

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Liberty, Global Stability and Nationalism

The 20th century witnessed two World Wars, the Holocaust and the rise of atheistic communism. That century changed the role of the United States in world affairs. Since the administration of George Washington, the US largely followed the doctrine of isolationism, which was forcefully articulated in the 1823 Monroe Doctrine. But it was Woodrow Wilson's decision to enter World War I and his subsequent 14 Points, which championed the principle of national self-determination and set the agenda for the 1919 Versailles Treaty, which challenged this isolationism. The US was going to "make the world safe for democracy." The 1920s and 1930s saw a return to US isolationism, but, after Pearl Harbor, FDR led the international response to Hitler in Europe and Japan in Asia. After World War II, the US did not withdraw back into isolationism, but emerged as the superpower of the world, committed to building a post-war world based on order, a rules-based economic world of openness and trade, and an international organization (the United Nations) that would be a check on the ravages of ethno-nationalism and its complement militarism.

One of the best examples of this new order the US put together after the devastation of World War II was the Marshall Plan. The US was now committed to rebuilding Europe and Japan around a new vision. The old order had seen open markets give way to protectionism and poverty. Ethnic nationalism gave way to violence, misery and the horrors of two world wars and state-sponsored genocide. Led by the US, a new order for the world was knitted together. Senator John McCain summarizes this vision: "This new order rejected the principles that led to the failure of its predecessor. It was based not on ethno-nationalism, spheres of influence and might-makes-right imperialism, but rather on universal values, human rights, rule of law, open commerce and national sovereignty." Rooted in the principle of national self-determination, this post war order set up by the US produced the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, NATO, the United Nations, trade agreements that promoted open trade not protectionism and an adherence to the importance of human rights. But this world is now coming apart! "Citizens of many nations have turned away from universal values and toward old ties of ethnicity, race and sectarianism. They have become increasingly resentful of immigrants, refugees and minority groups. They have turned inward economically and prioritized protectionism over integration. They have warmed to authoritarianism and embraced strongman politics."

The evidence for this remarkable abandonment of the post-war order is seen in the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom, populist movements in Germany, France, Poland and Hungary and the Trump phenomenon in the United States, which is centered on an "America First" foreign

policy, rooted in nationalism and protectionism. In a broader sense, the world seems to be embracing new forms of disorder: revolutions, insurgencies and counterinsurgencies. Genocidal civil wars in Syria and Yemen for example continue unabated. “Massive cultural, social and economic disruptions have swept every corner of the globe,” facilitated often by the ubiquitous presence of the social media. Many now argue that we are witnessing a profound shift back to the world before World War I: “An anarchic international arena in which every sovereign state, large and small, has to rely on armed strength, diplomacy and alliances for security. Ideology no longer matters, but power does—and the big powers inevitably dominate the small. In this new era, might inevitably makes right” [quotation by Arthur Herman of the Hudson Institute].

Clearly then, a xenophobic nationalism is replacing the post-war order. Globalization and technology are no longer positive developments but seen as pernicious forces that take jobs and destroy local communities. Indeed, British historian Tony Judt has written that “We have entered an age of insecurity: economic insecurity, physical insecurity, political insecurity.” This new nationalism exploits these insecurities, which are further fueled by social media. A strong ethnically pure culture and a powerful government are perceived as the only mechanisms that can restore security and safety in this global village. The leaders of this new order are Xi Jinping of China, Vladimir Putin of Russia and (for now) Donald Trump of the US. Putin desires to restore the glory of czarist Russia resting on the twin pillars of the powerful state and the Russian Orthodox Church. Xi of China is using his increasingly autocratic power to preside over China’s rise as a hegemonic power. His “One Belt, One Road” vision entails a \$1 trillion infrastructure project that will knit China with the Middle East and Europe in a way never before imagined. Trump’s “America First” vision is not based on “making the world safe for democracy” but rather based on the use of American military and economic power to accomplish its self-centered goals. In the world envisioned by these three nations, competition replaces cooperation in economic and in military categories.

The world order set in place after World War II is coming apart. In the Middle East, nation states are disappearing, replaced by ancient tribalism and clan loyalties rooted deep in the region’s history. The benefits of open borders with lower tariffs and growing international trade are being challenged by a narrow nationalism, a dangerous isolationism and a short-sighted introversion. The old order was built on globalization, free trade and a commitment to democracy—but no longer! Upheaval, chaos, disorder and dysfunction now characterize our world. In the midst of the collapse of the old, there is absolutely no agreement on what the new will look like. As Christians, we are reminded that our security and our stability are sourced in God, not the world. Psalm 46 is a comforting reminder that “God is our refuge and our strength. An ever-present help in times of trouble.” In this re-ordering of the world, we must keep that truth in mind.

See John McCain, “Defend the Blessings of Liberty” in *The World in 2018 (The Economist)*, p. 44; Arthur Herman in the *Wall Street Journal* (20 December 2017); and the holiday essay on “Nationalism” in *The Economist* (23 December 2017), pp. 53-58.