

Original Paper

Liberal Internationalism in the United States: Current Crises and Prospect Forecast

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Abstract

Liberal internationalism is an international order that the United States has long advocated. The aims of liberal internationalism are expanding democratic practices and free trade, defending democracy from its rivals while protecting and promoting human rights. This essay will expound the definition and development history of liberal internationalism, analyze the current crisis it is facing, and point out it in combination with the current American foreign policy that although there are domestic and international challenges, the United States still has the strengths to promote liberal internationalism and maintain the existing liberal international order considering the historical background, comparison of national power, maturity of existing international order and the will of rising power. The Biden administration's current foreign policy also shows that the United States is continuing to pursue liberal internationalism.

Keywords

Liberal internationalism, United States, Biden

1. Definition and History of Liberal Internationalism

Three authoritative scholars once defined liberal internationalism. Daniel W. Drezner (2006) pointed out that liberal internationalism is a marriage between the pursuit of liberal purposes (security, free trade, human rights, rule of law, democracy promotion, etc.) and the use of institutional means to pursue them (multilateral institutions of various stripes—not only the UN, but NATO or the G-7 as well). The concept of liberal internationalism is often associated with former US President Woodrow Wilson, thus sometimes being referred to as “Wilsonianism”. The aims of liberal internationalism are expanding democratic practices and free trade, defending democracy from its rivals while protecting and promoting human rights (Hoffmann, 1995). Well-known liberal internationalism advocate John Ikenberry (2018) held that liberal internationalism refers to a kind of hierarchical international order

with liberal characteristics after World War II. The United States plays a leading role in providing rules and stability, and this leading role is composed of its unparalleled power and its liberal principle of governance.

Liberal internationalism stems from the idealistic tradition of the founding of the United States. Since WWI, liberal internationalism in the United States diplomacy has experienced three stages: the Wilson period, the Cold War period and the Post-cold War period, during which, there exist differences in their approaches, but there do not exist differences in essence.

The first period is the Wilson period. The Fourteen Points Plan put forward by Wilson marked the initial formation of liberal internationalism. It marked that liberal internationalism had become an important part of American diplomatic thought and an important ideological tradition and cornerstone of American diplomatic grand strategy. Wilson emphasizes collective security as the norm of conduct for sovereign States and the establishment of a peaceful international order on that basis (Ambrosius, 2002). So Wilson worked to build the League of Nations and advocated free trade, democracy, and national self-determination. At the same time, the United States must abandon isolationism and pursue internationalism in order to promote the establishment and maintenance of the liberal international order. It can be seen that the most primitive liberal internationalism is the product of the reconstruction of the old international order led by Europe by the rising United States with classical liberal principles. The American political scientist Hans Morgenthau has argued that Wilsonianism is the symbol of liberal internationalism.

The second period is the Cold War period. During the Cold War, the United States shifted from the collective security to the alliance security built around the democratic unity in the Atlantic region, and from the “one world” system to the cooperation system of great powers. The liberal international order of this period dominated and governed by the U.S. The United States has become not only a sponsor and major player of the order, but also its owner and operator. The vision of a liberal order became a liberal hegemonic order. This, to some extent, undermines the principle of sovereign equality of Wilson’s liberal internationalism, and the international system presents the characteristics of hierarchy. In this period, liberal internationalism has strong realist overtones.

The third period is the Post-cold War period. During the Cold War, the U.S. liberal hegemonic order existed only within the Western world. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the United States became the sole superpower, and the liberal international order expanded from the US-centered alliance of Western countries to non-Western countries, and the “internal” order became the “external” order. In this period, the liberal international order is less hierarchical. Liberal internationalism advocates the establishment of an international order based on the basic principles of free markets, international institutions, security cooperation and democratic communities. However, to promote so-called democracy, the United States has conducted military intervention in Iraq, Libya and other countries. The norm of inviolable state sovereignty was challenged widely, leading to numerous humanitarian interventions conducted in the name of universal human rights.

2. Current Crises and Challenges of Liberal Internationalism

Since the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century, liberal internationalism has faced great challenges and crises. These challenges come from both home and abroad (Kupchan & Trubowitz, 2007).

2.1 *The Rise of Nationalism and Populism*

In terms of domestic factors, first of all, the rise of nationalism and populism. Joseph Nye (2016) believes that the threat to liberal internationalism mainly comes from the United States itself, which are nationalism and populism. The populist political forces represented by Trump came to power in 2016 and openly resisted the grand strategy of liberal internationalism. Since taking office under the banner of “America First”, President Trump has withdrawn from many international institutions and cooperation agreements, including the TPP and UNESCO. His pursuit of unilateralism, protectionism and isolationism has caused chaos in the international order. Trump believes that pursuing liberal internationalism has high costs and relatively low benefits, while pursuing realism has low costs and relatively high benefits. Hal Brands pointed out that in the more than 70 years before Trump came to power, the United States pursued a dynamic and ambitious world construction project abroad. However, after Trump took office, the United States faced unprecedented challenges since the end of the Second World War.

2.2 *Overconfidence of the Appeal of Democracy*

Secondly, the United States overestimated the appeal of its democracy. Tony Smith (2017) believes America’s problem as being too confident, too self-righteous about the universal appeal of democracy, too often assuming that American interests and values dictate its right to invade countries that fail to protect the human rights. Beate Jahn pointed out that the root of the crisis of liberal internationalism lies in exceptionalism and arrogance of the U.S. because the United States always ignored the interests and basic national conditions of other countries and forcibly promoted its liberal political and economic values to the world.

2.3 *The Shake of Unipolar Dominance*

From the perspective of international challenges, first of all, the unipolar dominance of the United States has been challenged. After the end of the Cold War, the international pattern changed from the bipolar system to the unipolar system with the United States as the dominant power. As the world’s sole superpower, the United States vigorously promotes liberal hegemony. However, the failure of Middle East Partnership Initiative, the 2008 financial crisis and the rise of the non-Western world, especially China, have put the liberal international order under serious threat. China’s strong rise is bound to call for reform of the liberal international order (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2016).

2.4 *The Global Spread of COVID-19*

Secondly, the global spread of COVID-19. The global spread of COVID-19 has exposed the long-standing loopholes in the liberal international order. The lack of communication and cooperation among countries has delayed the effective control of the crisis. The core of liberal international order is

the global governance mechanism or international institutions. In the face of COVID-19, the United States did not assume the responsibility of a global power, did not provide sufficient public goods to countries with poor health conditions, and even decided to withdraw from the WHO. It intensified other countries' distrust of the United States and made the international institutions incapable of functioning effectively.

3. The Reason why the United States will Continue to Pursue Liberal Internationalism

In the face of these crises and challenges, will the United States continue to pursue a liberal international grand strategy? Considering the historical background, comparison of national power, maturity of existing international order and the will of rising power, the United States still has the strengths to promote liberal internationalism and maintain the existing liberal international order.

3.1 Historical Background

First of all, liberal internationalism originated from liberalism, which is the gene of the United States. The mentality of dominating the liberal international order and remaining to be a world leader has affected the U.S. political elite for more than half a century. Since the Second World War, liberal internationalism has always been the grand strategy guiding the US foreign policy, and the two parties have reached a consensus on this issue. Liberal internationalism in any period is characterized by universal values (individualism, freedom, democracy, equality, rule of law, etc.), and its essence is to obtain, maintain and increase America's own power advantage and pursue the maximization of national interests. The coming into power of Trump and other nationalist leaders will have an impact on liberal internationalism, but will not fundamentally subvert it.

3.2 Comparison of National Power

Secondly, the United States is still the world's no.1 superpower. Brooks and Wohlforth (2016) believe that there are two preconditions for the United States to promote liberal internationalism: superior power and strong will to lead the order. For a long time to come, the United States will remain the number one power in the world with the most powerful comprehensive national strength. Apart from the United States, no major country can promote multilateral cooperation around an open and orderly vision. As former President Obama said, "the United States will continue to lead the world for another one hundred years," which shows the United States still has a strong will to lead the world.

3.3 Maturity of Existing International Order

Thirdly, the existing international order is relatively mature. Since the WWII, the United States has led the construction of a liberal international order in line with national political, economic and security interests. The United States stabilizes economic order through IMF, World Bank and WTO, promotes political order through the United Nations, and maintains security order through NATO, the US Japan Alliance, etc. Almost all countries in the world have become part of the liberal international order so the U.S. will not give up hegemony easily.

3.4 Will of Rising Power

Finally, as a rapidly rising state, China has no intention of overturning the existing international order. China is committed to the UN-centered international system and the international order underpinned by international law. After the cold war, China has integrated, safeguarded and reformed the current international order. President Xi once said China is a participant, builder, contributor and beneficiary of the current international system. China remains a developing country that takes economic development as its primary goal and adheres to the path of peaceful development. First, China mainly uses institutional complementarity rather than institutional competition to correct the shortcomings of the existing international system. In recent years, China has put forward a series of new mechanisms and initiatives, but these are designed to make up for the shortcomings of the existing system, not to compete with it. The AIIB, for example, is a useful complement to the existing international mechanisms, especially the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. The Belt and Road has also boosted the economic development of countries along the routes. Second, China is trying to achieve a peaceful rise. On the one hand, China has put forward the idea of building a new model of major-country relationship with the United States. On the other hand, China is committed to developing global partnership under the principle of non-alignment. China has never sought to challenge or overturn the existing international system. To reform and improve this order does not mean to start all over again, but to make it more just and equitable. China's acceptance of the existing international system is increasing, and it is gradually showing a trend of deep integration.

4. Biden's Choice of Liberal Internationalism

In terms of specific policies, the current foreign policy of the United States is still full of liberal internationalism, and it has not been completely abandoned. In US policy towards China, for example, populism and nationalism have not fully prevailed. US policy towards China remains restrained and pragmatic. During the Obama administration, the United States has relied on China in economic and international affairs, and counterbalanced China in security and diplomacy. China is both a "strategic cooperative partner" and a "strategic competitor". During this period, China-US relations were relatively stable, with no direct conflicts that were too reckless. Both countries managed their differences properly, and China-US relations on the whole developed steadily. During the Trump era, the US policy towards China has undergone a significant shift from both cooperation and competition to a zero-gravity state focusing on containment, resulting in direct conflicts between China and the US in many fields. During his term in office, Trump pursues unilateralism, adheres to "America first" and regards China as the number one security threat. A series of policies to suppress China have severely tested Sino-US relations, showing signs of stagnation and even regression, and the bilateral relations have fallen to the freezing point after the establishment of diplomatic ties. When the Biden administration took office, it adopted a compromise approach to the policies of the previous two administrations. It will not continue the reckless path of the Trump administration, nor will it return to

the Obama-era strategy of “engagement and pressure” to form a new China strategy oriented toward competitive coexistence and aimed at a new balance. In the view of the Biden administration, the rivalry between China and the United States is not without limits. The competition between China and the United States should be limited, not unlimited. After the Biden administration took office, the general atmosphere of China-US relations has improved compared with the late Trump administration, and the hostile attitude towards China has been reduced. Although it is not easy to reverse the deteriorating trend of Sino-US relations in the short term, in the long run, the Biden administration provides an opportunity for the development of Sino-US relations to ease and adjust, and the construction of a benign competition-oriented interaction model (competitive coexistence) may be the main trend of the development of Sino-US relations in the next four years. On the whole, US policy towards China is controlled and restrained. Although there have been major setbacks in the Trump presidency in recent years, it will be pulled back to a restrained and pragmatic foreign policy, so that the United States will not act out of line unilaterally. The United States still has the intention to bring China into the liberal international order, not to engage in bottomless confrontation with China.

If the foreign policy of the Trump administration has negatively affected the liberal internationalism of the United States, the foreign policy of the Biden administration has the color of liberal internationalism. Multilateralism is back, protectionism and isolationism are receding. Biden believes that the United States must deal with other countries from a position of strength, whether in the competitive, cooperative or confrontational parts of international relations. Power status is America's biggest common denominator in its relations with other countries, especially with China. The “position of power” is not “hard power” or “America First” but more soft power. It includes alliance strategy, multilateral system, human rights diplomacy and domestic revitalization.

4.1 America's Alliance and Partnership System

America's alliance system is an important source of its power. While the Trump administration tends to ignore its Allies when dealing with China-US relations, the Biden administration needs to unite Allies and partners to deal with challenges in international relations. The effect of this overlapping power will make the United States even harder to ignore in the world. On the basis of bringing Allies into the liberal internationalist order, Biden also found ways to bring other countries into the order and manage them through the international system to better implement liberal internationalism.

4.2 Returning to International Organizations and Multilateralism

Trump has withdrawn from many international institutions and cooperation agreements, including the TPP and UNESCO. His practice of unilateralism, protectionism and isolationism has caused chaos in the international order. After a series of actions to withdraw from the group and break treaties, when the United States withdrew, leaving a power vacuum; Biden returned to multilateralism, stressing the need for the United States to reassert its leadership role in multilateral international organizations, including NATO and the European Union, to further liberalize the world system.

4.3 The Values of Human Rights and Democracy that the United States Espouses

Trump is not interested in human rights issues and often deals with China on human rights issues. And the Biden administration believes that the United States must speak out on human rights issues because that's where its strength lies. This is very much in keeping with the characteristics of liberal internationalism, protecting democracy from opponents while protecting and promoting human rights. Human rights and democracy are very prominent features of liberal internationalism. To protect human rights and democracy is to protect liberal internationalism, and to advocate human rights and democracy is to advocate liberal internationalism.

4.4 Improvement of Domestic Governance

America's position of power also depends on improved domestic governance. The first step is to strengthen the competitiveness of American workers and companies, strengthen American research and innovation, and level the international playing field for American workers. If the United States cannot do this, it will be difficult to convince the public, to persuade other countries to follow liberal internationalism, to trust the United States as the leading initiator of liberal internationalism in the world. The second need is to improve American democracy. If Americans themselves do not have confidence in their government and institutions and are divided, it will greatly weaken the position of the United States in promoting liberal internationalism.

This shows that the foreign policy of the Biden administration has a strong liberal internationalism. After the low ebb of the Trump administration, liberal internationalism is reinvigorated.

4.5 Reasons Why Biden Pursue Liberal Internationalism

For this change, we can analyze the reasons from three levels: individual, national and international system. On a personal level, Trump is a businessman, while Biden is a traditional politician with long experience in politics. The two modes of thinking and problem solving are significantly different. Trump is characterized by strong moral leadership and always returns to the basic needs, desires and values of his followers. Biden is a transactional leader, trading jobs for votes and grants for campaign contributions. Trump shows a strong anti-establishment tendency, advocating unilateralism and America first, while Biden's team is a typical establishment, valuing US-led globalization. At the national level, in the four years since Trump took office, the United States has been deeply divided, with social tears and the rise of populism. Due to the impact of the novel coronavirus epidemic, the government has failed to control the epidemic effectively, resulting in obvious unemployment and accelerated economic recession. Arguably, the Trump administration left the Biden administration a mess at home. Therefore, the Biden administration needs to focus on solving domestic problems (containing the COVID-19 pandemic, reviving the economy and improving race relations) to overcome the aftereffects of Trump's "negative legacy." At the international level, over the past four years, China's economic aggregate has increased from about 60 percent of that of the United States to over 70 percent, further narrowing the power gap between China and the United States. The external environment of the United States has seriously deteriorated. Driven by the "America First" philosophy,

the Trump administration has taken a brutal approach of “leaving if not in accord” with international institutions, setting a historical record of the US withdrawing from the community. Trump blatantly launched a trade war against a number of Allies, withdrew from the Paris Agreement and the JCPOA, imposed sanctions on the German-Russian Nord Stream II gas pipeline project, unilaterally withdrew troops from Germany, and put pressure on Japan and the ROK on sharing military expenditures. These measures damaged the interests of its Allies and aroused their serious dissatisfaction with the US. The degree of estrangement between its Allies and the US was almost unprecedented. The US changed from the founder and defender of the existing liberal international order to the biggest destroyer, and its reputation and credibility in the international community suffered a heavy blow. The Biden administration urgently needs to address this issue and restore the liberal international order and America’s national reputation. This series of personal, national and international changes and differences forced the Biden administration to formulate a new foreign policy and re-promote liberal internationalism in order to improve the international competitiveness of the United States again.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, although there are domestic and international challenges, the United States still has the strengths to promote liberal internationalism and maintain the existing liberal international order considering the historical background, comparison of national power, maturity of existing international order and the will of rising power. The Biden administration’s current foreign policy also shows that the United States is continuing to pursue liberal internationalism.

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