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Prospects for Multilateralism at the End of the Liberal Order

By Joel Ng

SYNOPSIS

The US withdrawal of support for multilateral organisations is impending, and short-term disruption is inevitable. However, the long-term solutions that generate international order will prevail if other states are bold in their thinking and persist in cooperation.

COMMENTARY

The US disruption of the Munich Security Conference may have caused the overlooking of a more globally significant US executive order (EO) signed by President Donald Trump on 4 February 2025, titled "[Withdrawing the United States from and Ending Funding to Certain United Nations Organizations and Reviewing United States Support to All International Organizations](#)".

In the first instance, the EO ordered a halt to US participation or funding to the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC), the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), and the UN Relief Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

However, the EO also mandated a review of all international organisations, conventions, and treaties to which the US belongs or provides support, asking whether they are contrary to US interests and can be reformed. A conclusion that they are against US interests and cannot be reformed will lead to a withdrawal recommendation.

Prospects for US Withdrawals

The US had already withdrawn from the World Health Organization (WHO) before the

EO. Where the US is not a member, such as in the International Criminal Court (ICC), it had taken even more drastic action by putting senior staff there on sanctions lists over the ICC's unfair warrants for Israeli leaders (according to the Trump administration). Familiar targets that have already drawn Trump's criticism, such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO), must be prepared to see US withdrawal.

Even the possibility of withdrawal from the [International Monetary Fund and the World Bank](#), both largely underwritten by US funding (of which previous administrations have jealously guarded their control), cannot be dismissed lightly. If one wonders what the current US administration's view is about multilateral agencies, one need look no further than how it has "reformed" the [US Agency for International Development \(USAID\)](#) "to ensure they are efficient and consistent with US foreign policy under the America First agenda".

Thus, the question of whether the organisation can be "reformed" should not be understood to be reformed in a rational optimisation sense, but one in which the US will push its levers of power to wholly benefit a narrow conception of its interests. As the example of NATO after the recent Munich Security Conference shows, "reform" will mean convulsions for everyone else. In multilateral institutions where some of these members include US rivals such as China, the prospects for the type of organisational change demanded by the Americans are slim.

The End of the Liberal Order?

Stewart Patrick called Trump's EO "[The Death of the World America Made](#)". It is unsurprising that Trump, who has railed against liberals domestically, should be seeking to dismantle whatever he associates with liberalism internationally. This challenge has been fundamentally different from the external challenges to the liberal international order hitherto put up by rising powers.

Whereas rising powers banged on the doors from the outside, the US was the creator and major underwriter of post-World War 2 multilateral institutions. This granted it control of them, but also the power to undermine them from within. While it always had that latent capacity, it never had the will until now. Thus, the collapse came swiftly within a month of Trump's inauguration.

In the short run, this will be a period of volatility as the organisations that provide essential services are afflicted by funding uncertainty. In the long run, the retreat of both the US security umbrella and its underwriting of global public goods calls for the stepping up of its challengers who aspire to global leadership.

...And Wither a Rules-Based Order?

It is now obvious that the US will behave like a pre-World War 2 great power and not adhere to the rules it had created. This upends the international rules-based order insofar as it overlaps with a liberal order that is now dissipating. The danger is in multiple states following suit as they see that the world's policeman is gone, and indeed, many states are already choosing this path as conflicts proliferate around the world.

Yet foreign policy analysis teaches that while international law usually lacks external enforcement mechanisms (especially at its inception), it proliferates anyway because it solves basic problems in relations between states. These include [reducing and deterring conflict](#), solving [coordination problems](#), [demonstrating commitment and credibility](#), which is important for states' international legitimacy, and providing [stability and predictability](#) to benefit their businesses and markets. Even colonial powers in history found that [the rule of law](#) was a better solution than having to put down uprisings in every corner of their empires.

The present US administration may believe it can solve its problems on its own or by bending others to its will, but while they determine this question for themselves, the rest of the world, especially its smaller states, cannot. Groupings, particularly through regions, will be necessary to sustain a critical mass that wishes for buffers against the coming tumult.

ASEAN's Experience

In this respect, ASEAN has always played a critical role for Southeast Asia. During the Cold War, it was formed to manage the potential for conflicts among its members. The conflicts at its borders were prevented from spilling over, internal conflicts were managed, and ASEAN did this without a rules-based system and indeed emphasised informality as a virtue.

As ASEAN sought to be more economically integrated, it created a "rules-based community" for the benefit of trade – giving businesses certainty and clarity about regionalisation – but limited the imposition of rules to a pace comfortable for all. Moreover, it preserved the agency of its leaders to discuss all issues at the summit level, remaining unbound by ideological or political stipulations aside from peaceful conduct.

Even as more ambitious economists criticised ASEAN's rule of law framework as being too insipid, it has survived challenges from the backlash against multilateralism because it took care [not to override the sovereignty considerations of its members](#). As the liberal order unravels, ASEAN's internal formula remains sound but will undoubtedly come under pressure, as all multilateral organisations have. Therefore, it must redouble efforts to achieve cohesion and unity to protect its regional project from the vicissitudes of great power politics.

There is also latent potential for creation as we are freed of the strictures of the old order. Trump's EO called for a complete review of its participation in international organisations and the question of their reform. ASEAN, too, must consider how it will engage with a US administration that is unconvinced by rules or past practices and frequently skipped ASEAN summits.

Arrangements like the East Asia Summit and ASEAN Regional Forum must take the opportunity to shake up their formats to more effectively address the issues of the day. Their memberships contain states that could impact regional security, but these actors must be convinced of the need and utility of doing so through these forums. Loosening the formats of these forums to enable direct and focused discussions on their primary concerns should be considered – and the use of Track 2 to facilitate open discussion

while avoiding confrontation will be necessary. The international order can prevail if states are bold in their thinking and persist in multilateral cooperation.

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