

American Elections and the Global (Dis)order

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Abstract

Donald Trump's unexpected victory in the presidential elections came as a great shock to liberal internationalist circles in the US and abroad. Whether Trump will string the liberal order that the US has largely created is without a plain answer. It is clear, though, that there is already significant erosion in the basic architect of global order. Detritions to the fabric of global order can be observed with respect to four interrelated developments: the exacerbation of security challenges due to proliferation and diversification of the regional and global destabilizing actors, the reversal of democratic and liberal values in the West, rise of illiberal democracies and competitive authoritarianism elsewhere, and finally, a UN system mired with serious shortcomings in representation, capacity and legitimacy. The international society must address this erosion of global order and the first step in that regard is coming to terms with the fact that "the world is bigger than five" not only in terms of the re-alignment of major powers, but also of the distribution of power along state/non-state spectrum.

Keywords: US hegemony, presidential elections, UN reform, global order, populism

Donald Trump's unexpected victory in the presidential elections came as a great shock to liberal internationalist circles in the US and abroad. Accordingly, some liberal pundits and commentators started to point it out that the Trump's triumph meant further erosion in the ideational/ideological nature of the liberal world order –probably the greatest since its institutional establishment in the aftermath of the end of the Cold War. The election in the US is all the more important, as it is not only the most powerful state in the world, but -despite claims on the contrary¹- it is the ultimate "hegemon".

The contents of all debates and controversies during the American elections and Trump's eventual victory have substantiated my earlier conviction that the world has been going through a "twilight" period. This observation stems from the increasingly elusive and ambiguous nature of the current global (dis)order. The cool breezes of anti-liberal, "illiberal", anti-globalist, anti-internationalist, nativist, sometimes xenophobic, protectionist and authoritarian tendencies have already been blowing from the many parts of Europe, let alone the non-Western parts of the World. Therefore, the electoral victory of a leader like Trump might simply be regarded a sort of "tipping point"!

Whether America will string the liberal order that it has largely created up during Trump's reign is a question already being discussed among American and international intellectual

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¹ Simon Reich and Richard Ned Lebow, "Influence and Hegemony: Shifting Patterns of Material and Social Power in World Politics" *All Azimuth* 6, no. 1 (2017): 17-47.

circles without a plain answer, but significant erosion in the basic architect of global order is clear and real. Detrition to the fabric of global order can be observed with respect to four interrelated developments. First and perhaps most alarming is the proliferation and diversification of the regional and global destabilizing units, i.e. states or non-state actors that the global security architecture has already been struggling to deal with. The second development is related to the slow but sure erosion of the liberal democratic values in the old, consolidated democracies, especially in Europe. The third is the rise of authoritarian regimes as centers of attraction in the international system. Finally, the erosion in the institutional capacity and legitimacy of the UN undermines the foundation of the global order.

The current global security system under American leadership has unfortunately not been able to live up to the global expectations in regard with the growing security challenges emanating from both conventional and transnational forces in the last decade. Russian invasion and annexation of Crimea as well as its destabilizing actions in the eastern part of Ukraine are against all established norms and rules of international law. Nevertheless, neither the global system nor the American-led NATO has been able to provide an effective way to counteract these actions. In a similar vein, the tools and methods of the Western diplomacy have succeeded nothing but the aggravation of serious problems in the Middle East in the last decades. The emergence of the ISIS in Iraqi and Syrian territories *per se* could be seen the concrete evidence for the terrible fiasco of the Western diplomacy in the Middle East in the last decades. The current “global fight” against the transnational terrorism and radicalism suffer from the same weakness of absence of cooperation and leadership in the world politics. The same is also true on the growing racist, xenophobic and Islamophobic populism that has appeared in almost all parts of the Western world.

The second development indicative of the ideational or ideological crisis of the liberal hegemonic order is the gradual erosion of the liberal democratic regimes, not only in the newly democratic or semi-democratic countries, but also in the “consolidated democracies” at the heart of Europe and the US as well. In the aftermath of the end of Cold War, the world has experienced a “global resurgence of liberal democracy” effecting even places where authoritarian governments in different guises had been quite widespread. That was very much in parallel with the declaration of the victory of the liberal values and democracy and “end of history.”² Though the pundits have not yet officially declared the end of the “third wave of democracy”³, it could be easily argued that “old democracies” in the Western Europe, such as Britain, Germany, France or Belgium, are currently suffering from growing political attractiveness of xenophobic, racist, nativist and authoritarian populist political movements and parties. No matter which sides of the national political spectrums these populist movements are located, mainstream democratic political forces have been encountering great difficulties in countering their effect. Perhaps, in some cases, these mainstream parties and actors fall prey to the increasing populist pressures. For example, imposing more restrictions on some religious practices of Muslim people living in the European countries is becoming quite widespread. Ban on *burkini*, a full-body swimsuit worn typically by Muslim women, by mayors of more than 30 towns in France, was the most visible and absurd one among all restrictions in this regard. It is even more alarming to witness that the mayors, most of who are from right-wing National Front Party, refuse to accept the ruling by the highest administrative

² Francis Fukuyama, *End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin Books, 1992).

³ Samuel P. Huntington, “Democracy’s Third Wave,” *Journal of Democracy* 2, no. 2 (1991): 12-34.

court in the country, which stipulates that mayors do not have the right to outlaw *burkinis*. The so-called “European values”, like tolerance to the others and multiculturalism, have all been the most precious export products of the “Judeo-Christian Western Civilization” until very recently. But they seem to have already become obsolete, outdated, very *démodé* and less politically attractive.

The constant flow of refugees and the shortcomings in the treatment they receive have just exacerbated the situation in the Western countries from bad to terrible. The banal fascist and authoritarian inclinations among civil and political societies in the Western countries have come up with the most outrageous arguments against refugees. They are called “intruders” and “potential terrorists,” who are on a cruise to destroy the Western civilization. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has even argued that migration is a form of “poison.”⁴ He seems to have convinced (or been convinced by) a significant portion of Hungarian population who voted against the settlement of refugees in Hungary.⁵ Sometimes, the poor treatment even took the form of inflicting physical violence to these violence-stricken people.⁶ The immigration and social cohesion has long been on the list of hard-pressing issues on European agenda, but the new inflow coupled with increasing extremism both in the Middle East and in Europe, brought about almost a rupture in these societies. It is longer possible to keep the façade of a harmonious Europe, let alone a cosmopolitan one. Such decline in European peace and prosperity is particularly telling about the prospects of the US hegemony, because European project was the most precious offspring of American-led global order.

Another important success of the new liberal global order has been resurgence of liberal democracy across the globe in the post-Cold War era. Many authoritarian regimes in Asia, Africa, the Latin America and the Central and Eastern Europe have realized a transition to democracy, taking the European democracies as role models. Therefore, it is not a surprising to see that the democratic erosion in the “consolidated democracies” also had a dramatic impact in these newer democracies. In the past decade, the moral authority of liberal democracy has come under a great challenge in many new democracies in different parts of the world. According to the most recent democracy/freedom indexes of there is a clear global orientation to “illiberal” and/or semi-democratic forms of political regime. For example, UK-based Economist Intelligence Unit reports that almost one-half of the world’s countries are democracies. However, the number of “full democracies” is particularly low at only 20 countries.⁷ Moreover, as the subtitle of their Democracy Index 2015 report, “Democracy in an age of anxiety” suggests, that number may continue to dwindle. Freedom House also sees diminishing prospects for democracy. 2016 is the 10th consecutive year of decline in global freedom. In the past decade, 105 countries have experienced a net decline, whereas only 61 had a net improvement in their freedom levels. In 2016, the number of countries that made gains has been only 43.⁸

⁴ Lydia Gall, “Hungary’s War on Refugees,” Human Rights Watch, September 16, 2016, accessed November 11, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/09/16/hungarys-war-refugees>.

⁵ Patrick Kingsley, “Hungary’s refugee referendum not valid after voters stay away,” *The Guardian*, October 2, 2016, accessed November 11, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/02/hungarian-vote-on-refugees-will-not-take-place-suggest-first-poll-results>.

⁶ Palko Karasz, “Camerawoman Who Kicked Refugees in Hungary Is Charged With ‘Breach of Peace,’” *New York Times*, September 7, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/08/world/europe/hungarian-journalist-syrian-refugee.html?_r=0.

⁷ “Democracy Index 2015: Democracy in an age of anxiety,” The Economist Intelligence Unit, accessed November 11, 2016, http://www.eiu.com/public/topical_report.aspx?campaignid=DemocracyIndex2015.

⁸ “Freedom in the World 2016: Anxious Dictators, Wavering Democracies: Global Freedom under Pressure,” Freedom House, accessed November 11, 2016, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2016>.

As the scholars of “competitive authoritarianism”⁹ truthfully point out new democracies have been under great pressure due to the growing attractiveness of strong leaderships with populist appeals. Although there is no clear-cut transition to a full-fledged despotic/authoritarian regime, these populist strong leaders easily curb some essential freedoms to suppress their political rivals and other opposition. Russia under Vladimir Putin is succinct example to this kind of political regime. What is more alarming to the liberal/democratic forces in the world is the fact that the political sphere of influence of these regimes have been increasing. For example, Russian influence has been expanding even in some members of the EU, where pro-Russian political parties have won the general elections. Rather than the US, or other Western democracies, these usually far-right parties and movements in Europe perceives Russian President Vladimir Putin as the epitome of a powerful, conservative leader who upholds traditional values and opposes the US. In 2015, Marine Le Pen, the leader of French party National Front, has led the campaign to create the Eurosceptic far-right faction Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF) in European Parliament. It now has 38 members from eight countries. ENF is just the last one in a string of pro-Russian factions such as British parliamentarian Nigel Farage’s Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy, or far-left groups such as the European United Left.¹⁰

The growing influence of authoritarian regimes is not endemic to Russia and its sphere of influence. The growing influence of China in the international economy is evident in almost all economic and financial measures. Perhaps, the most visible example in this regard is the Chinese currency, renminbi. Beating Australian and Canadian dollars; it has recently become of the top five most used currencies, and by 1 October 2016 joined U.S. Dollar, Euro, Yen, and Sterling in IMF’s Special Drawing Rights (SDR) basket.¹¹ SDR is an international reserve asset and inclusion of Chinese currency is a testament to China’s status as one of the most important actors in the international economy. In a similar vein, IMF’s 2010 quota and governance reforms which finally became effective in early 2016, gave emerging markets like BRICS more power and greater say at the institution.

China now has the third largest IMF quota and voting share after the United States and Japan. The IMF reforms again show increasing Chinese impact over the international economic and financial structure. One should keep in mind, however, despite China’s ongoing contribution to the consolidation of the existing system; it also seems construct its authentic economic and financial ecosystem through some new international initiatives such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and One Belt One Road initiative. While the former provides funds to the development of infrastructure and other productive sectors in Asia, and hence is an important generator of soft power, the One Belt One Road initiative is a giant strategic investment project connecting China and the rest of Eurasia through both land-based and maritime routes. While the Belt countries comprise of the historical Silk Road countries, the countries of Southeast Asia, Oceania, and North Africa will be bound by “21st Century Maritime Silk Road” operating through several contiguous bodies of water. If

⁹ Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, “The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism,” *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 2 (2002): 51-65; Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After The Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

¹⁰ “European Parliament adopts tough resolution on Russia,” EurActiv.com, accessed June 11, 2015, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/europe-s-east/news/european-parliament-adopts-tough-resolution-on-russia>.

¹¹ “IMF Adds Chinese Renminbi to Special Drawing Rights Basket,” International Monetary Fund, accessed November 11, 2016, <http://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2016/09/29/AM16-NA093016IMF-Adds-Chinese-Renminbi-to-Special-Drawing-Rights-Basket>.

China decides to (and is able to) come up with an alternative economic order, it may increase China's attractiveness, and could even hasten the current wearing down of the global order.

The final development related to gradual erosion of global order is the growing problems related to the UN system. The UN was created in the aftermath of the end of the Second World War by the victors of the Great War and therefore reflected the global political conjuncture of the time. However, it is evident from the above developments that the world has become a place that is much more complicated and complex, which makes it dangerous to be governed by a system constructed in 1940s. The UN had been many times paralyzed during the Cold War because of the hostilities and rivalries between the Western and Eastern blocs. Today, there is not an Eastern/Communist bloc and hence, no rival blocs in the world politics. Still the UN system fails to live up to the political expectations, and indeed falls quite short to address basic security needs and other regional and global problems. At the heart of the UN system lays the Security Council with five permanent seats. Whom to those seats were allocated essentially reflected what we had in the global state system when the UN was created. What we have been observing since the end of the Cold War though, is a much more dispersed distribution of political and economic power at the global level. The world is much more complicated at both state and non-state levels. While non-western states in Latin America, Asia and even Africa have started to consolidate their political and economic strength at regional and international arena; non-state actors, whether benign or malevolent, have come to a point where they can compete with the sovereign governments even in spheres deemed to be exclusive to states, i.e. military. The most horrible example is obviously the ISIS case.

The world leaders seem to have already abandoned their hopes and trust that the global and regional security problems could be solved within the current structure of the UN system. Therefore, new semi-global or pseudo-global "institutions" like G20, which was originally invented to deal with global financial issues, has increasingly been used as platforms to discuss the global and regional security issues and other problems. Thus, if a "hegemony" refers to a global leadership in terms of value construction, agenda setting, building global institutions, financial and economic governance of the world and providing a global security; we can easily talk about the deep crisis of hegemony in the current world politics and economy. However, a crisis of hegemony does not refer to a sudden end of the existing hegemonic system. This fact is particularly true for the financial and economic nature of the global system. Therefore, the international society must address this gradual erosion of global order with a long-term vision in mind. The first step in that regard is coming to terms with the fact that "the world is bigger than five" as it is repeatedly put by Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. This is true not only in terms of the re-alignment of major powers, but also of the distribution of power along state/non-state spectrum.

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