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America and the World—The Effects of the Trump Presidency

The Ideals of 1989 Carried to the Grave

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In my previous piece on this topic, I argued that the revolutions of 1989 in Eurasia had instituted a new post-Cold War global order.¹ Among its characteristics were priority for human rights, and even a willingness, at times, to reject individual states' sovereignty in order to ensure these rights, a commitment to deregulation, privatization and open markets, on both the domestic and the international level, and a hegemonic position in world affairs for the US. This hegemony was generally exercised multilaterally, via institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, (IMF), General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), NATO, and even the United Nations, which had been from the 1970s through 1989 a center of hostility toward and resistance against U.S. policies. Scarcely begun, this global order was already under severe strain in the first decade of the twenty-first century, as a result of the unilateralist and dubious military adventures of the George W. Bush administration and international institutions' inability to cope with economic difficulties—whether the very painful and poorly functioning transition from communism to capitalism in eastern Europe or the global economic crisis of 2008-9 and its European Union (EU) sequel two years later.

I asserted that an alternative to this global order had been gradually developing, characterized by pronounced nationalism, authoritarian and undemocratic government, and a rejection or at least downgrading of most international institutions. Beginning in post-communist Eastern Europe, examples of this alternative included the Russian Federation under President Vladimir Putin, Poland ruled by the Law and Justice Party, and Hungary controlled by Viktor Orbán's FIDESZ. The two electoral surprises of 2016, the victory of Brexit in the UK referendum on membership in the EU and the election of Donald Trump as president of the U.S., suggested that such an alternative was spreading beyond its geographic origins. Developments since early 2017 lead to the conclusion that the ideals of 1989 and the international order emerging from it are truly good and buried.

The civil war in Syria, in which the two main protagonists, the Islamists of ISIS and the government of Bashar al-Assad, positively reveled in their contempt for any form of human rights, is a particularly striking example of what remained of the reaffirmations of the ideals of 1989 during the Arab Spring of 2011—not that the human rights situation elsewhere in the Middle East, in Egypt, Iran or Saudi Arabia, has been particularly good. During the 1990s, the idea of outside intervention to preserve human rights had been proposed and taken seriously; the Syrian civil war attracted a lot of outside intervention, albeit of a distinctly different nature. The intentions of some of the intervening powers, Iran, Russia and Turkey, ranged from cynical *raison d'état* to downright malevolence. The EU countries wrung their hands in impotence over the killing and mass expulsions of civilians; their one successful initiative was to find ways to ensure that none of those expelled found their way into the EU. U.S. policy was to exploit, cynically, Kurdish nationalists to defeat ISIS, and then to leave them to the tender mercies of the Turkish government. “Responsibility to protect” was nowhere to be found.²

Perhaps not quite so much as human rights, both open markets and multilateralism have been in decline since 2017. There have been post-1945 U.S. administrations that flirted with unilateralism—those of Richard Nixon and, especially, George W. Bush—but the government of Donald Trump has taken unilateralism to a whole new level: abandoning the painfully negotiated multilateral nuclear arrangement with Iran, repeatedly denouncing NATO, ignoring the World Trade Organization (WTO), pursuing ad hoc arrangements with North Korea, Russia or Saudi Arabia, veering from trade war with China to bilateral trade deal back to trade war, and issuing threats of imposing tariffs on products from the EU, Japan, Mexico, Canada and various other countries. Without the support of the U.S., other

¹ <https://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/Policy-Roundtable-1-5S.pdf>

² Human Rights Watch, “Syria Events of 2019,” 12 October 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/syria>.

major world actors have either been incapable of encouraging open and markets and multilateralism—in the case of the EU—or unwilling to, as the case with China.³

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a remarkable and totally unexpected theater of unilateralism. Public health had been one area of international agreement reaching across boundaries of otherwise hostile states and their diplomatic alignments. During the Cold War, the U.S. and the USSR, and the western powers and eastern bloc more generally, cooperated in supporting the World Health Organization (WHO), including its unsuccessful campaign to eradicate malaria and its successful one to eliminate smallpox.⁴ In addition to all this past precedent, a worldwide epidemic would seem to be a logical venue for international cooperation, but the Trump administration has used the occasion to attack China, announce its intention of leaving the WHO, and refuse all forms of international cooperation to combat the virus. As in other venues of international cooperation, while American actions have been particularly unilateralist, there is not much evidence that other countries have emphasized multilateralism in dealing with the pandemic. Not surprisingly, the U.S. refused to join the WHO's COVAX program, which would guarantee a small supply of an eventual vaccine (just for 3% of the population) to all countries. Russia also refused to join; China did so very belatedly; and other countries have had serious reservations or have pursued their own national efforts to guarantee vaccine supplies. Even in the EU, once the virus started spreading, the open borders of the Schengen Accord rapidly closed.⁵ It would be fair to say that in the COVID-19 pandemic it has been every country for itself.

If the years 2017 – 20 have seen continued and enhanced rejection of the ideals of 1989, they have also been a time in which the nationalist and often authoritarian political alternative has generally done well, politically. At the beginning of 2020, many of the world's largest nations were ruled by one version or another of authoritarian nationalist: China under Xi Jinping, India led by Narendra Modi, Russia of Vladimir Putin, Brazil of Jair Bolsonaro, Turkey of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and the United States of Donald Trump. Polish voters re-elected the Law and Justice Party, albeit by a narrow margin, and their British counterparts re-endorsed Brexit, in the overwhelming general election victory of the Tories' Boris Johnson—an election, admittedly, which was not exactly a Brexit referendum since the leader of the main opposition Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn, advocated Brexit as well. It is only in western Europe that center-right politicians, such as Angela Merkel in Germany, or center-left ones, like Emmanuel Macron in France, have been able to resist this trend, at least to some extent.

The recent election of Joseph Biden as U.S. president, a rare example of successful opposition to authoritarian nationalism outside of western Europe, will remove from power a determined enemy of the post-1989 global order. The new U.S. president will no doubt revoke some of Trump's policy initiatives, such as leaving the WHO, and, equally no doubt, will stop attacking NATO, as well as more generally pursuing a less erratic foreign policy. The many messages of congratulation he quickly received from heads of government around the world following his election, to say nothing of their many expressions of dismay and disapproval at the violent events in the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, do suggest a large-scale sigh of relief at such a prospect.

Optimism about a revival of the post-1989 global order and renewed U.S. world leadership—even assuming that it would be a good thing—would seem rather misplaced. In view of the very narrow majorities the new president and his party will command in both houses of Congress, more substantial initiatives may be difficult to implement. The decline in American power over the last two decades means that any revival of a global order could not be a unilateral affair, but skepticism about American policy, in the wake of the four years of the Trump presidency is likely to remain. Even more to the point, the one-time global order lies in ruins; its revival, even under the best of circumstances, seems both unlikely and probably undesirable. In an increasingly connected world, as the very rapid spread of the pandemic has demonstrated, some sort of global order beyond the self-interest of nation-states would seem like a good idea, but how to create such an order, who would do so, or on what basis it would be developed remain very unclear.

³ Robert Manning, "Trump's Globalism is a Caricature of Multilateralism," *Foreign Policy*, 2 October 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/syria>.

⁴ Ian and Jennifer Glynn, *The Life and Death of Smallpox* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); James Webb, Jr., *Humanity's Burden: A Global History of Malaria* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁵ Katie Rogers and Apoorvara Mandavilli, "Trump Administration Signals Formal Withdrawal from WHO," *New York Times* <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/07/us/politics/coronavirus-trump-who.html>; "Eight Schengen Countries Keeping Internal Border Controls in Place," *schengenvisainfo news*, 26 August 2020, <https://www.schengenvisainfo.com/news/eight-schengen-countries-keeping-internal-border-controls-in-place/>; Julia Belluz, "171 countries are teaming up for a Covid-19 vaccine. But not the US," *Vox*, 9 October, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/21448719/covid-19-vaccine-covax-who-gavi-cepi>.

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