

“Make the World Order Great Again” - The Fight over the Liberal Order as an Instance of the Transatlantic Divide

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Abstract: *The purposes of this article are a) to offer some highlights on the various concepts conflated under the term “world order” (post WWII world order, liberal order, global order), thus underlining its context-specific character; b) to place the discussion in the current context of the Transatlantic Divide and c) to examine EU’s embrace of the current narrative of a universalistic, unhistorical liberal order and the consequences of such embrace for the amplification of the Transatlantic Divide and of the internal East-West one. The choice to focus on the challenges to the world order from within the Transatlantic world and from its most prominent members is motivated by the fact that, to our understanding, this development is age-defining. The fact that China would challenge the world order that was established by its main competitor – US – in order to serve its own interests is less spectacular than the fact that the dismantling of the US-led world order appears to be led by US itself or the fact the biggest fights over the current order and its aftermath take place within the Transatlantic world itself.*

Keywords: *world order, liberal hegemony, Transatlantic divide, East-West divide*

1. “The old order is dying and the new cannot be born”

Today’s world has been described using various terms: “a world in disarray”², a “G0 world”³, characterized by “US abdication from global leadership”⁴ and “chaos in the liberal order”⁵. Sorting through the variety of descriptions, a consensus is emerging, according to which the order that was established at the end of WWII, and which has provided for a period of remarkable stability and prosperity (for the Western world at least) is now shifting.

Apart from this consensus, according to which we are dealing with a crisis, an

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2 R. Haass, *A World in Disarray: American Foreign Policy and the Crisis of the World Order*, New York, Penguin Press, 2017.

3 I. Bremmer, *Us vs. Them. The Failure of Globalism*, New York: Portfolio/ Penguin, 2018.

4 I. H. Daalder and J. M Lindsay, *The Empty Throne: America’s abdication of global leadership*, New York, Public Affairs, 2018.

5 R. I. Jarvis, et al., *Chaos in the Liberal Order. The Trump Presidency and International Politics in the Twenty-First Century*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2018.

interregnum, “consisting precisely in the fact that the old order is dying and the new cannot be born”⁶, the current global turmoil, as well as the theoretical and policy debate surrounding the shifting world order are better characterized in terms of a “a lack of consensus even on what a liberal order is”⁷. The very hot debate evolves around such topics as: the conflation between the world order and the liberal order; the various historical stages through which what we now denominate with the loose term “world order” have gone through; Easternization as a powerful mega-change trend implying the shift of economic and political power from West to East (see Frankopan 2015⁸, Rachman 2016⁹); the fact that there has never been a “true” world order¹⁰, let alone a “liberal world order”, which is either a “myth”¹¹ or a “delusion”¹²; the association of these shifts strictly with Donald Trump’s Presidency or with trends preceding and likely outliving his Presidency¹³; the election of Donald Trump as a cause (mainstream thinking) or rather a consequence, however anomalous, of these trends¹⁴; the inevitability of changes to the world order¹⁵, but not of its timing, manner and follow-up¹⁶; the reverberation of such shifting trends and the ensuing debates in the Eastern part of the European Union, where “doubts about post-1989 liberalism” are apparent¹⁷. Prestigious outlets such as Project-Syndicate or Foreign Affairs have reserved large spaces in which major contemporary thinkers have expressed their views (see Leonard, 2017¹⁸, Haass 2019⁹, Ikenberry, 2017²⁰, Nye, 2017²¹, Allison, 2018²²).

Given the breadth and width of the discussion, as well as its ongoing characters, the purposes of this article are: a) to offer some highlights on the various concepts conflated under the term “world order”, thus underlining its context-specific character; b) to place the discussion in the current context of the Transatlantic Divide and c) to examine EU’s

6 A. Gramsci, “Past and Present”, in J. A. Buttigieg (ed.), *Prison Note Books*, trans. J. A. Buttigieg and A. Callari, New York, Columbia University press, vol II, 1996, pp. 32-33.

7 M. Leonard, “What Liberal Order?”, *Project Syndicate*, 28 Feb. 2017, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/trump-brexit-liberal-world-order-by-mark-leonard-2017-02>

8 P. Frankopan, *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World*, London, Bloomsbury, 2015.

9 G. Rachman, *Easternization. Asia’s Rise and America’s Decline from Obama to Trump and Beyond*, New York, Other Press, 2016.

10 Kissinger, H., *World Order*, New York, Penguin Press, 2014.

11 G. Allison, “The Myth of the Liberal Order”. *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 97, Issue 4, Jul/Aug, 2018;

12 J. J. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion. Liberal Dreams and International Realities*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2018.

13 H. Patomäki, *Disintegrative Tendencies in Global Political Economy. Exits and Conflicts*, London, Routledge, 2018.

14 H. Kissinger, “We Are in a Very, Very Grave Period”, *Financial Times*, Interview with Eduard Luce, 20 July 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/926a66b0-8b49-11e8-bf9e-8771d5404543> (accessed 13 January 2019).

15 R. Baker, “Challenging the Inevitability of the Liberal World Order”, *Stratfor Global Intelligence*, 26 July 2018, <https://www.stratfor.com/article/challenging-inevitability-liberal-world-order> (accessed 13 January 2019).

16 R. Haass, “How a World Order Ends: And What Comes in Its Wake”, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 98, Issue 1, Jan/Feb 2019.

17 J. Rupnik, “The Crisis of Liberalism”, *Journal of Democracy* 29 (3): 24-38, 2018, <https://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed 13 January 2019).

18 M. Leonard, “What Liberal Order?”, *Project Syndicate*, 28 Feb. 2017, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/trump-brexit-liberal-world-order-by-mark-leonard-2017-02> (accessed 13 January 2019).

19 R. Haass, “How a World Order Ends: And What Comes in Its Wake”, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 98, Issue 1, Jan/Feb 2019.

20 G. J. Ikenberry, “The Plot Against American Foreign Policy: Can the Liberal Order Survive?”, *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 96, Iss. 3, May/June 2017.

21 J. Jr. Nye, “Will the Liberal Order Survive? The History of an Idea”, *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2017.

22 G. Allison, “The Myth of the Liberal Order”. *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 97, Issue 4, Jul/Aug, 2018.

embrace of the current narrative of a universalistic, unhistorical liberal order and the consequences of such an embrace for the amplification of the Transatlantic Divide and of the internal, East-West one.

For the purposes of this paper, the major challenge to the current world order (conceived both along economic and political lines) coming especially from China is only cursory factored in, with the acknowledgment that it is the challenge that has the potential either to unify or further disintegrate the West/ the Transatlantic world. The morphology of this challenge, as well as assessments as to its more likely consequence (re-integration or further disintegration within the Transatlantic world) require further work and reflection. Leaving this need for further work and reflection aside, the choice to focus on the challenges to the world order from within the Transatlantic world and from its most prominent members is motivated by the fact that this development is age-defining. The fact that China would challenge the world order that was established by its main competitor – US – in order to serve its own interests is less spectacular than the fact that the dismantling of the US-led world order appears to be enforced by US itself or the fact the biggest fights over the current order and its aftermath take place within the Western/ Transatlantic world.

2. What's in a name?

The heated debate on the dying old order, the chances to resurrect it and the new, nascent one lies at the crossroads of several topics: contemporary globalization and the global backlash, West/ US hegemony, *Pax Americana*, US as a declining power, the scenarios that can be envisaged for post-hegemony. To further compound the debate, “world order”, “post WWII world order” to be more precise, have become umbrella terms, that conflate globalisation defined along technical lines with globalisation defined as a political project, the project of globalisation with that of neoliberal globalisation, liberalism with neoliberalism and progressive neoliberalism²³, political liberalism with economic liberalism, global order with Western liberal order, free trade with multilateralism and what not.

We deal, in the terms of G. Allison with a “conceptual jelly”²⁴. Drawing clear conceptual boundaries around such a complex topic is well beyond the scope of this article. However, some distinctions (both morphologic and historical) are needed in order to examine “which and whose order” is fought over, longed for or rejected for by the main actors involved.

First, according to R. Haass²⁵, the global order that was created in the aftermath of WWII consisted of two parallel orders: the Cold War world order that had at its core the balance of power between the United States and the Soviet Union and the liberal order inside the Western world (the non-Communist one, that is, according to R. Haass), that operated alongside the Cold War Order. The actors involved in the creation of the two orders were different. While the main artisans of the Cold War order were US and Soviet Union, those of the liberal order were US and Great Britain. As R. Cox underlines, „the

23 N. Fraser, “Progressive neoliberalism versus reactionary populism: A Hobson's choice” in H. Geiselberger (ed.), *The Great Regression*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2017, pp. 40-48.

24 G. Allison, “The Myth of the Liberal Order”. *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 97, Issue 4, Jul/Aug, 2018, pp 124-133.

25 R. Haass, “How a World Order Ends: And What Comes in Its Wake”, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 98, Issue 1, Jan/Feb 2019.

United States used its economic leverage to pressure Britain to abandon the preferential trade and payments system encompassing the Commonwealth and Empire under the Ottawa Agreements of 1933 [...]. When these Anglo-American negotiations took place, Europe and the Soviet Union were devastated by war and what later became known as the Third World was inarticulate in international economic affairs. These countries were not effective participants in definition of the concept or in giving substance to it”²⁶.

After the end of the Cold War and given the US’ unipolar moment, the two orders appeared to converge into one, built on the assumption of “the endpoint of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government”²⁷. The “liberal” characteristics of the order operating inside the Western (non-Communist world) alongside the Cold War were extrapolated to the world order overall, leading to the idea of the “70-year liberal international order that brought about stability and prosperity to the world”. This conflation of the two orders and the latter taking precedence and acquiring universalistic overtones in the particular context of US’ unipolar moment is one distinction to keep in mind when analysing the defenders and the challengers of the contemporary status quo.

Second, inside the “liberal order” itself several distinctions can be drawn. During the Cold War, it was confined, as we could see, to the Western, that is, non-Communist world. After the end of the Cold War, it sought to encompass the whole world, hence the idea of a “global liberal order”. The political concept of “liberal order” was conflated with that of globalization, seen also as a political project: globalisation, in its technical sense, “seen as the possibility that social relations can be maintained with increasing ease and intensity across time and space”²⁸ was equated with globalisation in its political sense, a political project “based on a conviction that competitive, self-regulating markets, or their administrative simulation within organisations, are the best guarantees of efficiency, freedom, justice, or all of these [...]; exaggerated claims about globalisation in the technical sense have been used to obscure the dynamics that have led to the triumphant rise of globalisation as a specific project”²⁹. The fact that the rise of both China and India, the lifting out of extreme poverty of millions of Chinese citizens, the emergence of a vibrant Chinese and Indian middle-class are narrated as evidence of the success of the “post WWII global liberal order”/ “post WWII liberal international order”/ “post WWII Western order” is ironical, to say the least.

Third, in spite of the appearance of fixedness, the concept of “liberalism” is in need of distinctions and boundaries (substantive and temporal), too: “when we talk about successes and failures of liberalism we need to specify which type of liberalism we are talking about. We should distinguish between liberalism in government and liberalism in society. Institutional liberalism and liberal ideology or liberal cultural values are not the same. A distinction between liberalism as historical contingency and as recurring patterns of thought is also valid”³⁰.

26 R. W. Cox and T. J. Sinclair, *Approaches to World Order*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 495.

27 F. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York, Free Press, 1992.

28 H. Patomäki, “Crisis of Globalisation: From Its Causes to Emancipation”, *Social Europe Journal*, 6 June 2018, <https://www.socialeurope.eu/crisis-of-globalisation-from-its-causes-to-emancipation> (accessed 13 January 2019).

29 *Ibid.*

30 J. Zielonka, *Counter-Revolution. Liberal Europe in Retreat*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018, p 20.

In economic and political terms alike, *the major distinction here is between liberalism and neoliberalism*. The milestone marking the transition from one to another is considered to be the demise, in the early 1970s, of the Breton Woods system as a result of the US unilateral abandonment of dollar-gold convertibility. “An epochal transformation of capitalism that began in the 1970s and is now ravelling. The structural aspects of that transformation are well understood: whereas the previous regime of capitalism empowered governments to subordinate short-term interests of private firms to the long-term objective of sustained accumulation, the current one authorizes global finance to discipline governments and population in the immediate interests of private investors”³¹. From this moment on, neoliberalism has become the “ordering principle”, with variations, translations, and degrees of embeddedness, but some remarkable hallmarks: “trade liberalization, financial liberalization, and macroeconomic orthodoxy”³².

When talking about the current backlash against neoliberalism, N. Fraser adds another layer of complexity that is particularly useful for our present discussion: the marriage between some aspects of neoliberalism (especially its forms of financialization) and some elements of progressive thinking: “what [Trump’s] voters rejected was not neoliberalism tout court, but progressive neoliberalism. This may sound to some like an oxymoron, but it is a real, if perverse, political alignment that holds the key to understanding the US election results – and perhaps some developments elsewhere as well. In its US form, progressive neoliberalism is an alliance of mainstream currents of new social movements (feminism, anti-racism, multiculturalism and LGBTQ rights) on the one hand, and high-end ‘symbolic’ and service-based sectors of business (Wall Street, Silicon Valley and Hollywood) on the other”³³; “progressive neoliberalism mixes together truncated ideals of emancipation and lethal forms of financialization. It was that mix that was rejected *in toto* by Trump’s voters”³⁴.

Right now, the complex reality of the world order that emerged after the end of WWII, with its subsequent changes, some of which were captured by our cursory analysis, is narrated in largely oppositional terms, coupled with a considerable degree of personalization and moral posturing – clash over “values” and “convictions”. It has become a “banner” that “waves atop most discussions of the United States’ role in the world”³⁵; a banner under which various forms of challenges to US power – stretching from short-term, contingent criticism/ scepticism and dislike of one particular person/ President/ Presidency to downright Americanism – are organised.

3. “The paradox and tragedy of recent times”

Even a cursory look at the current explosion of books, articles, commentaries and statements about the world order would tempt one into thinking that we deal with a completely new phenomenon that is to be associated with US President Donald Trump. As. G. Allison underlines, one of the core claims of the reigning consensus around the “70-year liberal order” is that “U.S. President Donald Trump is the primary threat to the

31 N. Fraser, p. 43.

32 C. Ban, *Ruling Ideas. How Global Neoliberalism Goes Local*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 15.

33 Fraser, p. 41

34 Fraser, p. 44

35 Allison, p. 124

liberal order – and thus to world peace”³⁶. All these associated with the fear that, as a direct result of the US President’s actions and rhetoric, China will fill in the void and impose an “illiberal”, “authoritarian” world order. Hence, the call to action, essentially along political lines, to restore liberalism-as-we-know-it.

These claims are all open for challenge. For example, in a preface to a collection of articles by Dutch scholars and policy-makers from 1988, Sir Shridath Ramphal, then Secretary-general of the Commonwealth, wrote: “The paradox – and the tragedy – of recent times is that even as the need for better management of relations between nations and for a multilateral approach to global problems has become more manifest, support for internationalism has weakened – eroded by some of the strongest nations whose position behoves them to be at its vanguard and who have in the past acknowledged that obligation of leadership. This is most true, of course, of the United States, whose recent behaviour has served actually to weaken the structures of multilateralism/ including the United Nations itself”³⁷. Sounds more like today’s EU officials than a Commonwealth official call to action in 1988, before the fall of Communism and of the Berlin wall and the subsequent US unipolar moment, before 9/11, the Middle East quagmire, the global financial crisis and Donald Trump’s rise to power.

It is fashionable – and, sometimes, possibly legitimate – to associate these trends with Donald Trump’s Presidency. The current US President is considered a “threat” (see Allison) to the liberal order and especially to the transatlantic world, seen as its embodiment.

The complete suspension of the negotiations for TTIP (Transatlantic Trade and Investment Agreement), the retraction of the Paris Agreement, the repeated calls for fair burden-share within NATO, the threat of imposing trade tariffs on EU products, the decision to pull out the Iran deal and to withdraw from the INF Treaty are but last instances in a long series of events, making a compelling case that the US and the EU are pulling apart. And yet, the transatlantic deficit is a term coined by the literature long before Donald Trump becoming US President. Here are some events that would rightly fall under this characterization: the 2003 “old Europe” and “new Europe” divide in the context of the second Iraq invasion; the 2007 – 2008 global recession and its resolution mechanisms (massive bailouts vs. austerity), NATO summit and Russia’s actions in Georgia (2008), Libya (2011), President Obama’s Pivot Asia strategy, the Greek bailouts, the calls from burden-sharing within NATO, Ukraine.

President Obama’s “Pivot Asia” strategy was arguably a stepping-stone for Donald Trump’s “America First” strategy, with its implicit overtone “Europe second, third, fourth”. It may be an evolution from a policy of “benign neglect”, “aggressive lack of interest” to one of “malign neglect” or even hostility, but Donald Trump’s Presidency appears to be more of an accelerator of long-term trends: “the Trump administration’s economic and strategic policies represent important continuities and indeed escalation of past US non-cooperation internationally, rather than an abrupt about-face. Trump’s economic and security policies mostly just deepen existing foreign policy practices, although this may also involve qualitative changes, for example in US trade policy, where

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ J. Harrod and N. Schrijver (eds.), *The UN Under Attack*, Aldershot Hampshire, Gower, 1998.

self-regard now takes protectionist forms”³⁸. Here is how a prominent intellectual such as D. Moïsi described America’s “retrenchment” from Middle East and world affairs in 2013: “America is moving away, tired of its costly and uncertain military adventures in the Middle East, and no doubt reassured as well by the energy independence it should have by 2020 thanks to shale gas and oil”³⁹.

Finally, the fear that, as a direct result of Trump Presidency, China will impose its “illiberal”, “authoritarian” view of the world can be challenged from several points of view: it suffers from US/ Western centrism, is an instance of “liberal hegemony”⁴⁰, of excessive moral posturing in global affairs (good/ bad, clash over values, us/ them) with the ensuing fearmongering. Besides, as R. Cox underlined as early as 1992, the after-hegemony scenarios are much varied than this polarized view: “Supposing hegemony to be in decline, several logical possibilities for the future are: (a) a revival of the declining hegemony; (b) a revival of the universals of the declining hegemony underpinned not by one state but by an oligarchy of states that would have to concert their powers; (c) the founding of a new hegemony by another state successfully universalizing its own principles of orders; (d) a non-hegemonic order lacking effective universal principles of order and functioning as an interplay of rival powerful states, each with their client states most probably based on an organization of rival world regions; and e) a counterhegemonic order anchored in a broader diffusion of power, in which a large number of collective forces including states/achieve some agreement upon universal principles of an alternative order without dominance”⁴¹. Robert Cox’s 1992 “prophecies” are a useful guide to understanding the contemporary discussion around the “liberal order” (that is, of the hegemonic order): “the most unlikely prospects are (a) and (c) – the era of dominant hegemony seems now past; there are no plausible successors to Pax Britannica and Pax Americana. The globalizing trend of the present world would, at least in the medium term, give most probability to b), with a distinct possibility in case of breakdown, for example, through major financial crisis, of (d)”⁴².

4. EU as guardian of the liberal order?

As we have already underlined, the Transatlantic rift/deficit is a phenomenon about which one can safely say that it precedes the current US Presidency and will likely outlive it. The hypothesis put forth by T. G. Ash as “early” as 2004 is thrilling: “we must consider [the] hypothesis that the forces pushing Europe and America apart are so powerful that any attempt to hold the two together, by however skilful a British prime minister, however strongly supported by a nation however united, would still be doomed to certain failure [...] Whatever the cost, Britain will have to choose. A man standing astride two oil tankers that are moving apart, trying to hold them together with just the

38 H. Patomäki, *Disintegrative Tendencies in Global Political Economy. Exits and Conflicts*, London, Routledge, 2018, p. 83.

39 D. Moïsi, “Shattered Europe”, *Les Echos* (Paris), 10 December 2013, <http://www.presseurop.eu/en/content/article/4389281-shattered-europe> (accessed 13 January 2019)

40 J.J. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion. Liberal Dreams and International Realities*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2018.

41 Cox, p. 518

42 *Ibid.*

strength in his legs, is not a statesman – he’s an idiot”⁴³.

Contemporary events happening on both sides of the Atlantic amplify this pre-existing rift. Two interesting and possibly interconnected developments cannot go unnoticed: Germany’s political activism and EU’s positioning as the guardian of the “liberal order”. Evidence of the interconnectedness of the two phenomena is the “marriage” between the liberal elite/ establishment (the one that lost important political and symbolic positions after the defeat of Hillary Clinton in the 2016 elections) and the European establishment and its most visible symbol, the German political establishment and its Chancellor. Personal achievements and prestige notwithstanding, Angela Merkel’s image in the global mainstream media as the posterchild of the liberal order and its most ardent guardian (see, for example, Smale and Erlanger, 2016⁴⁴) reflects a wider, more structural set of challenges and confrontations.

The German chancellor’s endorsement of the French President’s call for an “EU army”, the calls for an increasing role of the euro in international transactions (European Monetary Fund, alternate SWIFT system, replacing the dollar with the euro in energy transactions), the suggestion that France should give up the UN security council and thus allow for the creation of a EU seat are all instances of this activism. This is rather unusual in the sense that, during the entire history of European integration, Germany has restrained from stepping into the arena of global political affairs. The Eurozone crisis created the opportunity for Germany’s rise to the position of the leading power in Europe, what U. Beck calls the “accidental Empire”: “Germany’s rise to the position of the leading power in ‘the German Europe’ is not the consequence of a secret master plan, cunningly conceived and adroitly executed. At least to begin with, it was the involuntary and unplanned product of the financial crisis and its anticipation of disaster. As matters progressed, we may suspect from the way in which they developed that a more conscious element of planning did enter into it”⁴⁵.

Brexit and the result of the 2016 US elections created yet another opportunity, of extending this originally intra-European activism beyond EU borders. Judging by the recent instances of Germany’s political activism – both in rhetorical terms and in terms of concrete actions – the “voluntary and planned” part from U. Beck’s analysis appears to get more traction.

Germany/EU’s positioning as the “the liberal West’s last defender” accurately reflects the simplifications of the complex reality of the world order that we underlined in the first part of the article: conflation of political liberalism with economic liberalism, oblivion as to the historical stages and changes inside the post-WW world order, embrace of a version of “liberalism” that is close to what N. Fraser calls “progressive neoliberalism”, fetishization and rhetorical weaponization of “multilateralism”⁴⁶ or of “free trade”. It is a simplification of the complex reality of the concept of “world order”, narrated as a set of

43 T.G. Ash, *Free World. America, Europe and the Surprising Future of the West*, New York: Random House, 2004, p. 45.

44 A. Smale and S. Erlanger, "As Obama Exits World Stage, Angela Merkel May Be the Liberal West’s Last Defender", *New York Times*, 12 November 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/13/world/europe/germany-merkel-trump-election.html> (accessed 13 January 2019).

45 U. Beck, *German Europe*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2013, p. 54.

46 J. Grygiel, “The EU Can’t Fulfil Its Purpose”, *The American Interest*, 30 December 2018, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2018/12/30/the-eu-cant-fulfill-its-purpose/> (accessed 13 January 2019).

“values” and “convictions” that needs to be upheld at the expense of everything else and a simplification of the complex challenges to which US needs to respond, whether it is led by one President or another.

The pre-eminence of the “clash over values” political narrative in anything having to do with intra-European as well as Transatlantic affairs reveals the tendency and the temptation of the current European Union or of its more powerful agenda-setters to embrace liberal hegemony (Mearshmeier), also as a form to differentiate and to distance themselves from the current US. In his fascinating book about “The Free World” published in 2004, T. G. Ash makes a thorough analysis of the claims that have been put forth in the history of the Transatlantic relations: “we may emerge from this tangled jungle of claims and data with two alternative conclusions: a) America and Europe are two different, strongly contrasting civilizations, one is better; (for “one” insert Europe or America according to taste); b) America and most of the diverse countries of Europe belong to a wider family of developed, liberal democracies; America is better in some aspects, Europe in others. Statement b is less interesting, less galvanizing but it has the boring old merit of being true”⁴⁷.

As we have already underlined, in structural terms, both economically, politically and ideologically, the biggest challenge to the US-led world order comes from China. After the election of Donald Trump as US President, the world witnessed an interesting role reversal, at least in rhetorical terms, with China promising to uphold the benefits of the political project of globalisation (free trade), while US taking a clear protectionist approach. This role reversal has receded into the background of global political conversations, while US-EU/ Germany open confrontation over the same issue appears to take centre stage. The narratives “EU-as-not-America” and “EU-as-counterweight-to-US” appear to prevail.

5. Conclusions. Implications for the Transatlantic and intra-European disintegrative tendencies

The tendency of EU/ its powerful agenda-setters to embrace liberal hegemony and universalistic, globalist values, to weaponize the concept of “multilateralism”, “free trade” and “post WWII global liberal order” in which at least several “orders” are merged (Western order, world order, post WWII world order until the end of the Cold War, post-Cold War order, post 9/11 order etc.) further fuels the disintegrative tendencies within the Transatlantic world. It also opens the debate on the red thin line “between short-term, contingent (anti-Bushism, today’s anti-Trumpism, n.n) and the long-term, endemic (anti-Americanism) explanations”⁴⁸.

Inside the European Union, the Transatlantic rift amplifies the geopolitical anxiety of Central and Eastern European member states for whom the West has represented a homogeneous concept for the past 30 years. One driver explaining the unconditional enthusiasm for EU membership of these states was that, at the time of EU accession, they found their security and economic interests perfectly aligned with a homogenous, “perfectly aligned West” that is able to provide for both security and

47 Ash, p. 71

48 Ash, p. 51

economic development. Brexit, US withdrawal from international engagement, the acceleration of trends associated with the transatlantic deficit have resurrected feelings of geopolitical anxiety and prompted feelings of *déjà vu*, of being caught in the crossfire of superpower confrontation. The fact that the East-West divide in the European Union, (re)created by “the legacy of the 1989 revolutions, combined with the more recent shocks delivered by the decline of U.S. power and the crisis of the EU⁴⁹ is narrated almost exclusively in political terms, based on a binary opposition liberalism – illiberalism is another indication of the tendency of EU/its powerful agenda-setters to embrace “liberal hegemony”.

Question remains whether the disintegrative tendencies within the European Union and especially within the Transatlantic world can be arrested. “Eventually, inevitably, even the best-managed order comes to an end. The balance of power underpinning it becomes imbalanced. The institutions supporting it fail to adapt to new conditions. Some countries fall, and others rise, the result of changing capacities, faltering wills, and growing ambitions. Those responsible for upholding the order make mistakes both in what they choose to do and in what they choose not to do⁵⁰. In our understanding, “those responsible for upholding the order” should first acknowledge that fighting for the status-quo or worse, longing for the restoration of a situation that no longer exists are losing strategies. Doing this from a moralistic point of view, with implicit overtones of civilizational superiority is further invitation to resentment and to what is loosely designated with the term populism. Which, in turn, can only fuel the disintegrative tendencies across the Atlantic and within the EU.

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