

Liberal Values and the Liberal International Order:

Limits and Future Direction

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Professor Joseph Nye in 2017 ever wrote an article titled “American Leadership and the Future of the Liberal International Order.”¹ In that article, he listed three possible challenges to a U.S.-led liberal international order - economic and financial capability, interventionism, and domestic political division. According to his observation, the real challenge to a U.S.-led liberal order among these three would be of domestic division. In other words, the real challenge to American leadership in a liberal world would come from the U.S. inside such as the domestic political division and the rise of populism, rather than from its outside like the threats from other powers.²

Given the strength of the U.S. power in a number of core areas including the economic, military, and technological aspects of the U.S. power as well as its soft power, Nye argued that a U.S.-led liberal international order would continue. Yet he also indicated that the liberal order could be altered in certain ways. One of the phenomena could be that, with the rise of other powers and the complexities that could generate, the U.S. would feel more difficult to organize actions. Another phenomenon under a new liberal order is that, with part of the power being transferred from states to non-state actors alongside the advancement of information technology, there could be more unfamiliar complexities for governments.³

While agreeing with the above assessment on the possible phenomena to appear under a new liberal order, this analytical paper would meanwhile focus on the exploration of values and their impacts on a future liberal international order. To do so, it would assume a view that the values for driving changes and forging a future liberal order might be enriched and be more pluralistic alongside certain non-western values with a liberal nature possibly gaining more influence on the global stage.

Among a number of challenging factors to the liberal international order, apart from what having been examined by other observers, this piece would assume that the way how liberal values have been promoted has significantly affected some people’s understanding and impression to liberal values themselves, as well as to a U.S.-led liberal order; and these kinds of understanding and impression could still generate a challenging effect to the U.S. aspiration and effort in facilitating a new liberal order.

Over the past decades, the promotion of liberal values and of a liberal order has generally borne a purpose of serving the U.S. strategic interest. Yet in the process of doing so, numerous repercussions have also been arisen on both the domestic and international levels. This paper will begin by briefly analysing the origin of liberal values; then it will assess the repercussions emerged in the process of promoting liberal values; and finally, it will try to foresee how a future liberal international order might be like. The purpose of doing this analysis is to see whether there could be a prospect for states, in particular, the major powers, to jointly forge and sustain a new liberal international order.

On the Liberal Values

According to Professor Francis Fukuyama, classical liberalism emerged in the European continent in the late 17th and 18th centuries, and was created to serve as a solution for addressing religious conflicts, as well as for peacefully dealing with problems raised in the pluralistic societies. Modern liberals like John Locke, instead of linking the liberal doctrine closely with politics or religion, sought to honour life itself and to take liberalism into a realm of mainly dealing with private matters. The interpretation to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” stipulated in the Declaration of Independence can be traced to this type of modern liberal tradition. Around the same time, the liberal tradition in continental Europe had been developed toward an even deeper meaning, which not only served as a mechanism for managing conflicts, but also as a means for protecting “fundamental human dignity.”⁴

Human dignity, in line with the Christian tradition, was “universally shared and made human beings equal in the sight of God.”⁵ By the Enlightenment age, “the capacity for choice or individual autonomy was given a secular form by thinkers like Rousseau (‘perfectibility’) and Kant (a ‘good will’), and became the ground for the modern understanding of the fundamental right to dignity written into many 20th - century constitutions.”⁶

From the above narratives, we can see that the evolution of the liberal doctrine in the early ages had been mostly closely connected to the west. Therefore, liberal values nowadays are usually perceived by many as western values. Nevertheless, in reality, numerous thoughts and values of being liberal in substantial terms are not solely western-related.

According to Fukuyama’s observation, “the most fundamental principle enshrined in liberalism is one of tolerance.”⁷ Throughout the human history, a broad range of values and thoughts, which also recognize the significance of inclusiveness or tolerance in helping manage diversities and differences in both private and public affairs, did not derive from or were created by the west. For instance, the Chinese value of “Harmony/Coexistence but not Sameness/Uniformity” or of “A Community with A Shared Future for Mankind” can be

understood as such.

In this regard, from the conceptual or theoretical perspective, liberal values appear to have more relevance to the west, yet in substantial terms, liberal values should be connected to a wide variety of civilizations and cultures, even though there wasn't a concept of liberalism created by the non-western world back in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Linking liberalism with individual humans, liberal values recognize every human being's equal rights in freedom of belief, of expression, of association, and of assembly.

In terms of the liberal doctrine's relevance to domestic politics, some usually think that liberalism parallels with a democratic political system in a society. While according to Fukuyama's investigation, "liberalism is connected to democracy, but is not the same thing as it is".⁸ A democratic regime may not be liberal - today's India can be considered as such; or a liberal regime may not be a democracy - Germany in the 19th century belonged to this category.⁹

With regard to liberal values' connection to international politics, the promotion of liberal values is mostly related to globalization and the forging and sustaining of a liberal international order, under which, numerous international governmental and non-governmental organizations, transnational corporations, and other range of transnational actors join their forces together with state actors to promote regionalism, multilateralism, and international cooperation etc.

From a conceptual perspective, liberal values weigh liberty and equality, and uphold a principle of inclusiveness or tolerance. Yet, the practice of liberalism in many occasions appears to have gone to a different direction.

Issues Raised in the Process of Practising Liberal Values

According to Fukuyama, within the U.S. society, both the left and the right have been critics of and raised various concerns to liberal values. The right accused liberal values of having undermined national identity, as well as the shared values and culture of a particular community; while the left complained that equality empowered by the law does not mean equality in real life. For instance, discrimination and other forms of injustices have appeared frequently in the liberal societies. In the meantime anyway, "those injustices have become identities around which people could mobilize."¹⁰

Though there are differences between the right and the left in their criticisms to liberal values, generally, they do share a structural similarity over this matter – which is that "liberal society does not do enough to root out deep-seated racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination, so politics must go beyond liberalism".¹¹

In addition to the above, the promotion of liberal values has generated big social, economic, and cultural impacts on certain groups of people. It has also affected significantly of domestic politics in many ways. Discrimination and the rise of populism cannot be separated from it. The following part will discuss various impacts of it in more details.

From the economic perspective, the liberal doctrine appears to have overvalued the market role in handling economic and financial activities. Observers generally believed that the 2008 financial crises were caused by deregulation and a lack of proper state intervention in core financial and economic activities.

While certain countries believing in the efficiency of a full market-driven economy, China has developed a different model, which allows both the state and the market to have a play in economic activities, and let the Chinese market open progressively. Due to the application of a slow and incremental approach, China had avoided being hit as hardly as its developed counterparts had during the 2008 financial crises.

By drawing on the lessons learned from the Asian financial crises, the 2008 global financial crises, and other series of repercussions generated by deregulation, as well as by taking into account a broader context of the domestic and international situations in the post-pandemic era, states will have to rethink about how to make a proper balance between the market role and government intervention in economic activities.

In the case of China, to accommodate the changing domestic and international environments, China has released a dual circulation economic policy, which basically means that, while continuingly being committed to opening-up, China would prioritize its domestic circulation and meet its domestic demands, and in the meantime, seek to make domestic and international dual circulations reinforce each other. This dual circulation pattern can be a most recent example to show how the Chinese government attempted to seek a balance between domestic market and international market through policy intervention in order to alleviate the possible repercussions and damages in the post- COVID-19 pandemic period.

Another issue concerning the economic impact of promoting liberal values is of inequality. Alongside the globalization process, the unregulated and fast liberalization and privatization of certain industries in some developing and developed countries during the 1980s and 1990s had led to the huge and fast accumulation of resources, capital, and profits by large corporations, powerful individuals, and other forms of big sectors, as a result of that process, inequality and the gap between the rich and the poor had become major concerns for policy-makers. China, like many other countries, also had to face the inequality challenge.

Apparently, the repercussions led by globalization and liberalization have not only significantly affected developed countries but also developing ones. Thus, when globalization and liberalization are entering a new stage now, the issue of how to promote a more inclusive and balanced growth and make the growth benefit as more people as

possible should become one of the primary concerns for world leaders. In recent years, we have seen a worldwide rising of populism. The inequality factor should be one of the main contributors to it.

From the social and cultural dimensions, the consequences of promoting liberal values are closely connected to the economic impact of doing that, which has led to the declining social status of certain group of people especially in the western societies. Apart from that, immigration also has made a great number of people feel that their shared tradition, values, and culture have been threatened. Thus, many have faced an identity crisis. After all, the social and cultural impact of promoting liberal values is also of a key contributor to populism and domestic divisions.

Furthermore, from the political aspect, the alliance between liberal values and the democratic system is designed to facilitate a platform for major political parties, based on debates and discussions, to secure consensus on issues concerning the countries' core interests. Nevertheless, very often the intensive debates and discussions, instead of securing or implementing consensus, have led to more delays and more divisions among the parties.

In the case of the United States, being unable to agree on certain measures and policies timely as well as not being able to enforce properly of the secured measures have caused a series of delays in addressing the COVID-19. Now, concerning the election, though the election is over, it is not certain what is going to happen for some time to come. Divisions among the political parties and among the people could be difficult issues for the United States to deal with in a long term.

Overall, from the above analysis, we can see that the promotion of liberal values has generated big economic, social, cultural, and political impacts on different societies of the world. The negative repercussions have led to divisions and the rise of populism, which in turn have posed a threat to the current liberal international order.

In the case of the U.S., Nye argued that the rising populist politics could be a major threat to a U.S.-led liberal international order in the future, as the populist politics could affect the U.S. readiness to lead on a number of issues such as climate change.¹²

In response to the challenges led by the rise of populism, the U.S. government has taken a series of measures including tightening border control and the immigration policies, encouraging the U.S. companies to move back to the U.S., waging trade wars against foreign countries, and limiting transnational communications and exchanges in various ways.

However, given the close interconnection and interdependence of different parts of the world facilitated by the advancement of technologies, it is hard to believe that a protectionist approach could work out well to help address the populists' movement. To properly manage the dilemma between the rising populism and the continuing promotion

of liberal values, more targeted domestic economic policies and measures to meet the concerns of populists may need to take into account. Apart from that, enhancing governance capacity at all levels of governments and promoting social cohesion, inclusiveness, and unity among the people and groups coming from a wide variety of racial and cultural backgrounds should also be advisable from a long-term perspective.

The final point concerning the impact of the liberal doctrine is of legitimacy - more precisely, the legitimacy of the liberal international order driven by liberal values. Many observers already questioned the legitimacy of a liberal international order, and argued that it lacks a broad legitimacy on the global level. The U.S. strategist Dr. Henry Kissinger ever argued that "No truly global 'world order' has ever existed. What passes for order in our time was devised in Western Europe nearly four centuries ago, at a peace conference in the German region of Westphalia, conducted without the involvement or even the awareness of most other continents or civilizations." ¹³

After WWII, the international system for a certain period of time had been divided into two major camps - the socialist camp and the capitalist camp, respectively led by the former Soviet Union and the United States. The two camps had had limited economic and business engagements. A post-war economic order was established under the U.S. leadership. Within the capitalist camp, certain core liberal values had so far been only shared by the U.S. and its key allies. From the 1980s on till the end of the Cold War, with the globalization process speeding up, the influence of liberal values had further been expanded. Then after the Cold War, they had obtained a new momentum on the global stage in driving globalization and liberalization.

The problem is that, while some may have benefited from the current liberal order, the liberal values and liberal order have also generated a lot of obstacles for a large number of countries, in particular, the developing nations, because they don't always fit well the domestic conditions of those countries. Very often the values and the system cannot solve the fundamental problems faced by a lot of them.

Nonetheless, it may not be appropriate to argue that all the problems just assessed above lie in the liberal values themselves. A lot of problems should also lie in the practice of liberal values. As for some developing countries, applying liberal values without having taken their domestic conditions into enough consideration could be one of the key reasons for having not made big improvement in a number of core issue areas. Therefore, selectively applying the principles of liberal values as well as of other various values in dealing with specific matters under different circumstances is more advisable.

Overall, quite a lot of issues have been raised in the process of promoting liberal values and of sustaining a liberal international order over the past years. By drawing the lessons accumulated in the past, what could a future liberal international order be like?

A Future Liberal International Order

The world would possibly develop toward a direction with more complexities and uncertainties. To forge a sound liberal international order and avoid the world becoming isolated or going back to a period like the first half of the 20th century, during which, the world was occupied by devastating conflicts and wars, major powers and influential international organizations will be expected to continue to play significant roles in helping forge a sound environment for regional and international cooperation. For instance, in the U.S. position, in Nye's words, to sustain an American liberal order, "it will not be enough to think in terms of American power over others. One must also think in terms of power to accomplish joint goals which involve power with others."¹⁴

In facing a complex future, this analysis would share a view that two key phenomena might appear alongside the process of forging a new liberal order.

First, the value system to facilitate a new liberal order would be enriched and be more pluralistic with non-western liberal values possibly acquiring more space in the value system.

Only by including a diverse range of values from different cultural backgrounds into the value system, applying alternatively the sound and positive aspects of various values, abandoning the flaws and negative aspects of certain values, and seeking commonalities among a wide variety of values, conflicting interests among major powers as well as among different races and cultures can be avoided or minimized; and to that extent, a sound liberal international order can be shaped and sustained.

In the Chinese society, a number of great thinkers in history had ever subsequently produced various schools of thoughts such as Confucianism, Taoism, and others etc. Buddhism was also introduced to China in ancient times and being incorporated into the Chinese tradition. In different periods of the long Chinese history, there had usually been a dominant thought mixed with other schools of thoughts to jointly formulate part of the Chinese tradition and to influence the Chinese society. In a simplest way, this kind of value tradition can be described as "Unity with Plurality".

Anyway, the Chinese experiences in managing the relationship among various schools of thoughts proved that there are no fundamental conflicts among the good aspects of all types of values - western, eastern, or others; and there should be a great deal of commonalities among them. As far as the principle of inclusiveness and of coexistence among them can be applied substantially at the international stage, a peaceful liberal international order can be sustained.

On the same issue, Dr. Kissinger put a more strategic view. He argued that:

"World order cannot be achieved by any one country acting along. To achieve a genuine world order, its components, while maintaining their own values, need to acquire a second culture that is global,

structural, and juridical - a concept of order that transcends the perspective and ideals of any one region or nation. At this moment in history, this would be a modernization of the Westphalian system informed by contemporary realities.”¹⁵

Second, with part of the power being shifted away from states to non-state actors, influential international organizations like the United Nations and others will be expected to play more crucial roles in helping forge and sustain a new liberal order, especially with regard to the aspect of promoting the inclusiveness of various values and ideologies, as well as of helping secure more flexibility and fairness in international cooperation.

Conclusion

In a world full of uncertainties, how the major powers like the U.S. and China engage with each other would significantly affect the nature and direction of a future liberal international order. There is a necessity for the major powers to look at each other differently from the way how great powers in history had look at and dealt with each other.

Regarding the future of a liberal international order, China has expressed support to a UN-centred international system as well as a world order based on international law, given that the UN memberships represent the interest of a majority of the international community, rather than that of a small number of countries.

Regardless of whether the future liberal order will be U.S.-led, or jointly led by the major powers along with greater participation of international organizations and other range of non-state actors, in order to avoid conflicts and to sustain a sound order, world leaders may have to accept the multi-polarization of values in the process of shaping a new global order. They also have to see that creating and sustaining a new liberal order needs a great deal of careful calculation - calculation of internal and external environments, of the balance between freedom and order, of the legitimacy and justice of order and so on - in Dr. Kissinger’s words, “order must be cultivated; it cannot be imposed.”¹⁶ Similarly, neither can values be imposed.

Notes

1. Nye Joseph (2018). “American Leadership and the Future of the Liberal International Order”, *China International Strategy Review 2018*, P1-15.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Fukuyama Francis (2020). “Liberalism and Its Discontents: the Challenges from the Left and the Right”, *American Purpose*, 5 October 2020, <https://www.americanpurpose.com/articles/liberalism-and-its-discontent/>

5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. See Nye, "American Leadership and the Future of the Liberal International Order".
13. Quoted in Kissinger Henry (2015). *World Order*, Penguin Books, P2-3.
14. See Nye, "American Leadership and the Future of the Liberal International Order".
15. See Kissinger, *World Order*, P373.
16. In the context of Kissinger's writing, the sentence of "order must be cultivated; it cannot be imposed." was used to make an argument on the appropriate balance between order and freedom, the author of this research paper views that it also fits the context of this analysis well when it is used to highlight the significance of careful calculation and cultivation in the process of forging and sustaining a sound liberal order.