

# THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND THE LIBERAL INTERNATIONAL ORDER: A VIEW FROM EUROPE

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The COVID-19 pandemic has largely served to accelerate global trends that were already in evidence before it broke out in early 2020, in a world that was increasingly dominated by the “return of history”, growing great power rivalry, and the erosion of the so-called liberal international order (LIO). Joseph Nye, for example, had already observed that the LIO increasingly reminded him of Voltaire’s observation about the Holy Roman Empire in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, when he wrote that, after a run of nearly one thousand years, it had ceased to be holy, or Roman, or even a proper empire. In keeping with this analogy, it is difficult to deny that by the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the LIO was already looking increasingly illiberal, fragmented, and disorderly.

Three main reasons have been advanced to explain this erosion of the LIO. The first derives from the notion of the ‘decline of the West and the rise of the Rest’, which has resulted in what some have defined as a state of “Westlessness”. Suffice it to say that, if in 1945 the US represented 50% of the world economy, by 2019 the figure was a mere 24%, while China accounted for 16%. The assumption underlying this view is that the LIO can only survive if the US retains its position as the liberal hegemon; consequently, a global power shift (from the West to “the rest”) will inevitably lead to a new world order. However, as John Ikenberry has pointed out, this view is somewhat simplistic, since the current version of the LIO is extremely complex, wide-ranging, and dense; what is more, since the turn of the century and the end of the so-called ‘unipolar moment’, it has not even always been to Washington’s liking. According to this interpretation, the ‘de-Americanization’ of the LIO need not automatically spell its collapse, nor should its future be exclusively determined by the evolution of US/China rivalry.

The second reason commonly given for the decline of the LIO centres on internal factors, and more specifically, on the impact of “hyper-globalization” in many Western societies. The pandemic has served to remind us of the extent to which the post-Cold War growth in trade and interdependence did not significantly advance the incomes and life opportunities of many of our citizens, a trend which deepened after the Great Recession of 2008, seriously undermining public confidence in the market economy and the institutions and norms that regulate it. Many of the older Western democracies, particularly in Europe, are now grappling with the legacy of 25 years of stagnant median wages, ageing populations, growing inequality and job losses (owing mostly to new technologies, but often blamed on imports and immigrants), and the political polarization and gridlock they have often engendered. Furthermore, the failure to solve these long-standing problems has undermined the legitimacy of our democracies, which are being challenged by resurgent nationalist, nativist, populist, xenophobic and even secessionist movements. In short, many of our citizens no longer see the LIO as the bedrock of their economic security and protection. Consequently, the biggest threat to the future of the LIO may in fact come from within our advanced Western democracies, more than from an increasingly assertive China or an irredentist Russia.

Finally, the LIO is often said to be in trouble because it is woefully incomplete. To some extent, of course, the LIO is still an aspiration, rather than a reality; the concept does not accurately describe how states behave, or how global governance really works. Most importantly, it is simply not the case that all nations today feel equally a part of, answerable to, or constrained by, a liberal order. In part, this is because the LIO was always seen by many not in terms of the provision of certain global public goods, but as the expression of US geopolitical interests or a specific ideological agenda (namely ‘neoliberalism’). In Western Europe, we were generally quite comfortable with the notion of the US

as benign hegemon, but in many other regions of the world a distinctly less sanguine view of US hegemony has often prevailed. Indeed, in many parts of the less developed world (Latin America, Africa, and Asia in particular), the LIO was often seen as more of a threat than as a source of security or protection. Difficult though this may be for some to accept, the LIO never achieved the universal acceptance which post-Cold War triumphalists in the West had aspired to. Nevertheless, criticism of the LIO should not be taken too far. Above all, it seems incontrovertible that, under its aegis, three quarters of the world economy has been aligned around a broad set of predicable norms, thereby creating a powerful gravitational pull towards stability at the centre of world politics. And even though the LIO undoubtedly served Washington well for many decades, it was always more than just a cynical cover for the interests of the US and its major allies in Europe and beyond.

Many observers claim the pandemic has accelerated the emergence of a fully-fledged multipolar world, which some see as a highly negative development, because they believe a LIO cannot exist in a multipolar context. Others, however, believe that we are witnessing the birth of an essentially bi-polar system, dominated by China and the US, which will not entirely displace other, lesser powers (as was also the case during the Cold War), though these will inevitably gravitate towards one of these two poles. John Mearsheimer, for example, has argued that we are already moving towards two “bounded” orders, controlled by China and the US respectively, both defined by fundamental security concerns, which will co-exist uneasily under a broader umbrella, a “realist international order”, which will deal mainly with economic issues.

Given the growing ideological (as well as economic and geopolitical) rivalry between the US and China, it could be argued that liberal democracies broadly face two options. The first would be to converge around a “thick but narrow” vision of liberal order, which will manifest itself in a dense set of agreements and shared commitments with other like-minded democracies. This approach has some potential, since six out of ten states in the world are currently democracies. Additionally, some scholars have argued that in many cases the cooperation of fewer than ten relevant actors may suffice to push through significant change at the global level. If this were the case, it might make sense to concentrate on forging “coalitions of the relevant”, which is perhaps the most viable future form of “minilateralism”.

It could of course be objected that the problem with this approach is that it would necessarily exclude some very powerful (and potentially disruptive) authoritarian (or illiberal) states such as China and Russia, without whose engagement it will not be possible to tackle the major global challenges we face, such as the struggle against climate change, nuclear proliferation or, as the pandemic has evidenced, global health crises. This could lead to the creation of a ‘thin but broad’ version of liberal internationalism, centred on a few overarching, more accommodating institutions, premised on less demanding obligations and commitments. The United Nations’ 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris climate agreement were perhaps early expressions of this vision.

## 1. Europe’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic

In the immediate aftermath of the outbreak of the pandemic, many identified this as a “make or break” moment for the European Union. Critics were largely justified in pointing out that the EU’s initial reaction was underwhelming: the EU’s “solidarity clause” (contained in Article 222 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union), which was designed to provide assistance to its members in case of “a natural or a man-made disaster” was never invoked, and while it is true that health is still a member state competence, it was conveniently forgotten that the EU already had an agency at its disposal—the European Center for Disease Prevention and Control—which spectacularly failed to prepare us for what was to come.

Despite this inauspicious start, by the summer of 2020 the EU and its member states had produced a coordinated response to the economic crisis triggered by the pandemic, adopting an unprecedented Next Generation EU financial package worth some €750 billion, which was to be embedded in the next multiannual financial framework (2021-27). While this may not have amounted to the “Hamiltonian moment” some had wished for (and which others may have

dreaded), it undoubtedly represented an ambitious response to an unforeseen calamity which threatened to blow Europe off course for decades to come. Additionally, after a hesitant start, the EU's vaccine rollout in 2021 appeared to prove that its internal heterogeneity was not incompatible with impressive levels of efficiency.

The pandemic prompted European leaders to take stock of their strengths and weaknesses, and to review their position in the international system. The reasons for this were manifold, but the behaviour of the world's major powers was undoubtedly one of them. According to a poll carried out by the European Council on Foreign Relations, the way the Trump administration responded to the pandemic seriously undermined the US's reputation and standing in Europe: 68 per cent of French and 65 per cent of Germans respondents claimed their opinion of the US had worsened, and only 1 per cent identified the US as their country's most important ally during the crisis. Interestingly, however, the pandemic also undermined China's standing, albeit slightly less so: 62 per cent of French and 48 per cent of German respondents said their view of China had worsened, and only 4% of French and 2% of Germans claimed China had been their most valuable ally.

Although dislike of the Trump administration was an important background factor, due to the pandemic European elites and public opinion appear to have concluded that the US is a less reliable partner than it once was; in particular, its efforts to undermine the World Health Organization when it was most needed, and to step up its confrontation with China at the height of the crisis, were generally deemed to have been highly irresponsible. Similarly, though, many in Europe also seemed to wake up to the fact that Beijing did not shy away from using its mask and vaccine diplomacy in a blatant attempt to take advantage of European vulnerabilities and widespread suffering. Together with its increasingly aggressive attitude towards Taiwan and its unashamedly repressive tactics in Hong Kong, this may have led many in Europe to conclude that China was finally showing its true colours.

In their own very different ways, the behaviour of both the US and China during the pandemic prompted renewed calls for greater European "strategic autonomy", which were also fuelled by the realization that we cannot rely on global multilateral institutions alone, however worthy of our support they may be. Originally, the "strategic autonomy" concept was largely limited to the realm of defence and security policy and sought to express the EU's aspiration to perform certain tasks without having to rely on Washington's support (or even blessing) to carry them out. However, the pandemic has made Europeans much more aware of their numerous vulnerabilities, and the consequent need to be far more self-sufficient; as a result, the demand for greater autonomy is now being applied to areas such as industrial and agricultural production, as well as scientific, technological, and digital policy. If adequately combined with the Next Generation EU package, this quest for greater autonomy could provide European integration with a new lease of life, offering it a fresh sense of purpose and direction.

## 2. Some tentative conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated (and aggravated) international trends that were already visible. Contrary to what some had hoped, it has failed to inspire a relaunching of the multilateral system (even though it was found to be seriously wanting), or a revival of cosmopolitan ideals; if anything, the opposite may have been the case. Additionally, it has fuelled Chinese self-confidence and assertiveness, while generating doubts about the US's ability to respond to an unprecedented challenge, which the Biden administration has not entirely dispelled. This is not to say, however, that the reaction of individual countries correlated directly with regime type, since some democracies responded far better than others, as was also true of authoritarian states; if anything, past familiarity with similar pandemics (such as SARS) may have been the key variable. The pandemic has at least reminded us that addressing major transnational challenges will require more international cooperation, norms, rules, and institutions, not less. Because of this, and given its founding philosophy and *raison d'être*, the EU will remain committed to furthering its multilateral agenda. At the same time, however, the EU and its member states will come under growing pressure to learn how to respond to escalating US/China rivalry, which will dominate world affairs for decades to come.