

## The Demise of Multilateralism Is Overstated



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The liberal international order created by Europe and the United States from the ashes of World War II is unquestionably under significant strain. It has been for years – all of the twenty-first century, really: America’s redirection after the attacks of September 11; bitter divisions over the 2003 Iraq war; economic collapse and slow recovery from the 2008 financial crisis; the trap door of Greek insolvency opening under the European monetary union; recrudescence of the Russian threat evident in Putin’s darkening reign, the Zapad war-games, and invasions of Georgia, Crimea, and Ukraine; deep suspicion of American intelligence agencies in the aftermath of the Snowden revelations; an unprecedented wave of refugees unleashed by the Syrian war; terrorist attacks; the rise of China as a global power to which Western economies are attracted and that seeks revision of

European and American-dominated international institutions; Britain’s rejection of continued union with Europe; Turkey turning away from the West from within the NATO alliance; and the spread of populism within electorates of the West – most worryingly of all in America’s election of President Donald Trump, a vulgar populist who gives every indication of not just disbelieving the major tenets of the liberal international order, but actively working to dismantle it. These have not just been the ordinary wear and tear of history’s passage, abrading order; they have been monumental challenges. So it is not surprising so many of us who value the security, prosperity, and community the existing liberal order provides for us agonize about sustaining it.

What is both striking and too little appreciated, though, is how well the order has actually held up. The monetary union has survived, with Greece in the Union. Angela Merkel managed the amazing feat of moving fast enough to stay ahead of a market run on the currency yet slowly enough the German electorate didn’t balk at the sticker price of preserving the eEuro. The Greek people have endured staggering hardship under German-led austerity but have repeatedly chosen to stay in the EMU rather than leave it. Ireland, Spain, and Portugal have fended off corresponding fates by swift and sound economic policies that garnered widespread public support. And Europe accepted, even largely welcomed, German leadership of the Eurozone that emerged from the crisis. Tensions over the Iraq war did not fracture the NATO alliance. Western publics have not wilted in the face of Russian revanchism, but have pulled together to deploy NATO troops to our most exposed allies’ territories and reinforce our commitment to common defense. Intelligence cooperation has been sustained, despite embarrassing revelations, because leaders made the

case for its continuing importance. Britain's decision to leave the European Union did not precipitate a rush to the exits by other countries; seemingly the opposite as publics weigh the disruption and costs of Britain's choice. The financial crisis did not lead to beggar thy neighbor trade or monetary policies; both the institutions and the informal cooperation of central bankers developed creative tools for keeping economies afloat and coordinated remarkably smoothly. Turkey was willing to make a deal with Europe to impede refugee passage. For all of Donald Trump's brash talk, he has been a threat only to the liberal trading order, and that is proceeding without the U.S.

In fact, it appears that the liberal trading order is being sustained almost without American leadership. Other countries that are also its beneficiaries are finding their voices in the silence America's failure has created. Japan and Australia have determined to sustain the Trans-Pacific Partnership despite America's withdrawal from it. Canada and Mexico have made a common front in NAFTA renegotiation and are pledged to continue its provisions irrespective of America's choices.

Another important buffer against threats to the liberal order has been American federalism. President Trump withdrew from the Paris climate accords, but twenty-three governors – including the governor of California, with its 33 million people and the world's fifth largest economy – have committed to abide by them anyway, as have the CEOs of numerous influential companies like Apple.

On security, the area most difficult to sustain without American leadership, the Trump administration has so far made decisions in line with traditional American policies: seeing through to successful conclusion the Afghan and Iraq wars, focusing narrowly on the anti-ISIS fight, continuing deployments to NATO's eastern states, committing to the defense of Korea and Japan against North Korean threats.

While I'm sure all of us would have preferred not to have the liberal order put to such stern tests, we ought perhaps to give ourselves more credit for its resilience in the face of so many diverse challenges over the past nearly twenty years. Our countries built a system of political relationships and institutions that are persevering and that our publics are largely upholding. Even as we worry and work to sustain it, we ought not lose sight that we are succeeding in that crucial task.