

## **A liberal world order to fight for; A world order under challenge**

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The liberal world order needs liberals to fight for it

WERE a single document to mark the high-point of liberal-world-order hubris, it would surely be "The End of History?", an essay written by Francis Fukuyama, an American academic, in 1989. Mr Fukuyama's question, posed a couple of months before the fall of the Berlin Wall, was whether the world was seeing the "universalisation of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government". His answer was yes.

How extraordinary that seems in 2018. China, the world's most successful economy over the past 30 years and likely to be its largest over the coming 30, is growing less liberal, not more, and its state-led, quasi-capitalist illiberalism is attracting admirers across the emerging world. In the Muslim world, and elsewhere, ties of sect and community, often reinforced by war and the fear of war, bind far tighter than those of liberal aspiration. On a measure of democracy made by the Economist Intelligence Unit, our sister organisation, more than half of the 167 countries surveyed in 2017 were slipping backwards. The backsliders include America, where the president seems to prefer dictators to democrats.

That is particularly worrying. America did more than any other nation to create and sustain the order Mr Fukuyama celebrated. In the 1940s it underwrote the Marshall plan and championed the creation of the IMF, the World Bank, the GATT and NATO. It cheered on the first moves towards European unity. Its armed forces contained liberalism's greatest enemy, the Soviet Union. Its dollar underpinned the global economy. And because America was founded on liberal values, this Pax Americana espoused liberal values, even if it did not always live up to them.

Mr Fukuyama thought the end of the cold war would let the liberal internationalist project move beyond its reliance on American power. The prosperous examples of America, Europe, East Asia's tiger economies and a Latin America abandoning military rule, along with a lack of alternatives, would bring the rest of the world on board. So it did, to some extent, for a while. But it was far from universal. And America has become an unhappy Atlas.

President Donald Trump's rejection of the values underlying NATO and the WTO has been remarkable, his spurning of America's role in maintaining them even more so. Yet his approach is not without precedent, or support. In 2002, the outrages of September 11th 2001 still fresh in their minds and hearts, only 30% of Americans agreed that "America should deal with its own problems and let other countries deal with theirs". But long, painful wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have reinforced American scepticism about interventions abroad that cannot be pulled off quickly and do not seem vital to the national interest. By 2016, the idea of America dealing with its own problems and leaving the rest of the world to

deal with theirs appealed to 57%. Younger people are astonishingly insouciant about revanchist Russia and ascendant China. Only one in two millennials think it is important for America to maintain its military superiority.

It is possible that the next president could swing in the opposite direction, recognising the vital role its alliances play in American security, seeking to reform rather than vilify international institutions like the WTO and reinvigorating international co-operation on climate change--a grave threat to the world order which has been far less doughtily faced than that of communism. But it is unlikely. So is any notion of Europe and other democracies taking on the challenge. And even if either were to come about, China would still represent a daunting challenge. Xi Jinping's determination to centralise power and to hold on to it indefinitely is a large part of that. But Mr Xi may represent a deeper shift: one made possible by the addition of digital technology to the apparatus of centralised authoritarianism.

Liberals have long believed that state control eventually collapses under its inefficiencies and the damage that the abuse of power does to systems that lend themselves to it. But the enthusiasm with which China has embraced digital living has given the Communist Party new tools for political control and responsive tyranny. Cyber-China may not have solved for all time the challenge of identifying and quashing opposition without stirring up more of it. But its efforts in that direction could last longer than hitherto imagined. It would be a foolish mistake to base an international order on the assumption that China will become more liberal any time soon.

Liberals also used to believe that autocracies might be capable of one-off bursts of innovation, like Sputnik, but could not produce technical progress reliably, year in year out. Yet in the past five years, Chinese tech firms have generated hundreds of billions of dollars of wealth. The protection afforded them by the Great Firewall and government policy is part of that success, but not all of it. China's government is investing huge resources in tomorrow's technologies while its new digital giants make full use of the vast amounts of data they have on Chinese needs, habits and desires.

Mr Xi sometimes stresses China's commitment to peaceful, harmonious development. But he then speaks more ominously about "great-power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics". On climate change, or indeed trade, China talks warmly of the rules-based global system. Yet it ignores international-court rulings against its militarised island-building in the South China Sea and blocks UN criticism of its abysmal record on human rights.

A reasonable forecast is that China will embrace international collaboration where it sees advantage in doing so and act unilaterally where its interests dictate. It will also devote some of its burgeoning technological capabilities to new ways of making war. If America continues on its current path it will do much the same. This will not make the two equivalent. Though China's military capabilities will grow quickly, they will not match America's. And it will always be easier and wiser for liberals to trust America to do the right thing in the end.

But if there is no clear international order, just big powers doing what they want, the world will get more of the same as Brazil, Indonesia, India, Nigeria and others increase in strength. Regional powers rubbing up against each other unconstrained; nuclear weapons; the destabilising effects of climate change: it might all work out for the best. But that is not the way to bet.

## Getting a League of Nations right

Faced with this uncomfortable reality, 21st-century liberals must remember two lessons from the 20th. The failure of the League of Nations between the world wars showed that liberal ideals are worthless unless backed by the military power of determined nation states. The defeat of communism showed the strength of committed alliances.

Liberals should thus ensure that the states which protect their way of life are able to defend themselves decisively and, when necessary, to blunt the ambitions of others. America's European and Asian allies should spend both more, and more wisely, on their arsenals and training their troops. Healthier existing alliances will ease the creation of new ones with countries that have reason to worry about China's ambitions.

Military capabilities are crucial. Only with them firmly in hand can the most be made of the world's many mechanisms for peace. In the cold war, the West and the Soviet Union had few economic links. The big economies of the 21st century are highly integrated. The gains to be reaped from working together to repair, reform and sustain the rules-based trade and economic system are huge.

In this spirit China's ambitions to make the yuan an international currency should, in general, be welcomed--they will only serve to hasten its economic liberalisation. The new Asian infrastructure bank it supports is likely to prove a useful addition to international finance. Some of the "One Belt One Road" infrastructure with which it is forging links to the rest of Eurasia will be useful--though the West needs to keep an eye out for cryptic militarisation. A strong West can welcome China's more forthright voice and increased influence, while limiting the threats that it poses.

The strength which serves that end cannot be purely military, or indeed purely economic. It must be a strength of values, too. At the moment, the West is in disarray on this front. Mr Trump has no values worth the name. European politicians are hard put to maintain liberal values at home, let alone stand up for them abroad. Nor do the leaders of India, South Africa, Brazil and the other big democracies of the developing world go out of their way to support abroad the values they espouse at home.

A decade ago the late John McCain proposed the idea of a "league of democracies". Such a league's members might champion liberal, democratic values and at the same time hold each other to account in such matters. It is an idea worth revisiting as a credible and useful alternative forum to the UN. The more clearly the people of liberal democracies can show that their countries work well, and work well together, the more secure they will feel, the more secure they will be and the more others will wish to join them. The world needs a vision of international relations which shores up, promulgates and defends liberal ideals. If liberal nations look only inward and give up either the power or the will to act, they will lose the moment, and perhaps their future.

Liberal ideals are worthless unless backed by military power

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