

The Difference Between a Rules-Based Global Order and Western Liberal Hegemony

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A standard phrase used by the small number of fading 'Western' countries – former colonisers all – is a 'liberal rules-based international order'. Those who are unfortunate enough to live in such a country have become used to the mantra, along with the fiction that the 'whole world' agrees. The 'world' in question, of course, includes only the small 'Western' club, with only 14 percent of the global population. What about the remainder, the vast majority of countries and peoples of the world? They are either coerced into following the rules imposed upon them, or to being blamed for 'not following the rules'.

The way I have summarised this position indicates that it contains an irresolvable paradox: Western liberal hegemony and a rules-based international order are completely incompatible with one another.

Let us begin with liberalism, which may be defined as the 'small community of the free and its dictatorship over the vast majority who are unfree'. I have glossed this definition from the profoundly insightful work by Domenico Losurdo, *Liberalism: A Counter-History* (2011). Losurdo shows in careful detail how the three countries where liberalism first took root – the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America – were central players in the slave trade. They based their initial capitalist wealth on slavery and were reluctant indeed to give it up. Crucially, they came to define the 'freedom' of liberalism on its contrast with the slaves who were certainly not free.

The basic reality has continued throughout the history of liberalism. While liberal ideologues like to propagate the myth of ever-expanding 'freedom and democracy' around the world, the reality is that the 'club of the free' remains remarkably small in number, while the vast majority is quite unfree. It matters not whether we consider the internal dynamics of countries like the USA, where a sea of poverty surrounds islands of immense wealth, or international relations, where the dozen or so 'Western' countries treat the rest like children or neo-colonial masters.

By now it should be obvious that Western liberalism can be only a hegemonic force, unilaterally imposing its will on unwilling others. It cannot produce a rules-based international order.

The question remains: what is meant by a 'rules-based international order'. Simply put, it means a global system that is democratic, respects each country as equal, does not seek to impose hegemony or interfere in the internal affairs of other countries, and thus operates in terms of the mutual respect of sovereignty. Clearly, this very idea is anathema to the former colonisers who take a 'holier than thou' approach to their former colonial subjects.

As I write in the early months of 2021, after a long year in which many contradictions have come to the fore, in which the arrogant countries of the 'West' have been brought to their knees, this rules-based international order has become clearer. A few key features: the point made by the Russians concerning the end of the liberal project has become an obvious fact; China has stepped onto the centre of world stage in so many ways, from selfless assistance to developing countries struggling with pandemic responses to the provision of free vaccines to many countries in Africa, Central Asia, South-East Asia, and Latin America; Iran has emerged as a stable country in the Middle East; and countries like Venezuela, Syria, and the DPRK (North Korea) have shown how weak the 'West' and its efforts at 'regime change' have become.

Perhaps the key turning point has been the fruition of Eurasian integration, with China and Russia at the core. True, China and Russia have become increasingly close over the last two decades, but events of the last year have accelerated the process. With the support of the majority of countries in the world, they are setting out to hold the last colonial power – the USA – to account for its rogue activities that disrupt global stability and cause untold suffering and death. We may see the process in various ways, whether the next phase of the anti-colonial project (so Losurdo), or the reality of a multi-polar world (so the Russians), or the rise of a community of common destiny for humankind (so the Chinese).

The weakness, outrage, and disbelief in Western Europe and North America that the world has turned out so is clear. As yet, they cannot come to terms with the new

reality, but they are now becoming peripheral countries in a multi-polar world. As Igor Diakonoff once pointed out in his *Paths of History* (2003), the western peninsula of the Eurasian landmass and its liberal project has always been an anomaly in global history. What we have at last is the emergence of a properly rules-based international order.