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The End of Certainty and the Rise of the Rest

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In many parts of the Global South, Western-style liberal democracy is no longer seen as the default destination. The war in Ukraine marks not only a geopolitical rupture but a rejection of the Western-centric international architecture.

The liberal international order that has shaped the world since 1945 is no longer the uncontested framework for global governance. Born of the Western victory in the Second World War and codified through institutions like the UN, International Monetary Fund and NATO, the Pax Americana was long underpinned by open markets, expanding democracy and US-led multilateralism. Today, this vision no longer commands consensus — even in the West.

The postwar order is not collapsing overnight, but it is being overtaken — by geopolitical pluralism, ideological contestation and the rise of credible alternatives. Across the globe, new political models are emerging that blend state-led capitalism, centralized governance and selective modernization. These are not temporary deviations. They reflect historical traditions, domestic legitimacy and regional priorities. In many parts of the Global South, Western-style liberal democracy is no longer seen as the default destination. It is simply one among many options. Nowhere is this shift clearer than in the internal disarray of Western democracies. In the US, partisan tribalism, social media disinformation and institutional gridlock have eroded democratic norms. “Trumpism” could outlast President Donald Trump. It prioritizes identity over policy, suspicion over alliance and power over principle. America’s leadership in innovation, higher education and cultural influence remains formidable. But its ability to lead by example has weakened — both at home and abroad.

Europe faces its own reckoning. The center is hollowing out, squeezed between populist right-wing nationalism and disillusioned progressivism. Inflation, inequality and housing insecurity have undermined the postwar middle class, once the bedrock of European stability. The social democratic model is stretched thin, caught between rising fiscal demands — from climate to defense — and waning political will. Brexit, far from being a sovereign renaissance, has revealed the costs of detachment in an interdependent world. Slowly and quietly, the UK is rebuilding practical ties with Europe out of necessity rather than nostalgia.

This fraying coherence has global consequences. For decades, the West assumed others would converge toward its model. That presumption is no longer viable. Across Asia, the Middle East and the Global South, performance-based legitimacy, long-term vision and technocratic governance are gaining appeal — especially after the West’s uneven response to COVID-19, various economic crises and political polarization.

The Middle East exemplifies the contradictions of this emerging order. Gulf states like Saudi Arabia and the UAE are pushing ambitious economic reforms — from Vision 2030 to sovereign wealth diversification — while maintaining firm, centralized control. They are no longer just recipients of external power but brokers of influence. The region is also a strategic arena where



great powers compete. Washington, Beijing and others are no longer merely extending power, but negotiating it.

China's rise further underscores the shift. The Chinese model — rooted in state-led capitalism, digital infrastructure and strategic planning — offers an alternative to Western liberalism that many countries find compelling. Legitimacy in China comes not from elections but from economic performance, social stability and national revival. For much of Southeast Asia and parts of Africa, Beijing's approach represents a pragmatic, if imperfect, model for development without democratization.

The war in Ukraine marks not only a geopolitical rupture but a rejection of the Western-centric international architecture. Russia seeks strategic autonomy through multipolar partnerships, turning eastward toward China and southward toward its BRICS partners. This loose coalition has grown into somewhat of a platform for institutional counterbalance to the West — spurred by resentment over the weaponization of the dollar and the perceived double standards of liberal norms.

Yet this is not a story of inevitable Western decline. The US still anchors the global financial system, leads in technological innovation and shapes cultural narratives. Europe remains a bastion of soft power and institutional depth. But influence must now be earned, not assumed. The era of uncontested Western primacy is over. What remains is a world of competing systems, fractured legitimacy and negotiated relevance.

What is fading is not democracy itself but the illusion of its inevitability. The world is fragmenting into a mosaic of governance models — liberal, illiberal, technocratic, hybrid. The task for the West is no longer to assert universality but to demonstrate adaptability and relevance.

That task begins at home. Without restored trust, renewed institutions and a revitalized social contract, Western democracies cannot credibly lead abroad. Internationally, engagement must be grounded in mutual respect — not paternalism. Sovereign states will chart their own paths. Partnership, not proselytization, is the new currency of diplomacy.

We are not entering a new Cold War era. We are entering something more uncertain: a world without a center of gravity, without a sole definition of progress and without a clear endpoint. The liberal order's twilight is not the end of order — it is the beginning of something more complex, more pluralistic and more demanding.

The end of certainty may feel like decline. But it could also be the beginning of a more honest, resilient global order — if the West is willing to adapt.

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