



By: **Carl Bildt**

# A new era of global disorder



It was once common to speak of a “liberal international order.” Even if the accompanying institutional arrangements were not always entirely liberal, international, or orderly, the label had its uses.

After all, the purpose of an ideal is not to describe reality, but to guide behavior, and for many decades, most countries aspired to be part of the liberal order and to contribute to its development (even if some preferred to free ride or game the system).

Those days are clearly gone. We have entered a new era of global disorder.

Obviously, the steady rise of China and other emerging economies was always going to pose a challenge to arrangements that were created by the Western powers after World War II.

But the decisive factor in the demise of the liberal international order is that its chief architect, the United States, has abandoned it.

No longer do American leaders echo **John F. Kennedy's** commitment to “pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty.”

True, the US wasn't always consistent in upholding international law or supporting the United Nations and its multilateral networks of cooperation.

But there is little doubt that without American support, this entire edifice would have crumbled, as seems to be happening now.

Under President Donald Trump's second administration, the US has become explicit in denouncing the old liberal order, with Secretary of State **Marco Rubio** arguing that it is “not just obsolete; it is now a weapon being used against us.”

## Common rules

By definition, an international order entails some common rules. But the Trump

administration is openly hostile to any such constraints.

It is explicitly pursuing a policy of putting its own self-defined interests above everything else, and it has proven willing – and even eager – to brutalize friends and allies in the process.

Trump's punitive tariffs are only part of the story. He has thrown out the entire rulebook, including by imposing import tariffs for reasons that have nothing to do with trade.

## The global economy will pay a heavy price for Trump's reign of destruction

While it is still early days, there is no doubt that the global economy will pay a heavy price for Trump's reign of destruction – with the US economy perhaps suffering the most in the long term.

The very concept of international law has been all but expunged from US foreign and economic policymaking.

The long-held view of geopolitics as a contest between democratic and authoritarian regimes now looks utterly irrelevant.

Trump and his appointees speak of human rights only selectively, such as when issuing false claims about a **genocide** being committed against white farmers in South Africa (meanwhile, the Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank merit barely any mention).

## Forever wars

There has been an understandable backlash in the US against the “forever wars” in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as a belated recognition that foreign countries cannot simply be reordered by US diktat.

The “unipolar” moment of unrivaled US power – between the fall of the Berlin Wall and China's emergence as a technological

superpower – undoubtedly lent itself to American hubris.

## The US has become an engine of international disorder

But now the pendulum has swung all the way in the other direction. From **Greenland** to the Panama Canal, the US has become an engine of international disorder, joining the likes of Russia, with its delusional war of aggression against Ukraine and mushrooming shadow war on the European Union.

Meanwhile, vast regions, from the Horn of Africa to **Sudan** and through the Sahel, are descending into conflict and chaos, and no one seems to care. In fact, the US is busy with its own new little “war of choice” against Nicolás Maduro’s regime in Venezuela.

## China wants a new global order

Despite its industrial might and expanding naval resources, China is unlikely to fill the void left by the US.

So far, the Chinese have been treading cautiously, strongly resisting what they see as US bullying, but refraining from intervening in various conflicts around the world.



*If there is any hope in this age of global disarray, it will lie in plurilateral coalitions focused on specific issues – Carl Bildt*

China explicitly wants a new global order, not a continuation of the US-led liberal order that

prevailed for eight decades after WWII.

But there is no new order on the horizon. We have entered a period of global disorder, with illiberal regimes gaining ground and the old structures of international breaking down.

These trends would be dangerous enough in isolation; they are even more so in the face of climate change, pandemic risks, and potentially disruptive technologies like AI.

The cooperation needed to manage these threats is not in the offing. If there is any hope in this age of global disarray, it will lie in plurilateral coalitions focused on specific issues – trade rules, global health, and the energy transition, among others.

Countries that recognize the dangers we face will have to find new ways to come together on their own.

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