

How liberal is liberal?

Leading media outlets have lamented Donald Trump's destruction of the liberal 'rule-based' international order. Numerous articles accuse him of failing to respect the rules of the game.

On the contrary, I argue the US president cannot destroy the liberal 'rule-based' order, because it never existed, at least not in the idealistic form presented currently. This is not about defending the US president, simply about countering a legend.

Undoubtedly, the post-war period saw efforts towards a peaceful world order, embodied by the United Nations. In reality however it was the Cold War and numerous proxy wars fought around the globe that stymied the development of peripheral states that were caught in Cold War dynamics.

After the Soviet Union's collapse, then US President George H.W. Bush portrayed the first Gulf War in terms of a "new world order", ostensibly under American leadership. Clearly, the so-called new world order was a 'unipolar moment' for worldwide control.

From the end of World War Two to the post-Soviet era, the glaring difference between myth and reality of the liberal world order can be seen again and again.

The UN, NATO, and 'collective security'

Supposedly, the San Francisco Conference of 1945 took place to maintain the unity of the Allies. While it resulted in the creation of the UN Charter – undoubtedly a significant accomplishment – it also divided Europe politically, ideologically, and militarily.

Obstructionism in the UN Security Council was already clear in the use of the superpowers' veto rights. Between 1945 and 1989, the Soviet Union exercised this right 116 times; the US did so 60 times, though never prior to 1970. This was a recipe for deadlock.

John Foster Dulles, the US Secretary of State in 1956, described his Cold War Policy in the following way: "The ability to get to the verge without getting into the war is the necessary art." This statement hardly depicted a flourishing 'liberal, rule-based' order.

The concept of collective security never really came into effect. In the words of NATO's first Secretary General, Lord Hastings Lionel Ismay, the purpose of the alliance was to "keep the Soviet Union out, the Americans in, and the Germans down".

A long-standing ideological conflict reigned instead of a liberal international order, with two superpowers, the US and the then USSR, locked into an arms race of unprecedented proportions.

The rule of the Dollar

As Cold War costs spiralled upwards, Washington established a global economic system in line with American interests. The European economy had been non-existent in 1945. After the Bretton Woods remit to avoid the catastrophic mistakes of World War One, the post-war boom in North America and Western Europe was, without argument, clear evidence of success.

However, the system was more complex than planned. Underpinned by the domination of the Dollar and fixed exchange rates, a US trade deficit in 1971 led to a break in the Dollar's link to gold and the end of fixed exchange rates. Was the system liberal?

Probably. Was it rule-based? Yes, but the rules favoured the US.

After the break in Dollar-gold convertibility and the onset of floating exchange rates, widespread abandonment of capital controls fuelled globalisation in the decades that followed. This has produced winners and losers and a 'predatory capitalism' developed its own momentum, no longer under public control and stretching the definitions of 'rule-based' order.

The unipolar moment and the 'new world order'

When the UN agreed to military intervention, the US took UN backing to apply. In many instances, the US went without an international legal basis, as with the bombing of Serbia in 1999 and the Iraq War in 2003. Washington's approach reveals few major differences between its 'liberal interventionists' and 'neoconservative unilateralists'.

Democracy is certainly preferable, but US 'democracy building' needs to be understood in the sense outlined by Dick Cheney's 1992 'Defense Planning Guidance': as a means to maintain global primacy.

There are similarities with the 18th century's 'balance of power', where regular conflict preserved the status quo. Indeed, annual US military budgets often match other major powers' combined spending and National Security Strategies since 2002 have emphasised the right to preventive warfare.

The idea that international order rests on 'rule-based' treaties should therefore be replaced by columnist Charles Krauthammer's view: "It is largely for domestic reasons [i.e., widespread American opinion prefers 'multilateral' legitimacy] ... that American political leaders make sure to dress unilateral action in multilateral clothing".

The road not taken

The Soviet Union's collapse was an opportunity to build a liberal order worthy of the name, based on democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. It would also have been a golden opportunity to include Russia as an equal partner in rebuilding the liberal order. Instead, the US sought supremacy worldwide through NATO enlargement. This constituted a strategic mistake and a missed opportunity to improve the condition of humanity worldwide based on true liberal values.

Whereas a 'logic of war' in Europe had been replaced with a 'logic of values and prosperity' after the Council of Europe was founded in 1949 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, the US waged wars wherever, whenever, and however it wanted. NATO's expansion across the old continent is now creating new tensions.

The US itself is not willing to subordinate itself to the international order; it has never ratified key international treaties and has treated 'rule-based' multilateralism as desirable but not necessary. This begs the question of whether liberalism – regardless of Trump and his disruptive influence – ever stood a chance of succeeding.

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