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The crisis of American leadership

As liberal democracies try to address the immense challenges of this century, they must confront the Iraq War's legacy of mistrust and division

In December 2003, roughly nine months into the Iraq War that would forever define his legacy, then-US President George W. Bush was asked whether his administration's policies complied with international law. 'I don't know what you're talking about by international law. I better consult my lawyer,' he joked. Bush's disastrous military adventurism starkly illustrated the importance of international norms and institutions, as well as the consequences of disregarding them.

Unfortunately, we seem to have forgotten this lesson once again.

Since the end of World War II, the United Nations has been the cornerstone of the international rules-based order. While numerous other international agreements address issues such as chemical weapons, biological warfare and regional stability, the UN has been entrusted with the overarching role of maintaining global peace and stability. What made it effective, at least for a while, was the support of the world's liberal democracies and, crucially, the unwavering commitment of both Democratic and Republican administrations in the United States.

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To be sure, the US has long been ambivalent about some aspects of the international order, as demonstrated by its long-standing refusal to join the International Criminal Court. For the most part, however, the US has adhered to the global rulebook, despite the enormous political and economic power it acquired in the aftermath of World War II, which would have enabled it to do whatever it wanted unilaterally.

That all changed with the Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq, a sovereign country, in the face of fierce international opposition and without the UN Security Council's approval. In doing so, the US severely damaged its own credibility and undermined the global rules-based system, providing many African and Latin American countries with a plausible reason not to condemn Russia for its invasion of Ukraine. Even India has maintained a neutral stance on Ukraine, capitalising on the US-led economic sanctions by buying deeply discounted Russian oil, despite the deepening ties between the Kremlin and China, India's main geopolitical rival.

Striking the right balance in migration

As liberal democracies attempt to negotiate international agreements to address the immense political, economic and social challenges of the twenty-first century – particularly climate change and mass migration – they must confront the Iraq War's legacy of mistrust and division. Addressing future migratory pressures, in particular, will be impossible without international agreements and the cooperation of lower-income countries in the Global South.

Africa's population, for example, is expected to double by 2050. To avert a toxic combination of political instability, war, and climate-exacerbated economic misery that could affect hundreds of millions of people across the continent's most vulnerable regions, Europe's liberal democracies must employ innovative statecraft, security interventions and substantial development aid. Without such measures, Western European countries could face a massive migration wave that would inevitably lead to significant social challenges and further fuel the rise of populist politics.

At present, however, it seems that Europe's main strategy for dealing with illegal immigration is to hope that the prospect of dying in the Mediterranean or the English Channel will deter asylum seekers. But as the United Kingdom's recent experience shows, such measures, while popular with right-wing tabloids, do not address the problem's underlying causes. As European countries grapple with aging populations and a decline in the number of working-age people, the need for a sensible immigration policy that considers countries' long-term needs is increasingly apparent.

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decades. The issue already dominates the political debate, with the power to topple governments, as it recently did in the Netherlands, and fuel the rise of right-wing extremists. But given the continent's demographic challenges, sustaining essential public services and maintaining economic growth will require accepting far more immigrants than the likes of France's Marine Le Pen and the UK's Nigel Farage would prefer.

The existential threat posed by climate change underscores the urgent need to bridge the trust gap between developed and developing countries. Crucially, the international community must agree on how to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions and ensure that those most affected by the effects of global warming – the low-income countries that are least responsible for creating it – are not disproportionately burdened.

The world's confidence in Western liberal democracies' capacity to shape policies and agreements to address these critical challenges would be significantly higher if the US was still capable of bipartisan leadership. But at a time when Republicans in Washington are undermining the very foundations of electoral politics, this seems highly unlikely.

Many of America's current domestic political divisions grew out of the Iraq War. Whereas presidents like Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, and Dwight Eisenhower demonstrated that effective leaders can make the world a safer and better place, even in the face of great adversity, Bush's presidency showed that the opposite is equally true.

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