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America, heal thyself

If the US is to resume its role as in the liberal international order, it needs to overcome the domestic divisions

Read this article in German.

In 1998, then-US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright famously defined the United States as 'the indispensable nation,' declaring that, 'We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future.' Two decades later, the US remains the indispensable nation. And yet, rather than seeing into the future, it has lately seemed to have its eyes closed. Does Joe Biden's victory in this month's presidential election mean the US is re-opening them?

One thing is apparent: had Donald Trump won a second term, the fate of the US Albright described would have been sealed. The America that has long undergirded the liberal international order – shaped by the universal principles defined in the 1941 Atlantic Charter – would have been destroyed, once and for all.

And yet the impending Biden presidency by no means guarantees a return to the US leadership and vision of the past. Yes, it was a definitive victory. Biden won over 79 million votes, more than any other US president. And he won the same number of Electoral College votes as Trump did in 2016, when Trump claimed to have a 'massive landslide victory,' despite his having lost the popular vote to Hillary Clinton.

Nonetheless, Trump received more than 73 million votes this year – about ten million more than in 2016, and the second-largest number of votes ever cast for a US presidential candidate. And his unfounded claims of widespread voter fraud – supported so far by much of the Republican Party establishment that has, until now, refused to confirm Biden's victory – have convinced about half of US Republicans that he is the election's 'rightful' winner.

Trump's influence will stay beyond the election

Far from producing a wholesale rejection of Trump and Trumpism, the election has demonstrated that Trump's influence will extend far beyond his presidency. This is to say nothing about the lasting scars that his continued challenges to the election results – in the courts and in public consciousness – will leave on America's democracy and international reputation.

To be sure, this legacy is not likely to be fully felt internationally in the near term. The Biden administration will seek to reassert America's role in multilateral institutions. Already, the president-elect has pledged to rejoin the Paris climate agreement, the World Health Organization, and the Iran nuclear agreement. Other likely actions include the unblocking of appointments to the World Trade Organization's Appellate Body, responsible for adjudicating disputes among members, a move that is of both practical and symbolic significance.

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But, while these nods to multilateralism are important, the expectations that the US will swiftly resume its global leadership role must be tempered. Although the US remains the world's predominant military and economic power, as well as a major cultural force, it is no hegemon. It can no longer dictate the direction of international relations.

What the US *can* still do is mobilise diverse international actors to address shared challenges. Unless the US heals its divisions, however, even this 'convening power' – which lies at the heart of Biden's likely early efforts to restore multilateralism – is likely to be eroded in the medium to long term.

Convening power is more nuanced than raw hegemonic power. It rests not only on capacity and influence, but also on a sense of moral authority that attracts partners and infuses shared action with legitimacy. A convening power must set an example of liberalism and multilateralism, not just make demands. A country as divided as today's US cannot provide such an example.

The future of the international order

The stakes are high. If the pole around which the international order was built continues to weaken, the dangerous drift of recent years – exemplified by the absence of a coordinated global response to the Covid-19 pandemic – will continue. Even the diplomatic muscle memory that has enabled the limited recent examples of cooperation will fade.

Why shouldn't someone else lead? Simply put, because no one else can. There is no single actor, or even a collection of actors, that is ready to take America's place.

Consider the European Union, which has long fancied itself a potential standard-bearer of liberal values. It certainly possesses many of the attributes of an exemplar: vibrant and diverse cultures, dynamic civil societies, well-institutionalized systems for upholding human rights and the rule of law, and a commitment to multilateralism.

And yet, in many areas vital to global leadership, the EU falters. A lack of political will has meant that Europe has consistently misallocated resources. As a result, it has failed to build up adequate shared capacity or even to create the conditions for doing so. For example, EU leaders insist that Europe needs to achieve 'strategic autonomy,' without agreement on what that means.

More fundamentally, the EU lacks the self-assurance it would need to serve as a credible and compelling example for the world. To change that, it must first define and convey a compelling *raison d'être*, which can form the basis of its own revitalised model. It must then dedicate significant resources – time, effort, and money – to building the capacity and status needed to project its influence. In short, the EU must walk the walk.

Unless and until it does, the US will be indispensable, because it is irreplaceable. That makes it all the more important for the Biden administration not only to re-engage with the world and the multilateral system as a convening power, but also to find a way to heal the US. Only a reasonably united America can stand tall, look forward, and serve as the beating heart of the liberal international order.

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Ana Palacio

Madrid

Ana Palacio, a former Spanish foreign minister and former Senior Vice President of the World Bank, is a member of the Spanish Council of State, a visiting lecturer at Georgetown University, and a member of the World Economic Forum's Global Agenda Council on the United States.

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