

# CURRENT HISTORY

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*“The liberal international order could become more stable and durable by creating a greater role for, and requiring commitment from, a broader group of nations, each participating as one among equals.”*

## The International System After Trump and the Pandemic

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Both as a candidate and as an elected leader, US President Donald Trump repeatedly asserted that his main foreign policy goals were to shrink the United States’ role abroad and to put “America first.” These goals should be understood as part of a much broader aim to dismantle the liberal international order that the United States has helped build and maintain since World War II. During his 2016 presidential campaign, Trump accused the United Nations of not only being incompetent, but also acting as an impediment to sovereignty and democracy. Since his inauguration, he has made repeated attacks on long-standing international institutions designed to promote global cooperation in areas as crucial and diverse as peacekeeping, trade, and public health. He continued these attacks even as the COVID-19 pandemic posed an increasing threat to all three core elements of the liberal international order: security, economics, and human rights.

The post–World War II liberal international order has been defined notably by political scientist John Ikenberry as an “open and rule-based international order” that is “enshrined in institutions such as the United Nations and norms such as multilateralism.” It has endured and evolved since its origins in 1945, but not without controversy over the nature and scope of its mission. These fissures became even greater after the end of the Cold War, with the expansion of the system to include nations in transition to democratic regimes and market economies.

In other words, the global system was already showing signs of strain and weakness before the dual shocks of Trump’s ascent to the US presidency and COVID-19’s emergence. Both Trump and the pandemic have served as critical stress tests for the liberal international order. They also suggest three important lessons for its future.

First, global cooperation is a necessity in which we must invest consistently, rather than a luxury we cannot afford. The pandemic has demonstrated how essential it is to preserve the norms, rules, and institutions that make international cooperation possible. Mitigating the effects of a pandemic requires, at a minimum, cross-border coordination on travel, and at a maximum, collaboration in the development and distribution of an effective vaccine.

Second, global cooperation has broad popular support. This is crucial because public backing for multilateralism is key to sustaining the political will necessary to maintain it. Trump repeatedly accused the World Health Organization (WHO) of mishandling the COVID-19 crisis; at the height of the pandemic, he moved to suspend US funding for the WHO. Yet public opinion surveys indicate that support for multilateral institutions in general, and global confidence in the WHO in particular, have remained high in the face of COVID-19. Meanwhile, global confidence in Trump—which was already the lowest among the most prominent world leaders—has remained low during this period.

Third, the United States remains crucial to global cooperation, albeit not in its current role. The dual shocks of Trump and COVID-19 provide an opportunity to reimagine the liberal international order. For many decades, the United States has played a hegemonic role and used its

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dominance to disproportionately influence the meaning of both “order” and “liberal” for the rest of the world.

This helped to secure US support for global cooperation, because Washington could define international norms, rules, and institutions in ways that favored its own domestic interests. Yet it created a system that is heavily reliant on both the hard and soft power of the United States. This reliance has left the entire international system vulnerable to the outcome of democratic elections in one country. If global cooperation is to be sustained, this risk needs to be minimized by creating an international system in which leadership is diversified and responsibility is shared among a broader group of nations that includes, but is not dominated by, the United States.

The November 2020 election of former Vice President Joe Biden offers an opportunity for the United States to revive its commitment to the liberal international order. As Biden has already acknowledged, two important first steps in this process are displaying a greater willingness to listen to and engage in meaningful discussions with traditional allies, and renewing American participation in supranational organizations like the WHO. With his decades of political experience and demonstrated inclination to reach across the aisle, Biden is well suited to repair strained or broken relations with members of the international community while working collaboratively to chart a course for a gradual reorganization of the global system.

International cooperation, much like interpersonal cooperation, is based on trust. Rebuilding relationships and adopting a more multilateral foreign policy will put the United States in a position to help lead a gradual transition toward a system of shared stewardship of the liberal international order.

## THE NECESSITY OF COOPERATION

In September 2017, Trump gave his first address to the UN General Assembly, where he heralded his transactional approach to foreign relations and made his objections to multilateralism clear to the world. While his vehement hostility may have surprised and disheartened many at the time, the stage for Trump’s rhetoric and actions was set well

before. Signs of America’s increasing ambivalence toward addressing global problems via international institutions had been on display since the late 1990s.

The foreign policy of George W. Bush is a notable example. In the first year of his presidency, he withdrew from several long-standing international agreements, including the 1970s Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, and rejected many others that were still pending, including the Kyoto Protocol on climate change and the Rome Statute that established the International Criminal Court (ICC). Other US presidents have also called into question the future viability of key international institutions, including the cornerstone of the transatlantic security alliance, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Barack Obama’s administration warned that unless America’s European partners increased their military spending (to a recommended 2 percent of gross domestic product), NATO would face a “dim, if not dismal future.” NATO was also showing signs of strain from within Europe before Trump’s election, as the continent experienced

a rise in Euroskeptical right-wing populist movements, precipitated by economic stagnation and a massive influx of refugees.

These fissures in the international system are partly a product of its structural origins. The primary rationale behind the creation of the liberal international order was to promote global peace and prosperity in the aftermath of two world wars and the Great Depression. The mechanism for achieving these aims was a set of institutions based on three core elements—security, economics, and human rights—enshrined in the original UN Charter. Collective security would ensure peace, but only so long as democratic systems of government dominated and obstacles to international trade disappeared.

As the liberal international order evolved over time, so, too, has its emphasis on these three core elements. While the initial focus was primarily on security and economics in the 1950s and 1960s, it shifted to human rights in the 1970s. This created new tensions for two main reasons. First, the increased attention to human rights illuminated some of the underlying contradictions in a system that sought to promote order based on a Western understanding of liberalism among an

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ideologically diverse set of member nations. As membership in the UN expanded from the original 51 countries in 1945 to over 100 in 1961, so, too, did this diversity. Second, the defense of human rights was often at odds with competing notions of democracy and sovereignty. For example, NATO's 1999 intervention in Kosovo was criticized for proceeding without direct UN authorization, and in violation of Yugoslavia's sovereignty.

The fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the end of the Cold War exacerbated these tensions. The termination of the rivalry that had dominated international affairs for over four decades left the United States with increased capacity and greater incentive to take unilateral action. This shift in geopolitics also made domestic support for multilateralism less likely. Why should Washington rely on international institutions like the UN to execute foreign policies when it could go it alone or use its stature as the sole superpower to mobilize other countries? Multiple presidents across party lines succumbed to this temptation, though perhaps the most consequential example was George W. Bush's 2003 invasion of Iraq without securing a mandate from the UN Security Council.

The end of the Cold War also coincided with the collapse of the Communist bloc and an abundance of new states transitioning to democratic regimes and market-based economies. For the UN, this meant an expansion in both its membership—the 1992 cohort was the largest since 1961, and the second-largest in a single year—and its ideological diversity.

Thus, while Trump's assault on multilateralism and the COVID-19 pandemic have undoubtedly exposed the frailty of the liberal international order, they are not the sources of its weakness. Rather, these dual shocks have illuminated the reality that global cooperation is an indispensable public good that requires steadfast commitment from member nations, and not an extravagance to be indulged in when convenient.

History shows that global pandemics are likely to recur and that global cooperation is key to mitigating them. Since 2000, the world has witnessed multiple viral outbreaks (such as SARS and H1N1) of pathogens similar to COVID-19. The WHO has been central to declaring these outbreaks as pandemics and coordinating responses that include disseminating information and best practices.

The failure to effectively curtail the COVID-19 pandemic—in no small part due to the abdication of US leadership—has also underscored the fact

that security, economics, and human rights are integrally related. The success of measures to control the pandemic requires international coordination and collaboration across all three elements: limiting travel and tracking movement across secure borders; supplying financial aid to prolong lockdowns while sustaining local economies; and providing affordable access to medical resources (testing, protective equipment, and treatment).

## STAUNCH SUPPORT

Trump is certainly not the first US president to speak out against or defy international institutions. Among the three elements of the liberal international order, Washington's commitment to human rights, whether organizationally through the UN, or through its approach to foreign policy, has always been weakest. The United States helped to create the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), for example, but has since been one of its staunchest critics. After the Reagan administration withdrew from UNESCO in 1984 to protest its perceived bias in favor of the Soviet Union, the United States did not rejoin the organization until 2002. And it never joined the ICC, which was created in 2002, mainly to prosecute war criminals.

Yet Trump has gone far beyond his predecessors in both his rhetoric and his actions. His executive order on June 11, 2020, authorizing criminal prosecution and financial sanctions against the ICC's personnel, including its judges, was unprecedented. So were his repeated denunciations of the WHO since April 2020. As the number of COVID-19 cases and related deaths continued to climb in the United States, Trump shifted blame toward the WHO, accusing it not only of being biased in favor of China, but also of deliberately spreading false information about COVID-19 and mismanaging the pandemic. He then suspended US funding, which amounts to about a fifth of the WHO's total budget (most of which is dedicated to polio eradication), and officially withdrew the United States from the organization in July 2020, after repeatedly threatening to do so.

Trump's bombastic rhetoric and theatrical displays of US power are designed to dismantle the international system by eroding what is fundamental to its survival: public support. The system is possible only because its members willingly agree to let their actions be constrained by the norms, rules, and institutions that comprise it. In other words, it is largely voluntary. Trump has sought

to demolish the liberal international order by undermining the political will that makes this voluntary constraint possible. Political will is based in part on popular support, which in turn is linked to public confidence and trust.

Thus far, Trump's attempts to undermine public support for the international order appear to have failed. While some may find merit in his goals—particularly anti-globalists who are attracted to his populist agenda—public opinion research suggests that the majority of people around the world, including Americans, do not. The COVID-19 pandemic may be part of the reason for this. If pandemics have the potential to remind us of the human cost of discord among nations, COVID-19 could act as a booster shot to raise collective awareness of the need for global cooperation.

Surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center both before and during the pandemic indicate the persistence of broad popular support for multilateralism and international cooperation in general.

A sample of 14,276 adults based on nationally representative surveys in 14 countries during the summer of 2020 (June 10 to August 3) found high regard for both the principles of multilateralism and the international institutions that are based on these principles. The same broad popular support for international cooperation had been found in previous iterations of the survey.

For example, a majority of respondents agreed that countries should compromise on international issues even when their own interests might be at stake (58 percent) and that “countries around the world should act as part of a global community that works together to solve problems” (81 percent). A majority of respondents also expressed a favorable view of the UN and its efforts to fulfill its core mission—particularly “promoting peace and human rights.”

The survey results also suggest that respondents had a high degree of confidence in international cooperation to solve global problems like the coronavirus pandemic. A majority of respondents agreed that greater cooperation with other countries would have contributed to a more effective COVID-19 response in their own countries.

Surveys that we conducted as part of an interdisciplinary research team at the University of

Michigan (Pandemic and People: Studying International Coping and Compliance, or SICC) in the summer of 2020 indicate that citizens around the world remain confident in the WHO. Respondents were asked, “How much confidence do you have in the following organization's or individual's handling of the coronavirus?” They were given four possible options: “no confidence,” “not very much confidence,” “some confidence,” or “a lot of confidence.” We asked about confidence in both Trump and his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping, as well as in the WHO.

Our results suggest that a majority of respondents had much more confidence in the WHO than in Trump with regard to the pandemic. Over 70 percent reported being confident or very confident in the WHO, whereas fewer than 25 percent reported being not very confident or not at all confident. These percentages are reversed for Trump and Xi, with fewer than 25 percent expressing confidence in either leader.

Our findings also suggest that confidence in the WHO has important implications for the resolution of the current pandemic, because there is a strong relationship between lack of confidence in the WHO and vaccine hesitancy. Respondents who expressed some or a lot of confidence in the WHO were much more likely

to respond “yes” than “maybe” or “no” when asked, “If a vaccine for COVID-19 were available to you at no cost, would you get it?”

If Trump's approach has not achieved its intended results abroad, has it at least been effective at home? Both the Pew and SICC surveys suggest that his success has been limited. According to the former, “Americans are more favorable toward the UN than not: 62 percent have a positive view, while 31 percent have a negative view.” Although there has been a large upward shift in approval since 2007, when only 48 percent of Americans had a favorable view of the UN, “the US public's views of the organization have been relatively consistent” since then, with 58 to 65 percent expressing a favorable view.

According to the SICC survey, the US sample is very close to the total sample regarding the WHO's handling of the coronavirus: 71 percent of respondents reported being confident or very confident in the organization. Although a sizable portion of

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Trump's base distrusts international institutions, there is little evidence that this group is growing rapidly or is significantly larger than what we see in other countries.

## REIMAGINING HEGEMONY

To argue that the liberal international order remains vital is not to say that it does not need to be reformed. In this respect, the dual shocks of Donald Trump and the COVID-19 pandemic provide an opportunity to reimagine rather than discard the norms, rules, and institutions that foster global cooperation. These events suggest that although the United States remains crucial to sustaining global cooperation, its hegemonic role needs to be reconceived if we seek to preserve the ideals that the liberal international order was designed to protect.

The United States played a central role in building and maintaining the liberal international order from its origins in 1945. The hegemonic US role may have been necessary for forging multilateral institutions after World War II, given the debilitated condition of America's European allies, but this role has since become a potential liability. The international system has always been vulnerable to the democratic process within its member nations—not only because cooperation among nations depends on domestic support, but also because voters can elect leaders who are opposed to supranational efforts.

Overreliance on the United States has made global cooperation vulnerable to election outcomes in one particular country. Trump's election made this risk painfully clear. By accepting Washington's hegemonic role, the liberal international order has failed to diversify its leadership portfolio, leaving the entire system in a highly exposed position.

To sustain global cooperation, this risk needs to be minimized by reordering the international system so that leadership is diversified and responsibility is shared. The liberal international order could become more stable and durable by creating a greater role for, and requiring commitment from, a broader group of nations, each participating as one among equals.

Moving away from hegemon-led multilateralism will certainly not be easy or costless, but such a shift is already underway. Alongside the decline in US presidents' commitment to multilateralism, there have been signs of increased commitment from other countries. When George W. Bush

attempted to thwart the Kyoto Protocol by refusing to implement the agreement signed by his predecessor, numerous countries rescued the treaty by pledging to voluntarily abide by targets for emission reductions.

Just days after Trump announced that the United States would halt funding for the WHO, the United Kingdom reportedly increased its contribution by 65 million pounds (more than \$80 million). Similarly, while Trump has rejected US participation in any international initiative to develop or distribute COVID-19 vaccines, dozens of other high- and upper-middle-income countries, eventually including China, have joined the global alliance known as the COVAX Facility to ensure that vaccines reach people living outside countries that can afford to develop or buy their own supplies.

Reimagining the international system under shared leadership would reduce reliance on the United States, yet it is vital that Washington remain an active and willing participant. The United States continues to hold a comparative advantage over its partners on multiple fronts, including but not limited to security, economic, and global influence. It still possesses much of the hard and soft power that enabled it to play a central role in the liberal international order for many decades. It still has the largest economy and military by key measures (though China has overtaken it in others), buttressed by its research capacity and technological prowess.

These factors make the United States an indispensable partner in addressing a range of issues that will require collaboration among nations. It would be difficult to sustain global cooperation for responding effectively to pandemics like COVID-19 and other major ongoing threats, like climate change and nuclear proliferation, without US participation.

The central position of the United States also makes it difficult to imagine how a fundamental transformation of the liberal international order could occur without its consent and full participation. It will require ample effort and time for members of the international community to embrace such changes in the organization and operation of the system. Institutions, both formal and informal, are sticky—they cannot be transformed overnight. It would take a genuine commitment from the leaders of both the United States and other member nations to stop expecting Washington to be the prime mover and limit its role to contributing as one (and not necessarily first) among

equals. During a period of such transition, the United States would remain crucial for the maintenance of the liberal international order, given the central role it occupies at present.

The global public has not given up on either cooperation or the United States. Opinion research suggests that a majority of people around the world—including Americans—have confidence in international institutions like the UN and the WHO, and in multilateralism more generally. Consequently, the actions of the US government under Trump should be viewed as an aberration rather than the beginning of a longer-term commitment to isolationism.

Although trust and confidence in the United States have fallen to record lows around the globe since Trump assumed office, there is evidence to suggest that this lack of trust is largely directed at Trump himself. The SICC survey results, for example, indicate that citizens of other countries continue to distinguish the US president from the American government and people. Although respondents are slightly more likely to blame China than the United States for the pandemic, those who blame the United States are much more likely to assign responsibility to Trump; conversely, those who blame China are more likely to find fault with both the government and its people.

## WAKE-UP CALL

Recognizing that the liberal international order was in decline long before Trump's election and COVID-19's emergence is not the same as accepting that its demise is either inevitable or desirable. Both events have served as wake-up calls for supporters of the liberal international order and suggest three important implications for its future.

First, global cooperation, which is needed now more than ever, requires sustained commitment and investment from member nations. Second, global cooperation remains broadly popular, a fact that should motivate and empower policymakers to defend and sustain it. Third, while the United States must adapt to an era in which it is no longer a global hegemon, it continues to have a crucial role to play in promoting and maintaining global cooperation.

Yet our ability to learn these lessons may be limited. The liberal international order emerged out of a collective desire for peace and prosperity after much of the world was devastated by two brutal wars. The prolonged absence of violent global conflict may have lulled both leaders and populations of countries that once contributed to the liberal world order into a false sense of security, which fails to recognize the price that had to be paid to achieve the current calm—and the need

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for continued vigilance.

COVID-19 may help revive the motivation necessary to restore broad commitment to an international system that is dedicated to both preventing and resolving global crises. Although this pandemic has not come close to matching the enormous human losses of the previous century's world wars, it has taken a serious toll on our day-to-day lives. It may serve as a reminder that despite our differences, we are members of the same species, finding joy in much the same mundane activities of everyday existence and vulnerable to many of the same invisible foes. This shared experience of our own frailty and mortality could bring nations together in attempting to forge a path toward greater peace and prosperity based on a joint commitment to mutually beneficial cooperation. ■