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With or without Trump

The US will continue to withdraw from multilateral institutions — regardless of the election outcome. Is Europe ready to fill the gap?

The US election on 5 November is widely seen as fateful for Europe. The possible return of Donald Trump to the White House is causing uncertainty in Europe, while Kamala Harris is seen as a guarantor of normality and the rules-based international order. Yet those who assume that Trump's foreign policy is an anomaly run the risk of overlooking profound developments in US foreign policy. Europe must prepare for the United States to turn away from multilateralism regardless of the election outcome. To preserve the rules-based international order from which they have benefited immensely, Europeans must draw the right lessons.

It is a common assumption that US disengagement from multilateral institutions is a feature of the Trump era. Indeed, the Trump administration ended US support for or membership in numerous international organisations and agreements. Examples include the Paris Agreement on climate change, the 'Iran Deal', the UN Human Rights Council, the World Trade Organization (WTO) and even the World Health Organization.

While its withdrawal from multilateral institutions during the Trump administration was unprecedented in terms of the number and importance of the institutions abandoned, there is no denying that the US has a long history of ambivalence towards multilateralism: the country has withdrawn from multilateral institutions before. Under Jimmy Carter, for example, the United States left the International Labour Organization (ILO); under Ronald Reagan, it left the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO); and under Bill Clinton, it left the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO). In addition, George W. Bush refused to ratify the Kyoto Protocol and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC).

Not an anomaly…

A continued US withdrawal from multilateral institutions is likely due to three profound trends: Firstly, there are now more multilateral institutions and they wield more influence than ever before, which increasingly limits the US' room for manoeuvre and makes these institutions the target of political criticism. On top of that, the growing domestic polarisation in the US – including on foreign policy issues – is making decision-making in Congress more difficult. Finally, the US is confronted with rising powers such as China and India, as well as revisionist and illiberal states such as Russia.

Joe Biden, too, was subject to these internal and external constraints, and he only partially kept his promise that 'America is back'. While the US has returned to important institutions such as the Paris Agreement and UNESCO, it has not returned to the Iran Deal, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) or the Open Skies Treaty. Nor have the funding gaps Trump left behind to support global climate protection been fully closed. Finally, Biden has not only continued the blockade of the WTO but has also introduced new protectionist measures such as the Inflation Reduction Act.

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Europe should therefore question the assumption that Trump's policies were an anomaly. The centrifugal forces at work in the US are manifold and will persist in the future. Whether the US government is led by Trump or Harris, Europeans will have to expect further cases of US withdrawal from multilateral institutions.

It would also be a mistake to dismiss Trump's decisions as erratic and impulsive. His 'America First' policy and his criticism of multilateral institutions tapped into populist narratives of taking back control of foreign policy and investing money in one's own nation rather than in other countries.

… but a strategic calculation

But a look at Trump's rhetoric shows that the way in which the US attacked multilateral institutions was strategically calculated. They limited themselves to criticism where they could expect quick concessions due to their strong position of power. As a result, public reproaches and demands were levelled at NATO, which the allies quickly met with concessions. Where there were opportunities for blockades, the

US remained a member and prevented unpopular policies within the institution. For instance, the US blocked the WTO's dispute settlement procedure so as to prevent binding judgements against its protectionist trade policy. But it only terminated its membership in institutions in which it could hardly exert any influence to prevent unwelcome policies. For example, the US withdrew from the Paris Agreement as it was unable to prevent or even change its regulations on its own.

The US withdrawal from multilateral institutions hence followed a pattern even under Trump: the greater the US' power of obstruction in an institution, the more limited the attacks were. The Europeans could therefore counteract the escalation of US criticism of multilateral institutions by, for example, granting the US special veto rights or appointing Americans to important positions in international bureaucracies. Even if such privileges make decision-making more difficult and run counter to standards of fairness, they promise to keep the US at the negotiating table and thus preserve the relevance of multilateral institutions.

A third misconception is that multilateral institutions are doomed to fail without the US. While the US was instrumental in creating and maintaining key multilateral institutions, many proved remarkably resilient after the US withdrawal. The Paris Agreement, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the WTO and the TPP all proved resilient.

Nevertheless, not all institutions survived the US withdrawal. For example, UNESCO and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) plunged into budget crises after the US cancelled its financial contributions. Without US support, the Kyoto Protocol, the Iran Dea' and the Treaty on Open Skies also failed.

Filling the gap

Institutional resilience cannot be taken for granted, but must be actively brought about by other leaders. Following the US withdrawal, European governments, the EU and the bureaucracies of international organisations took on an important leadership role in many multilateral institutions and filled the gaps that arose. In the Paris Agreement, for example, the EU and China assumed responsibility for pursuing global climate targets. The WHO Secretariat worked closely with European member states to respond to Trump's criticism and fight the Covid19 pandemic without them. In the WTO, the EU Commission took a leadership role and forged a coalition of trade powers with which they set

up an alternative trade court to circumvent the US blockade of the official dispute settlement procedure.

If European governments want to maintain the rules-based order, they must be prepared to take a leadership role after the US withdrawal. For this to succeed, they must continue to champion multilateral institutions and abide by their rules to maintain their reputation as supporters of liberal principles. This will strengthen their soft power and enable them to win partners among non-Western states for the preservation of multilateral institutions.

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Furthermore, Europeans should consolidate and further expand their own capabilities — from armaments to the financial sector. Because only together do they have enough hard power to exert influence on the international stage on key issues such as environmental and security policy. In the process, it is important to identify dependencies and systematically dismantle them. After all, the EU's attempt to save the Iran deal failed due to the dominance of the US dollar in the international financial system.

Ultimately, Europeans should strengthen the secretariats of international organisations, as they have a particularly strong motivation to fight for their continued existence. This is possible by providing the secretariats with more financial resources and further promoting their independence from individual member states.

Europe should take its destiny into its own hands instead of hoping or fearing the outcome of the elections on 5 November. If Europeans are willing and able to take on international leadership responsibilities and work together in favour of multilateral institutions, the rules-based international order will continue to exist in the future.



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