



# Trump and the Prospects Of An Illiberal International Order

## Murray Carroll

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### **Donald Trump's presidency has called into serious question the role of the US in the Paris Agreement, the direction of international cooperation on climate change, and the role of the US in the liberal international order.**

Just one year ago, the world was celebrating the adoption of the Paris Agreement as a new foundation for global cooperation on climate change. The North/South firewall that created asymmetrical obligations under the Kyoto Protocol was removed, leaving in its place, a level playing field upon which to build efficient international regulatory cooperation. As Prime Minister David Cameron *remarked*, “What is so special about this deal is that it puts the onus on every country to play its part.” The more optimistic among us were already *discussing how the voluntary aspects* of this hybrid agreement could be strengthened to advance the effectiveness of the treaty regime.

The election of Donald Trump as the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, however, has called into serious question the role of the US in the Paris Agreement, the direction of international cooperation on climate change, and moreover, the role of the US in the liberal international order and its cohesiveness moving forward. On climate change, for example, *Trump and his cabinet* vacillate between outright denial and “lukewarmism” (open to the possible existence of climate change but denial of its importance or the urgency of a response).

As such, most of us who take international cooperation seriously are filled with more than a little anxiety and/or dread at the prospect of a Trump presidency

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but it is important to view Trump as a symptom of a systemic problem: a struggle at the heart of liberal democracy.

## The past and future of liberal democracy

Winston Churchill's remark that, "the best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter" gets to the heart of the post-Cold War rebalance between the paternalism of liberal autocracy (or undemocratic liberalism) and the recent growth of populist illiberal democracy.

As Fareed Zakaria reminds us, "The tension between constitutional liberalism and democracy centers on the scope of governmental authority. Constitutional liberalism is about the limitation of power, democracy about its accumulation and use." The purpose of liberalism's controls on democracy is to create a long-term structure that is resistant to the short-term solutions of individual leaders to placate the short-term thinking of the people. The liberal international order seeks to do the same between states.

The recent pendulum swing towards illiberal democracy reflects the shortened time horizon of the electorate in the West and their resentment of the longer time horizon of the elites necessary for a liberal international order.

## Foreign policy and the willingness of the electorate to pay for it


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Trump has been able to tap into a populist resentment of the costs Americans are paying to support international public goods, in particular a global trade

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regime that is perceived to have benefited Mexico and China at America's expense and "collective" security arrangements in Europe and Asia that have provided US allies a far greater peace dividend at a disproportionately lower cost than for Americans. For many Americans, ungrateful allies but also America's challengers are free riding on an international order shouldered by the American taxpayer.

There are, of course, virtually no benefits and considerable costs for America to withdraw from the international economic order or its security alliances, but Trump may be able to increase the cost for other states of participating in the international order secured by the US.

The Republican Party has been trying to limit disproportionately high financial obligations to the UN since the 1980's, but with an electorate choosing to give them control of the Presidency, Congress, and the Supreme Court, the credible threat of US isolationism has not been this great since the rejection of the League of Nations.

By threatening to walk away from international agreements that provide others benefits reliant on American beneficence, Trump, who has made a career out of [rent seeking](#) in real estate development and personal branding, will seek to extract greater rents from the international order.

The danger for Trump is that reduced obligations for Americans, or unreasonably high costs for free riders, create incentives for them to seek other sources of global leadership. However, [there is reason to believe](#) that Japan and South Korea see much larger costs from Chinese domination; middle-eastern allies see much higher costs than benefits from a US withdrawal; and

post-modern Europe will realize it is mostly defenseless without American security guarantees.

None of this “deal making” will improve the lives of the Americans who voted for Trump, but it will likely **force US allies** to come to terms with their contribution to the peace benefit they’ve enjoyed for so long.

### **Paris and domestic politics**

The **Trump administration** has begun the process of rolling back the implementation of President Obama’s Clean Power Plan and is likely to reduce donations to international climate funds. In the short term, this will appease many in the Republican Party who feel that responsibility for addressing climate change creates short-term costs that disproportionately fall on Americans and provides benefits primarily to non-Americans. That said, these policy changes are likely to result in more coal plants outside the US than within it.

**Article 28** delays the possibility of withdrawing from the Paris Agreement for four years, but the US could repudiate the ratification of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, a process that would only take one year. As the Paris Agreement creates no binding mitigation obligations for the US, it is not clear what the Trump administration gains from walking away from either treaty, especially when it is clear that the US would lose a **seat at the table** it could use to stall the progressive development of the regime.

With former Exxon CEO **Rex Tillerson** as Secretary of State, the US is likely to continue to support the transition away from fossil fuels (or decarbonization of the global economy) but work actively to slow the pace of implementation to a crawl.

## **Contagion: from a domestic politics issue to an international problem**

In the West, the long-term thinking of liberal democracies facilitated increased prosperity among partners in the international order.

And that prosperity empowered undemocratic liberal elites to expand national rights and responsibilities and translate them into international rights and responsibilities. Tacit approval for these measures, however, was reliant on continued domestic prosperity. But as that prosperity has faltered, it is unsurprising that support for liberal internationalism has declined among the electorate.

The vote for [Brexit](#) typifies the impulse of the people to support measures described by illiberal democrats as necessary to regain control of their uncertain economic and cultural destiny. The EU's migrant crisis and austerity measures from the financial crisis have strengthened illiberal nationalists across Europe, weakening the normative power of the liberal autocracy at the heart of supranational Europe.

In all cases, the excesses of undemocratic liberalism, followed by reduced domestic prosperity, have eroded [popular support for international cooperation](#) where the domestic costs are perceived to exceed the benefits.

## **Conclusion**

Trump's formal repudiation of the TPP and rejection of the TTIP reflect the shortened time horizon of an electorate unwilling to invest in potential future economic gains, but these decisions don't inherently threaten the international economic order. If, on the other hand, Trump imposes [45% tariffs on imports](#)

from China (another ill-advised campaign promise) or walks away from US security guarantees these actions would present serious systemic risks.

It's worth considering, however, that by painting the worst-case scenario of US withdrawal from the international order so vividly, Trump has highlighted the benefits provided by American leadership that are frequently taken for granted.

In seeking to protect US sovereignty (by reducing what are viewed as asymmetrical obligations) Trump may reinforce the importance of reciprocity in international cooperation and diminish the desire to internationalize Western liberal values. An international criminal court with the support of the US, China, and Russia would be stronger than the current European incarnation. The UN Security Council would be stronger if each member of the P-5 paid the same proportion of UN dues, and the UN General Assembly (where two-thirds of the members collectively pay less than 2% of the total UN budget) would be more legitimate if it were unable to determine the UN budget with a two-thirds voting majority.

Scaling back liberal excesses need not result in authoritarianism, isolationism, or gunboat diplomacy. If addressed prudently, illiberal democratic rebalancing may produce more sustainable liberal democracies and a better liberal democratic foundation for international cooperation.

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