

Imagining a World without the US at its Center: Reducing the Levers of American Disruption in Africa and Europe

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An essay

by

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Introduction

The architecture undergirding international relations and economics since the end of the Second World War is rapidly coming apart. While the current American president is the most visible actor violently tugging on its seams, both developed and developing world actors have, for years, registered complaints and dissatisfaction with the system, believing it to be inherently unfair. At the extreme end of the political spectrum, both camps have voices calling for a wholesale dissolution of the system. None of these voices has, however, proffered the vaguest outline of a superior replacement. To heed them is to risk abandoning an imperfect “practical” in search of an elusive “perfect” that may never materialize. Such an outcome will have gravest repercussions among the world’s weakest economies, especially in Africa. Therefore, this essay argues that the much-maligned international order deserves a second chance, *with a catch*, – it must evolve without a central role for its erstwhile greatest benefactor.

The United States is too big, powerful, and important to render inconsequential. US politics, however, have become increasingly volatile for its position within

the system. Reducing US centrality means reducing the levers of American influence on global affairs, thereby rendering the system more resilient to the whiplash due to polarizing convulsions in American politics. Current American foreign policy forces the rest of the world to consider a future previously unimaginable – a system without the United States at its center. A foreign policy that makes no concessions, honors no rules, makes no distinction between friend or foe, dishonors treaty obligations and economic commitments, ultimately carries the greatest existential risk to the system. It is therefore reasonable for the rest of the world to assign an increasingly peripheral role to the disruptive actor for the common good.

A History of Disaffection with the Rules-Based Order

The US, under President Trump, has reprised the role that the West had previously accused China of playing. The core of the Western case against China is that China has flagrantly and repeatedly flouted the rules of the international order – to its advantage. There is an assumption that a clear system of known and knowable rules govern how states conduct themselves in politics and commerce. In

this telling, China's actions are not victimless, its rise has come at the expense of competitors – particularly the West. Accusations of Chinese subsidies, intellectual property theft, overcapacity and “debt trap” are all versions of this allegation. Marco Rubio levied the charge in its crudest form. In his confirmation hearing as Secretary of State, Rubio argued that “China has lied and cheated its way to superpower status at the expense of the United States.”ⁱ To the West, then, the system is being gamed, rendering it unfair.

China and the rest of the developing world make a similar accusation – that the global governance architecture is inherently unfair, reflecting as it does, the world of 1945 when many of today's nations were yet colonies. They argue that the so-called rules-based order does not reflect reality and what rules exist have always been selectively enforced. For example, Western complaints about Chinese subsidies find few sympathetic ears in the many developing countries where they blame part of the collapse of the WTO Doha Round in 2011ⁱⁱ on US and EU insistence on maintaining agricultural subsidies.

Yet even its worst critics will acknowledge benefits of this international system, warts and dysfunctions, notwithstanding. China's accession to the World Trade Organization is arguably the greatest external influence on transforming its economic fortunes. The openness and predictability of the international trading system enabled globalization which yielded increased access to FDI, job creation, technology transfer, and lower consumer prices across the developing world. The extent to which these benefits could have been fairer is an open debate, and many in emerging and frontier economies could list a myriad of problems with the system. What cannot be denied are the benefits that the system has delivered.

Resistant to Change

From the vantage point of developing countries – the United States and other Western democracies have remained resistant to amending the system. President Trump and a large segment of the American population, however, see things differently since he has justified his tariffication of international affairs by what he perceives as a system that victimizes the United States and has been “taking advantage of” the United States. Across Europe, there is also an emerging and increasingly popular repudiation of the universality of values and norms embraced over the last fifty years – especially norms around migration and asylum. In their telling, the rules as they are, disadvantage European societies, imposing an unfair burden on them. So, while neither group – except in some extreme corners – is calling for wholesale dissolution of the system, none seems to think it works as intended to.

Each side may very well get its wish as the much-maligned system, currently undergoing seismic disruptions, may ultimately collapse. Many argue that scrapping the entire system and starting from scratch is what the world needs as its current governance structures have not been fit for decades. But one would do well to heed the age-old admonition to “be careful what you wish for, you might get it.”

Possible Future Scenarios

Current trends could lead to several possible outcomes, as author Minouche Shafik observes in Project Syndicate, a non-profit publishing platform.ⁱⁱⁱ The world, according to her analysis, could degenerate into a system where raw power becomes the ultimate arbiter. Examples for this, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Rwandan adventurism in the DRC, and the UAE kingmaking support for a faction in the Sudanese civil war, will not be aberrations,

but the norm in this world. The second possibility is a fractured world where regional hegemony is the law over their respective regions – China over Asia, the United States over the Western Hemisphere, Europe will be its own thing without a true hegemon, Africa will be up for grabs between Europe and China. There is still yet the third possibility of devolution into trading blocs as the foundational pieces of the new order. In this arrangement, the AfCFTA, the Euro zone, RCEP, Mercosur, USMCA and a yet-to-emerge economic zone for the rest of Latin America and the Caribbean, negotiate the rules and norms governing economic and political life. But suppose the EU–Mercosur agreement is any indicator. In that case, these blocs will invariably attempt to replicate the same benefits the current system bestows by signing waivers and agreements between and among themselves. In the current system, disagreement with one partner leaves options with others, but such options may no longer exist. It is improbable that the next iteration of a world order emerges without significant dislocation, higher transaction costs, duplicative arrangements and suboptimal outcomes that overwhelm what benefits it confers, unleashing buyers' remorse not dissimilar to sentiments in the UK after separation from the EU.

We have not reached that point. The current chaos unleashed by President Trump's disavowal of this system's putatively shared values and norms should provoke a reassessment of whether the system in a version of its current form is worth salvaging. This author remains convinced that a wholesale reconstruction of the system is not guaranteed to deliver superior outcomes than its previous iteration.

Origins of The Rules Based Order

A World War One Era Prime Minister of France, George Clemenceau, reportedly complained, "generals always prepare to fight the last war, especially if they won it". However, his complaint does not only apply to wars. It is reasonable for people, either as individuals or as a collective, to emerge on the other side of a tragedy to attempt to avoid the conditions that led to said tragedy. The determination to avoid those errors is naturally much stronger in the period immediately following the crisis and diminishes over time. A generation or two later, their descendants question the necessity of those institutions without irony. This is true about today and the era immediately after World War II.

The system created after World War II reflected the militarism that led to war and the economic practices leading up to the war. Many of its architects had been scarred by both the war and the Great Depression. Tariff increases in the United States and retaliatory tariffs from other countries, a weak international institution (the League of Nations) which could not "avert the cycle of protectionism" and currency devaluations aggravated the economic crises of the 1930s. According to the IMF "Global trade volume fell by 25 percent between 1929 and 1933, with nearly half of this decline attributable to higher trade barriers... Although protectionism did not cause the Great Depression, higher trade barriers exacerbated it and, most importantly, worked to choke off recovery."^{iv}

The United Nations, the Bretton Woods institutions, NATO and the raft of norms that govern international affairs today were born in this context. The idea of the European Project – an integration of European economies to prevent another global conflagration from Europe – is all a result of "preparing to fight the last war". These institutions and the global

architecture in which they were created were never perfect or designed to be, and as the world they were created to serve changed, they should have changed. But no one gives up power and privilege unilaterally. Social processes become path-dependent, and inertia builds into the system so that any change is perceived as a violation by those for whom the system has worked so well.

In fact, John Ikenberry argues that the emerging system – the rule-based order emerged with “a kind of western liberal democracy component on top of those more basic fundamental institutions, sovereignty and global multilateralism.”^v Old stakeholders gave themselves the role of “patrons and curators of a system where we have gone beyond what existed in earlier eras. Thus, their repeated assertion of some other actor “violating” the rules-based order, even for actions they themselves have repeatedly done.

Developing world contention that the system reflects the preferences of its founders is not without merit. Rules, as Malcom Chambers argues, “do not necessarily have a positive value. Rather, their worth depends on the extent to which they serve the interests and values of the states which sustain them.”^{vi} American influence on this order, from its beginning until now, has been focused on shaping it to the advantage of the American economy.

For as long as the rules of this order served the interests of those who created and sustained them, the incentive to defend them and treat them as sacrosanct, persisted. New actors were accommodated insofar as their entry advanced the interests of these states.

The Rise of China and the Challenge to the Systems’ Original Patrons

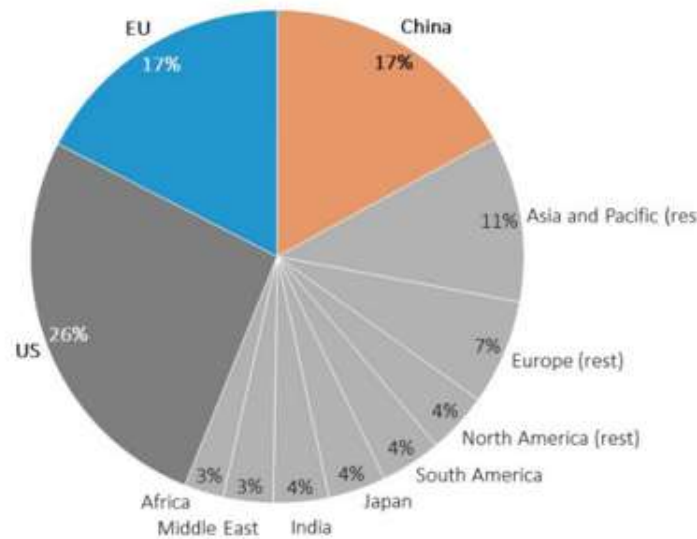
The system remained materially unresponsive to developing world

demands for change. It faced no consequential challenge until the rise of China. When China was simply a location where manufacturing was cheaper, environmental regulation was laxer and the source of cheap electronics and consumer goods, it posed no threat to the system.

When China began appropriating the perks and benefits of a rule-maker, its presence and rise became a threat to the “international system”. The Draghi Report notes, “The ECB finds that the share of sectors in which China is directly competing with the euro area exporters is now close to 40%, up from 25% in 2002. The EU’s share in world trade is declining, with a notable fall since the onset of the pandemic.” It is hard to be a stalwart defender of a system, which one believes no longer serves one’s interests. But this was not always the case, since the same report states, “Between 2000 and 2019, international trade as a share of GDP rose from 30% to 43% in the EU, whereas in the US it rose from 25% to 26%.”^{vii}

In the United States, a Carnegie Report on US foreign policy asserts that the gains from globalization are concentrated in the hands of “the nation’s top earners and multinational companies and aggravated growing economic inequality at home.”^{viii} So dominant is China’s presence in manufacturing that, per UNIDO, at current rates it will be singularly responsible for 45 per cent of global manufacturing in six years.^{ix} A pall has fallen on the West. The system has not changed, its pre-eminent beneficiaries have simply seen their positions erode. Western disaffection with the current order and insistence of Chinese rule-breaking is primarily driven by losing previous privileges as the system’s founders and curators. The idea that a world order in which the US, with 4.2 percent of the global population, has 26 percent of global GDP and Africa with 18.3

FIGURE 1
Share of World GDP
GDP at current prices, 2023



Source: IMF, 2024

percent of the global population and 3 percent of global GDP is unfair to the US is ludicrous.

India, with 17.7 percent of the global population, only surpassed the UK in GDP in 2022, although the UK has only 68 million people (less than 1 percent of the global population). Yet it is not Africa, India, and the rest of Asia that are clamoring for breaking up the entire system. It is the United States, whose President is so aggrieved by what he perceives as an unfair system that he is willing to destroy the entire system.

Neither side stands to gain from the dissolution of the existing order. While tearing down an existing system can be done in a matter of weeks, building a superior one from scratch might take an eternity.

That the United States, which has benefited the most from a system shaped to advantage its economy, is leading the charge to destroy the system, forces the rest of the world to contemplate the previously unimaginable – a global system without the United States as its fulcrum.

An Unreliable Guarantor

The same argument the West previously levied at the Chinese is now directed at the United States under Trump. In his 2025 Munich Security Conference speech, the German President argued that "A lack of rules must not become the model for a reorganization of the world...It makes a difference when the leading democracy and world power says: We can do without rules." ^x

There are some, in both the United States and Europe, who see this as an aberration – that the world will return to some kind of normalcy after Trump, but they deceive themselves. At a private event on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference, a former European Commission bigwig described Trump as arguably the most consequential politician of his generation. He noted that Trump had changed the language of the discourse and made it possible to say and do in the public sphere what was heretofore unimaginable. This author agrees that Trump has, thus, so shifted the discourse as to permanently alter what is normal, making it difficult for

a successor to return to the pre-Trump status quo.

The Biden administration kept most of Trump's tariffs on China and added some.^{xi} It was the Biden administration that refused Nippon Steel (out of Japan, an ally) authorization to purchase US Steel. Biden, not Trump, decided what technology allied nations and industries would be allowed to sell to China – even when these choices went counter to allies' economic interests.^{xii} That the United States, under Trump, would make consequential decisions about a war on European soil without the courtesy of forewarning or consulting the Europeans is as definitive a statement as possible that the 80-year assurance of the American security blanket is broken. This cannot have gone unnoticed in Seoul, Taipeh and Tokyo. In the Asia Times last year, Dnyanesh Kamat echoed a commonly accepted sentiment in Asia that “America is unlikely to be a reliable ally no matter who occupies the White House.”^{xiii}

In Africa, the statement was even more abrupt and cruel. Because American development assistance to Africa is dominated by health care, it carries life and death implications for its beneficiaries. A cursory look at the USAID development portfolio in Africa would have made this clear to a high schooler. So complete is the disregard for Africa, these programs were halted regardless of their consequences on lives there. When waivers were issued for the resumption of life-saving drugs, it was a cruel joke since the staff to process the waivers had been laid off or placed on administrative leave. Even the most aid-dependent African countries want to transition away from this dependence eventually. It is equally valid that US taxpayers reserve the right to end this assistance and direct their tax dollars elsewhere. However, as the German President noted, it cannot be a world

without rules. There was an orderly way to review and end those programs. The Trump administration, however, chose chaos. Many USAID programs are negotiated to last multiple years, because many African countries plan their budgets around a medium-term expenditure framework (MTEF).^{xiv} An MTEF is usually a 3-year spending program for national and provincial governments. Ministries of Finance and Development Planning attempt to coordinate their MTEFs with development assistance. The Trump administration abruptly ended these programs in the middle of MTEFs, leaving their putative African partners no wiggle room – especially as most of them struggle with the high risk of debt distress, high inflation and ballooning costs of living. It is hard to justify this as a necessary component of “cutting waste.”

However, this is not simply about the Trump administration. It was the Biden administration that expended no political capital toward the reauthorization of the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) – the centerpiece of US–Africa trade and commercial relations over the last two decades. It is now plausible that AGOA is not renewed when it expires this year. After almost a decade and a half of American politicians warning African governments about establishing close economic ties with China, those governments were simply abandoned as a side-effect of America's toxic domestic politics.

Many in Africa also see this as a one-off anomaly and that America will return to “normal”. This is not advisable – none of Trump's actions would be sustainable without a permissive Republican-controlled Congress that has granted the administration free rein to repeatedly appropriate legislative prerogatives.^{xv} The Trump administration's actions enjoy broad support from a not unsubstantial segment

of the American population. Eighty years of serving as a fulcrum of the international system may have taken its toll and the Americans are asking for reprieve. For the system's stability, the rest of the world must indulge them by relieving them of the burden the Americans now consider onerous.

The Three-legged Stool

Over the next four years – each region will reassess its exposure to the United States and take steps to reduce it. In Europe, it will be an increase in European defense spending and a security policy distinct from NATO's. In Africa, it has to be an increase in social spending and underwriting the cost of public goods, especially in health care.

An independent Europe will introduce the most stability to the system as a peer to the United States and China. The triangle is the simplest geometric shape that ensures stability on uneven surfaces. In the emerging multipolar world, a third node of global power creates better stability in the system. Europe has the wealth and economic basis to be that node, but over the last seven decades Europe has accepted subsuming its interests in America's. Former U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, presciently spoke of a day when this would come to an end. He predicted a day when a crop of American leaders and a large part of the voting public would have no formative ties to the Cold War and on that day they would question the logic of underwriting the cost of European defense.

In private conversations at the Munich Security Conference, many European leaders seemed clear-eyed. There was an acceptance among a plurality that perhaps 80 years of American security guarantee was enough and that it was an American prerogative to end it. An entire event discussed a European Defense Union,

distinct from NATO. Some of the ideas were surprisingly pragmatic. There was a conclusion that all 27 EU member states would not agree, so a "coalition of the willing" could be the founding members with room for later joiners.

The most significant lever of American influence on European life is security. Whether Europe ultimately creates a defense union or not, an arrangement where its defense is financed independent of the United States reduces the levers a future American leader could tilt to destabilize Europe. The combined defense spending of the EU27 plus the UK is still lower than Russia's. The point is not to decouple from the United States; the economic and cultural ties run too deep. As argued earlier, such policy aims to protect European stability from the vagaries of polarized American politics.

In Africa, that lever is primarily USAID's financing of the African health sector, and for a few African countries, access to the US market through AGOA. Every African leader, policymaker, and researcher has known for decades that the continent's inability to fund human capital has remained a persistent short- and long-term liability. In the short-term, it exposed the continent to the vagaries of policy shifts in donor countries – none as abrupt and destructive as the most recent under the Trump administration. However, in the long term, without adequate investment in health care and education, Africa's young and growing population evolves into a liability and not an asset.

Reducing American leverage will thus present a challenge in Europe and Africa. It does not get any easier in Asia, where America's presence is a hedge against the Chinese behemoth or in Latin America where access to the US market remains a lifeline for some economies (Mexico, Dominican Republic, Nicaragua and Peru)

or specific sectors like agriculture and manufacturing. However, for each region, the next four years must reassess those links and building resilience must be considered either through new partnerships or hard choices in reallocating existing resources.

A World in Peril

There is a scenario where the reduction in reliance on America leaves the world more volatile. This is a world where the loss of the US security guarantee in Europe triggers Japan to create a credible deterrent to Chinese adventurism in defense of expansive interpretations of its territorial limits. Nothing short of a nuclear Japan will present such a credible threat. Peace between South and North Korea can only be secured in strength. South Korea will also feel compelled to develop a credible deterrent to the north in the form of becoming a nuclear power. What becomes the basis for sanctions on Iran and its nuclear ambitions? And why would the Saudis abandon a similar viable deterrent? Nuclear proliferation with simmering regional tensions presents a witch's brew of a dangerously unstable world – for all, including the Americans. Half of Tesla's global sales come from vehicles manufactured in China. Apple's global dominance cannot be separated from its relationship with Foxconn. The valuation of America's largest firms is not simply driven by domestic demands, but by an assumption that they retain access to global markets. America's extensive economic relationships with the rest of the world were among the most compelling arguments for its global role. A receding American presence from the center is an acceptance of a relatively poorer America.

Conclusion

At the end of the Second World War, belligerents on all sides (voluntarily and involuntarily) agreed to design a global order to prevent a third conflagration. The Bretton Woods system and the current international order are vestiges of that commitment. Over time, as the world changed, new entrants demanded amendments to the system, and disagreements remain about the degree.

As the rest rose, especially in China, the dominant position of the previous beneficiaries eroded at an alarming pace. War and economic disruptions in other parts of the world sent millions of migrants seeking better opportunities in Europe and the United States, raising doubts about the universality of previously accepted principles. As politics shift ever rightward in this new reality, every side seems dissatisfied with the system, although none proposes a superior alternative. The system's most dominant actor has consequently become its most disruptive – forcing other members to actively consider if the US should remain at the center.

The promise of collective security, evidenced in post-WWII institutions it spurred, is that we inherited each other's strength and weaknesses. Financing climate action in the world's poorest economies or underwriting the cost of disease surveillance in "last mile" regions were never altruistic. It was an investment in collective security. But we have a United States that now repudiates that promise. The rest of the system must now rearrange around a new locus and slowly reduce the levers of the most disruptive actions of the United States. There is no guarantee that this new, less US-centric system works, but it presents greater stability than what the world has to currently endure. ■

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