Biden's foreign policy would be different from Mr. Trump's. He would seek to strengthen alliances and build a more consistent foreign policy approach to the myriad problems America is facing. He could undo some of the policy decisions of Mr. Trump's such as the U.S.'s withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord or its exit from the World Health Organization. But could Mr. Biden, a liberal internationalist himself, revive the western liberal international order? Could he revert to liberal trade, embrace globalisation like, say, Bill Clinton did, or launch wars in the name of protecting human rights or exporting democracy? Could he establish the U.S. hegemony over a fast-diversifying international system? The forces of history are against him.

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After the Second World War, there was a trans-Atlantic consensus among the ruling elites of North America and western Europe on how to tackle the challenges from the Soviet Union. Now, there is no such consensus on how to tackle the challenges they face. There could be broad agreements on issues such as climate change or the fight against COVID-19, but on critical strategic issues such as the rise of China and the challenges from Russia, there is a huge gap between the old globalists and the new populists.

Mr. Trump has been defeated, but not Trumpism and the anti-globalist politics it has unleashed. Even if Mr. Biden overcomes the currents of isolationism at home, he could face similar challenges across the Atlantic where a bunch of illiberal populist leaders and cultural nationalists such as Marine Le Pen of France, Matteo Salvini of Italy, Norbert Hofer of Austria and Geert Wilders of the Netherlands are on the ascent. Like Mr. Trump, none of them represents the old order.

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