



L-r: US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Kyiv, April 24, 2022. Photo: Ukranian Presidency via ABACAPRESS.COM

How the Attempt to Liberalize the World has Made the International System Less Peaceful

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After the Cold War the United States worked to advance peace by trying to promote liberalism in different parts of the world. Despite some success, the strategy did not bear fruit and ultimately made the international system less liberal and more conflict-prone. The primary reason for this phenomenon is the influence of nationalism, joined by the weakening of unipolarity. Nationalism, particularly ethnic nationalism, explains the nature of the main conflicts in the world, as well as the inadvertent boomerang effects of the peace-promotion strategy, which was based on spreading democracy and liberalism. The result is that the international system must cope with some salient conflicts. The principal threats to world peace are the conflicts between Russia and Ukraine and China and Taiwan. The secondary threats come from the civil wars in failed states. In addition, prominent Western countries, led by the US, are now marked by deep polarization and social division, which come at least in part from the inadvertent results of the liberalization efforts. The article suggests some ways to integrate nationalism and liberalism in the world at large and in Israel, despite the formidable challenge this entails.

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The escalating war in Ukraine raises some difficult questions about what were once powerful expectations of a peaceful post-Cold War era. Thirty years ago the Soviet Union disintegrated and the Cold War ended, and it seemed that the world was moving to an era of peace and cooperation. And yet, we now find ourselves in the midst of the largest armed conflict in Europe since World War II.

Following the end of the Cold War, the US attempted to pacify the world by liberalizing it. Despite some successes, this attempt ultimately failed, and has even made the world more conflict-prone and less liberal than it was shortly after the end of the Cold War. The explanation for this failure focuses on the power of nationalism, even though the decline of unipolarity also played an important role. Nationalism, especially ethnic nationalism, explains both the essence of the key conflicts that threaten world peace and the inadvertent boomerang effect of the pacification-via-liberalization strategy.

Pacification-via-liberalization was based on three primary foundations. First, United States military and economic dominance following the end of the Cold War considerably increased US freedom of action and its ability to shape developments in the international arena. The outcome of the Cold War reinforced America's self-confidence in its ability to shape world dynamics. Second, liberals strongly believe that various liberal mechanisms can promote peace, namely, democracy, free trade, and international institutions.

Third, some liberals subscribe to the belief that liberal tenets are universal and apply to every region and culture, and are not confined to the West. Thus, the assumption is that other nations will welcome US efforts to promote democracy, even if in extreme cases it might have to resort to force, because the US will be removing hated despots from power and liberating the people suffering under brutal dictatorship. This was the logic behind the post-9/11 "freedom agenda" and the imposed regime change in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya.

Democracy promotion, whether peacefully or by force, was one major mechanism of pacification-through-liberalization. Globalization through the enhancement of trade and foreign direct investment was another, particularly the engagement with China. This policy **culminated** with China joining the WTO in 2001, which indeed raised Chinese global economic involvement and also helped the growth of the Chinese economy. In tandem, the US **led** the expansion of international institutions to enable them to address various global problems through multilateral negotiations.

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This strategy of pacification-via-liberalization has failed, and today's world is confronted with some major conflicts. The greatest dangers to world peace are the conflicts between Russia and Ukraine, China and Taiwan, and China's maritime conflicts over the South and East China Seas. There are also the civil wars in failed states such as Yemen, Syria, Libya, Somalia, Myanmar, Ethiopia, and others. Regional powers, and sometime great powers, **take advantage** of the chaos in these places and intervene there for their own interests. Finally, the West, particularly the US, is deeply **divided and polarized**.

One obvious explanation for the failure of pacification is the changing global balance of power. The relative decline of the US power and the rise of others increases the constraints on US freedom of action and its ability to shape the world in its own image. The changing balance also leads to heightened demands of the rising powers based on their growing capabilities, such as the Russian and Chinese demands for spheres of influence in their respective regions. More generally, the more powerful the rising powers become, the more daring they are in challenging the declining hegemon and the

liberal international order it created after the end of the Cold War.

Yet such a power-based *realpolitik* account explains neither the substance of the contemporary conflicts, nor how the pacification-via-liberalization strategy has led inadvertently to the current disputes. For that, we must consider the effects of nationalism, and especially its ethnic variant.

While the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Chinese aspirations to reincorporate Taiwan, including potentially through force, have a security element of distancing rival powers from their own neighborhood, the popular emotions behind these demands are not explained by *realpolitik* alone. These demands stem from nationalist aspirations to unify the nation, which have a demographic and historical component. Belligerent leaders are apt to use nationalist fervor in an attempt to restore the nation to its “golden age,” be it genuine or mythical. Putin [argues](#) that the Ukrainians and Russians are one nation that was arbitrarily separated after the Soviet collapse following the end of the Cold War. Similarly, the Chinese [assert](#) that the Taiwanese belong to the Chinese nation. Moreover, both Russia and China claim that Ukraine and Taiwan, respectively, historically belonged to them, and only Western imperialism tore these territories in question from their natural homelands in order to weaken China and Russia.

In the failed states the problem is the reverse. These states suffer from the absence of a common national identity. Instead, different groups have their own powerful ethnic/sectarian/religious identities. When state institutions are weak, such an absence of a common civic identity more easily leads to civil wars among the different groups. Moreover, in regions such as the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia, there are powerful shared trans-border identities that spill across national borders, and regional powers might take advantage of them for their own interests. A key example is Iran and its use of the [shared trans-border Shiite identity](#) to intervene in the domestic politics

of neighboring Arab states, such as Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. Similarly, Turkey uses the identity card to mobilize/recruit Sunni militias for its interventions in Syria and Libya.

While the liberal West believed that such identity-based ethnic divisions are politically irrelevant in the West itself, in the last decade [deep divisions](#) have emerged in some Western countries between liberal multi-ethnic coalitions and illiberal white Christian groups. The sense among some extremist white Christian groups that liberal “globalist” elites want to replace them with groups of color has fueled the rise of nationalist populism in Europe and the US in recent years. Such racial beliefs and fears seem to explain, at least partly, the ongoing support for Trumpism in the US and for Trump’s false charges that the 2020 presidential elections were stolen from him. Insofar that this allegation challenges the most fundamental pillar of democracy—the peaceful transfer of power—some experts and analysts [fear](#) that the US might be on the brink of a new civil war, and that in any case, the level and quality of American democracy are plummeting dangerously.

Finally, nationalism may explain the boomerang effects of pacification-via-liberalization, leading to intensified conflicts. Thus, the growing aggressiveness of the revisionist authoritarian powers ([China](#) and [Russia](#)) was at least partly a reaction to US attempts to liberalize them, even if only by peaceful means of economic engagement (China) and financial assistance for democracy promotion (Russia). Nationalists see such attempts as intolerable intervention in their own affairs by a foreign power attempting to change their regime. Nationalists also oppose what they view as a liberal encirclement of their homelands, which include, in the case of Russia, NATO’s eastward expansion and Western involvement in the democratizing “color revolutions” in states near Russia, in the post-Soviet space. In the case of China, resentment and anger focus on US alliances with states proximate to China, notably Taiwan

and other prominent states (Japan, South Korea, Australia, and partly also India), and the continuing presence of the US navy close to Chinese shores, in seas that—according to the Chinese—belonged to the Chinese empire in its golden age (the South and East China Seas).

The liberal hopes that China would become more peaceful, let alone democratic, through economic engagement and integration into international institutions did not materialize. Even though China became a leading trading state and a key member of major international institutions, it has become more authoritarian in the last decade, as well as more aggressive in its maritime disputes with its neighbors and toward Taiwan. The US assistance for democracy building in Russia in the 1990s likewise did not bear fruit. Under Putin Russia has become both more authoritarian and more aggressive toward its post-Soviet neighbors; in addition, it battles democracy in the West through cyber warfare.

Some of the recent key instances of failed states are a product of [American liberalizing interventions](#): Afghanistan (2001), Iraq (2003), Libya (2011), and to a lesser extent, Syria after 2011. Especially notable is the case of Iraq, where the US invasion and occupation destroyed the few institutions that previously maintained law and order, even if in an arbitrary way: the army, the Baath Party, and the state bureaucracy. Thus the Iraqi state was destroyed, and this in turn inadvertently enabled Iran's penetration of Iraq's domestic politics and the rise of extremist terror elements, led by the Islamic State.

Last but not least, the polarization in Western societies, notably in the US, was also seriously affected by the liberalizing attempts outside the West. The US military interventions for regime change in the Middle East, which were not only costly in blood and treasure but also failed to produce stable democracies, led to a disenchantment of the American public with the “forever wars” and foreign involvement generally. This proved to be a bonanza for populists like Trump who exhibit great skepticism about US global commitments,

including its alliances. Populist leaders also used the immigration and terror elements from failed states to heighten their own support.

In addition, the liberal policy of promoting globalization, which marked its great success with China, led to a huge rise in Chinese imports, and thus to growing unemployment and income freezes for many blue-collar workers in the West, who [allied themselves with the populists](#). Also, while liberals have supported immigration and believed in the integration of immigrants in Western societies, a sizable portion of European and American societies [oppose immigrants of non-European origin](#), and such anti-immigration groups have found their “protectors” in illiberal populist leaders, such as Trump in the US and Boris Johnson in the UK.

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The liberal support of multilateral international institutions has also aroused nationalist opposition, claiming to defend national sovereignty against “foreigners” intervening in their states’ domestic affairs. In Europe this led to [rising opposition to the EU](#), culminating in Brexit.

In sum, nationalism poses a severe challenge to liberalism, both internationally and domestically. The post-Cold War optimism and the US-led attempts to pacify the world via liberalization have met many obstacles in China, Russia, and the Muslim world. Some of the liberalization policies have had boomerang effects on the West itself, contributing to the rise of illiberal nationalist populism that threatens liberalism even in its bastions in Europe and the US, and thus raises doubts about the future of the liberal international order.

In the Ukraine War we are witnessing a clash of two types of nationalism: offensive and defensive. At the least, the Russian offensive nationalism aims to separate the Russian-

speaking regions from the rest of Ukraine based on ethnic-linguistic ties. Putin's maximalist version of Russian nationalism aspires to control the whole of Ukraine, based on the claims that historically Ukrainian territory has always belonged to Russia, and the Ukrainians are really part of the Russian nation and not an independent nation of its own. The heroic Ukrainian resistance to the Russian invasion is motivated by defensive nationalism: a love for Ukraine, and the wish to defend the Ukrainian nation and its territorial integrity. The powerful Ukrainian resistance to the Russian occupation shows that nationalism remains the key force in world politics. Yet the Ukrainian struggle also shows that nationalism is not always a force for evil. The liberal West will have to learn to consider it and work with it, if it wishes to make the world more peaceful.

Thus, a difficult question is how we might integrate nationalism and liberalism. Unfortunately, there are no easy answers. The relatively easier domain is the material one: in the economic field, the state can invest more in domestic supply and reduce—to one degree or another—dependence on global supply lines. This might be costly, but pandemics and wars can make this road more plausible and sensible. Still in the relatively easy rubric, states might also transfer less national authority to international institutions, even if the latter might be extremely useful for numerous purposes of international cooperation. Regarding migration, while keeping the gates open, Western countries might maintain some limits, though both from economic and humanitarian points of view, migration is generally a constructive process.

The most challenging question concerns identity. Classical liberalism strongly promotes civic identity that includes all citizens—as equal members of the nation—even though in recent years we have witnessed bitter identity conflicts in some of the key bastions of Western liberalism such as the UK, France, and the US. The ideal way is to construct a common patriotism and a shared pride in the homeland. Thus, despite

the ethnic diversity of Ukraine, currently the heroic patriotism of all the Ukrainian people against foreign occupation is evident, even if there are some ethnic Russians who might collaborate with the Russian invaders.

In Israel, the issue of a shared identity is especially challenging. Israel was established as the homeland of the Jewish people, and gained its international legitimacy on this basis. At the same time, some 20 percent of the citizens are Arabs—proud of their own identity and heritage. The Israeli Jews are closely affiliated with world Jewry, while the Arab citizens of Israel naturally have their own cultural ties with the Arab world and the Palestinian community. One way to overcome such differences is to work very hard—and invest extensive resources—in implementing full equality between Jewish and Arab citizens, and make this equality part of every relevant legislation and resource allocation. Israel should labor to make all its citizens—irrespective of their ethnic origin—take an equal part in the accomplishments of the state and benefit from equal allocation of all state resources in every sphere and domain. This can heighten the national identification of all the citizens with their state.

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