

## THREE STRIKES AND YOU'RE OUT?

Implications of “Hyper-Globalisation”, the New Cold War, and the Coronavirus for the Future of Multilateralism

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These are gloomy days for contemplating with nostalgic affection the multilateral post-Cold War international order. Commonly referred to of late as the “Liberal International Order” [LIO], that dispensation is seen to be increasingly under threat of such severity as to be virtually on life support – if in fact, it has not already been tipped into the grave. A variety of challenges are apparently responsible for the dire situation of the contemporary LIO. Any of them on their own would be trouble enough for that order; but the combination of the challenges listed in this chapter’s subtitle – a veritable triple whammy, with the latest affliction, the COVID pandemic of 2020, considered by some to be its *coup de grâce* – is such as to conclude that the time has come to publish multilateralism’s obituary.

At the risk of taking the label of a Panglossian exercise, this chapter will not argue that multilateralism is dead. Multilateralism is not synonymous with the LIO, thus if the latter disappears, there is no logical reason why the former must also vanish. Certainly, multilateralism is under strain. Indeed, one would probably have to go back to the inter-war era of the twentieth century to encounter such a pervasive sense of despondency regarding this institution. The dysthymia that reigned during the “twenty years’ crisis” of those two decades stood in sharp contrast to the optimism that had characterised the years leading to August 1914.<sup>1</sup> In the giddy aftermath of the Cold War’s ending, did anyone really not believe the world could begin anew as a result of the wonder-working prowess of globalisation? If whisked back by a time machine to 1913, one might have found what appeared to be very familiar terrain. At that time, just as in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, it looked as if the spectre of Great Power war suffered banishment from an increasingly interconnected and cosmopolitan world. At that time, again just as in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, it really did seem as if ever growing interdependence had corroborated a new truth about international politics, namely that when people and goods could move freely across borders, armies would never again have to do so.<sup>2</sup> It was possible in those heady years of peace to regard war, so long the scourge of the planet, as finally unmasked for what it was: the “great illusion”.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, even during that era so often recalled, not only in France, as *la belle époque*,<sup>4</sup> problems abounded. “The good old days”, in the words of the Billy Joel song, “weren’t always good, and tomorrow’s not as bad as it seems”.<sup>5</sup> At least the singer got the first half of the couplet right, given that when contemplated from the good old days of *la belle époque*, the future actually turned out to be *worse* than anyone could have imagined. To be sure, those pre-1914 decades were hardly paradisiacal, not even in “advanced” Europe, what with more than 15,000 people dying in terrorist attacks during the 15 years before 1914 and where the continent’s largest country, Russia, resembled nothing so much as a “constantly simmering civil war whose outbreaks of insurrection and reprisal punctuated a fragile stalemate in the state”.<sup>6</sup> Conditions in Europe’s colonial empires were, needless to say, much worse. The era only looked so good because what came after it, the new Thirty Years’ War of 1914–1945, was so evidently horrific.<sup>7</sup>

If there is such a thing as an historical learning curve, then the “international community” certainly clambered up one following the Second World War. Enabling this rapid and inspiring exit from the recent experience of Great Power war was the greatly reinvigorated geostrategic institution known as multilateralism.<sup>8</sup> Fuelling it in large part was a sustained commitment of the liberal democracies of the wartime alliance – above all, the United States and Britain – to prevent the kind of geopolitical backsliding that had proven so costly after the First World War.<sup>9</sup> Today, the latest – post-Cold War – manifestation of that order is itself tottering, and to more than a few analysts, it is because like the order that ended in 1913, illusions lay at the base of the LIO. One concerned the relative painlessness of globalised free trade, such that in increasing overall global wealth – which it did – it could also ensure that the fruits of greater prosperity could be more ethically and equitably shared – which it did not. Another of those illusions was that a liberal Power of such vast capacity – in the event, the United States – could be counted on to understand that as it was the principal beneficiary of the multilateral order, it must fall to it to become *and to remain* the order’s leading champion. Quite a few analysts felt moved to suggest that for the United States, the appropriate role to adopt had to be that of “hegemon”, even if it remained unclear what the concept of hegemony was actually supposed to mean in practice.<sup>10</sup> But whatever it might have meant, the “h-word” implied one certainty: there could be no “Amerexit” from the task of overseeing the LIO.

One astute critic of American foreign policy has given to the post-Cold War mind set a metaphorical label, the “Emerald City consensus”. Andrew Bacevich invokes this trope to identify that magical place to which the yellow brick road led in *The Wizard of Oz* – a place of fulfilling all wishes and where all dreams come true. For Bacevich, this post-1991 consensus rested on three core assumptions, all critically dependent on American superintendence. They were: “unfettered” capitalism worked best for Americans and everyone else; “unabashed” American military domination of the system worked best for Americans and everyone else; and the purpose of life after the Cold War had become, for Americans and everyone else, to enjoy to the fullest individual liberty whilst taking on as few civic responsibilities as possible.

In light of this trio of assumptions, Bacevich finds it easy to understand Americans’ current disaffection with the LIO: they simply ceased to believe that it was still working to promote their interests. Bacevich and former President Donald Trump, with whom he stood in fundamental disagreement on so many issues, did at least share one important quality: membership in the same Baby Boom generation.

During the period stretching from the mid-1940s through the 1980s, as [Trump] and I passed from infancy and childhood into adolescence and then manhood, most Americans most of the time nurtured the conviction that the three versions of

post-war freedom to which they subscribed could coexist in rough equipoise. That their nation could be simultaneously virtuous *and* powerful *and* deliriously affluent seemed not only plausible, but essential.<sup>11</sup>

Somewhere along the road, however, the wheels began to fall off the cart that was supposed to lead to the Emerald City.

Even though one might fairly object that the Emerald City consensus is so clearly America-centric, Bacevich's argument cannot and really should not be considered synonymous with the entirety of the political institution known as multilateralism. Indeed, over the past few years, some might even be tempted to regard it as antonymous with that institution, and even a few optimists think it possible to keep alive an LIO from which America has absented itself. Still, the Emerald City metaphor does have the considerable merit of highlighting what is *by far* the leading – albeit not the sole – source of the current angst about the future of the LIO: the conviction that America *has* lost faith in the order it did so much to bring into existence after 1945. Accordingly, this analysis will be emphatically America-centric and concentrate on two matters: America's initial embrace of, and enthusiasm for, multilateralism; and the implications of the “triple whammy” of the reaction to hyper-globalisation, the emerging Sino-American Cold War, and the impact of the COVID pandemic.

To restate, America does not represent the whole story; it is not the be-all and end-all of contemporary multilateralism. However, and in keeping with the baseball motif conveyed in this chapter's title, one could do much worse than to regard it as playing the same role that one former New York Yankees star, Reggie Jackson, once arrogated to himself: the “straw that stirs the drink”. Illustrative of this assumption is a recent enquiry into the ongoing relevance – or lack thereof – of the mobilising role played by the geopolitical construction known as the “West” in the formulation of American foreign policy. Michael Kimmage rattled off a list of the leading contemporary challenges confronting multilateralism. High on the list of difficulties facing the LIO were the increase in democratic backsliding in many parts of Europe; the failure of the Middle East to embrace democratisation; the resurgence of a rebarbative and nationalistic Russia under Vladimir Putin; and, most important, the unstoppable – or at least unstopped – “rise” of China.

Yet worrisome as the items on this list may be, today's funk really has its roots in American soil. For Kimmage, applying terminology that reflects an easy identity amongst the constructs of “West”, “Washington consensus”, and LIO, the principal peril posed to multilateralism has been the American *retreat* from it. “With Trump's election”, he writes,

an American-led West was becoming an object of nostalgia. It might still be a rhetorical figuration or a future option, but it was no longer the point of orientation for American foreign policy. The Washington consensus had unravelled most spectacularly not in Beijing or Moscow or Damascus but in Washington, DC.<sup>12</sup>

In effect, America had cast it aside as outmoded, and even dangerous, political junk.

Assuming that Kimmage is correct in this assessment, it follows that the place to begin comprehending the current state and future prospects of multilateralism is with America's experience as a “multilateral” player in the game of states. It has been a latecomer to the game, from the historical perspective. Whilst Kimmage and so many other authors have sought recourse in the notion of the oft-commented post-Cold War “Washington consensus” as a means of identifying some of the denotative qualities of American multilateralism, there had actually been another, much older and longer-lived, Washington consensus conditioning the

country's relationship to the international balance of power. This earlier consensus stood as the very antithesis of multilateralism. As such, it meant that the blossoming of America's newfound love after 1945 for multilateralism required the uprooting of the earlier Washington consensus.

That older Washington consensus took its meaning from the famous "farewell address" given by America's first president, George Washington, in September 1796.<sup>13</sup> It was widely interpreted – and correctly – as guidance to future generations of Americans to avoid becoming enmeshed in the power politics of the leading European states, with whom Washington warned against the forging of "permanent" alliances – a successor, Thomas Jefferson, endorsed and embellished the advice, substituting "entangling" for "permanent" as the sort of alliance that was to be shunned. The first Washington consensus enjoyed an extraordinarily long life, temporarily breached when America entered the European balance of power in 1917, but apparently only permanently overturned because of the country's involvement in the Second World War.

This first Washington consensus is often characterised by the label "isolationism", but this latter word is, like "hegemony", open to so many confusing and contradictory interpretations that it is probably wisest to replace it with the notion of "unilateralism".<sup>14</sup> One analyst advocates doing just that.<sup>15</sup> Although not without complications in its own right, unilateralism at least helps gain some analytical purchase over the concept that is so central to this chapter's analysis of American multilateralism. This is because post-1945 American multilateralism started out, and for many decades remained, primarily – although not exclusively – a transatlantic phenomenon. And to the extent that there has been an upsurge in concern about America's defecting from the multilateral frameworks it did so much to erect over the past 75 years, it is sparked by worry about its turning its back on the transatlantic framework of security and defence that had been the hallmark of multilateralism "American-style". To a degree difficult to over-emphasise, that variant of multilateralism really did begin its existence as a *Pax Atlantica*.<sup>16</sup>

What situated America squarely in the multilateral geopolitical arena during the twentieth century were the two world wars, the first only temporarily, but the second more lastingly. Since Europe had been, for so long, the place where the world's Great Powers "resided", it was also by definition the part of the world that involved for America the most risk of entanglement. Worse, it was where the source of danger lay. If possible to avoid involvement in the European balance of power, it followed to generations of Washington's successors that so, too, could the risk of entanglement be skirted and that of harm avoided. Ultimately, it proved impossible for presidents to continue to entertain this vision of an America hived safely off in "its" hemisphere, so in this sense it is correct to interpret the intervention decision of the Second World War as a reflection of the grand strategy of "offshore balancing".<sup>17</sup> It is less correct, however, to attribute the intervention decision during the First World War to this motive. In large measure because of this failure of American decision-makers to construe the 1917 decision as motivated by concerns for their country's physical security, it proved impossible to launch an era of security multilateralism in the two decades following the First World War. In that moment, *la nécessité* did not *oblige*.

In retrospect, what would have been required to make post-First World War multilateralism function in theory was impossible to achieve in practice: a close security and defence relationship between the United States and Britain. During the interwar years, a lasting Anglo-American alliance remained a will-o-the-wisp, for as some scholars point out, this all-important bilateral relationship remained conditioned by a considerable degree of mutual suspicion and strategic rivalry.<sup>18</sup> Americans, and those who led them in the interwar years, simply had great difficulty imagining that national security depended in any fundamental way on scrapping the first Washington consensus.<sup>19</sup> To the contrary, safety and common sense required its maintenance.

It is hardly any exaggeration, then, to link American multilateralism so tightly with the trans-atlantic security arrangements of the decades following the Second World War. The country's new grand strategy contrasted radically with what had gone before; but if it was very much an "internationalist" and multilateralist one, it was not for all that, a "universalistic" grand strategy. Rather, it was, as George Kennan, the father of American containment policies, so memorably phrased it, a "particularistic" strategy. Europe was the cynosure, even if not the exclusive focus of strategy insofar as American policy-makers saw things. And even when American involvement in other regions began seemingly to increase, it was in large measure for fear that non-involvement in regional security elsewhere – for instance, Korea – would redound negatively for America in what *was* its multilateralist geographic core, Europe.<sup>20</sup>

By the mid-twentieth century, those who thought and wrote about America's grand strategy embraced a new axiom: no piece of real estate outside of North America itself could be of such primordial significance for the country's strategic interests as that large landmass often referred to as "Eurasia". Control of this territory by any single adversary or league of adversaries would present a dire, perhaps even fatal, challenge to American prosperity and physical security alike. The prospect of such control, however, could remain at bay if America might prevent any foe from dominating Western Europe. Regarded as constituting the dynamic "rimland" of Eurasia, this region held the greatest concentration of industrial wealth, and therefore military potential, outside of the United States.<sup>21</sup> The key to understanding America's post-1945 embrace of multilateralism was, therefore, in the "rational" assessment of leaders obliged to do all possible to enhance the nation's security and other interests.

But there was more to America's love affair with the old multilateralism than simple self-interest based on a rational calibration of threats, set off against the requirements needed to parry those threats. There was also an ideational aspect to American grand strategy, a derivative of what many took to be the country's "liberal" ideology. Over time, this second – ideological – element of strategy would emerge as important in America's embrace of multilateralism, *pari passu* the decline in anxiety regarding the Soviet "threat" once the alarmism of the late 1940s and early 1950s began to dissipate. If ideology never did or could supplant security completely as a principal motivational buttress of American multilateralism, it certainly became, as the Cold War settled down into an uncomfortable yet bearable stalemate, a powerful reinforcing element in the country's Western-oriented multilateral dispensation. Even the doctrine of "containment" needs regarding at least as much as a liberal – therefore ideological – strategy as it was a balance of power one.<sup>22</sup>

Americans have never been thoroughgoing realists. For so many of them, realism was a mid-twentieth-century European import that fitted only partially and uncomfortably into the country's strategic culture.<sup>23</sup> It did not resonate with America's geopolitical DNA in the long period leading to the country's involvement in the Second World War. And even after realist precepts started to entrench themselves in American policy-making circles following that conflict, powerful ideological garnishing was required to mobilise elites and public behind strategic initiatives required for waging the new Cold War. During the post-1945 period, and well into the first decade of the twenty-first century, liberalism supplied that ideological garnish, interpreted in the American context through the cognitive filter of "Wilsonianism" – or what one scholar termed the "Wilsonian impulse".<sup>24</sup>

Yet another observation is that the "liberal tradition is not only *in* America, it *is* America. The realist tradition, in contrast, not only is rarely in America, it is un-American".<sup>25</sup> Some might disagree with this attribution of such total ideological dominance to liberalism, but few would dispute that liberalism has been a – some say, *the* – cardinal feature of America's mooted "exceptionalism".<sup>26</sup> Nor would be it easy to deny that following the Second World War, the

Wilsonian variant of liberalism did come to represent a new standing injunction for many American policy elites to conceive their country's place in the world in both multilateralist and interventionist terms. Security concerns made multilateral participation in global affairs mandatory; liberal ideology made it palatable.

Not only did liberalism apparently pre-dispose America to multilateralism; it also predisposed it toward a form of multilateralism that found anchor geographically in what was regularly referred to as the "West", the principal institutional manifestation of which became, after 1949, the "democratic alliance".<sup>27</sup> That alliance, of course, was the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation [NATO], and though at its outset its purpose had been to endow its dozen members with collective defence, many regarded it as much more than a simple security pact. Instead, it was the very embodiment of the liberal multilateral order of the post-war decades. Some scholars were even beginning to argue that, the first Washington consensus to the contrary notwithstanding, it was *multilateralism* rather than unilateralism that best reflected America's "geopolitical soul". This was a novel argument that developed increasing intellectual traction when the Soviet threat – the phenomenon that had kept America involved in the post-1945 multilateral order – disappeared. Not surprisingly, when the Soviet Union collapsed shortly after the "threat" vanished, the argument gained greater voice.

In this creative intellectual retelling, America during the first post-Cold War decade was imagined as having been *born* with a multilateral gene, whatever previous historical reality might have suggested to the contrary. What, after all, had the entire American constitutional experience been if not a tutorial from its very beginning in applied multilateralism? Such was one claim, whose understanding of early American political tradition – its "Philadelphian" constitutional order – was one impregnated by the conviction that multilateral co-operation came naturally to an America whose own early life and liberal character demanded constant attention to the requirements, as well as the benefits, of achieving ordered liberty through the spirit of compromise and "other-help".<sup>28</sup>

Although the institution of post-Second World War multilateralism contained within it many different (sub)institutions, the one that mattered most was the Atlantic alliance, itself erected on the foundation of the pre-existing – wartime – Anglo-American alliance. This is why NATO's post-Cold War evolution would prove to be so interesting, at least from the perspective of International Relations theorists. For many theoretically inclined NATO-watchers, the 1990s became a fascinating decade, one during which the alliance's principal champions hailed from the epistemological precincts of liberal-institutionalism and social-constructivism. This is not to say that there had been a headlong retreat of realists from the ranks of NATO supporters during those years; it is just to remark the most creative intellectual energies came forth from non-realist theoretical enclaves. Amongst some students of the alliance, the "new NATO" in constant evolution throughout the 1990s would so transform itself as to overstep the traditional boundary between international organisation and domestic institution.<sup>29</sup> Henceforth, some argued, NATO "should be viewed as an evolving civic community whose pacific relations are the institutionalised norm rather than the calculated preference of states".<sup>30</sup>

NATO both symbolised and enabled the "multilateral moment" in world affairs. It did so mostly because it fostered the shaping of a collective identity in the West. No longer merely a clearinghouse of discrete national interests, as imagined by realist theoreticians, constructivists came to see the alliance as something truly new under the international sun. A German assessment pushed this argument further than anyone else did. It asked to envision NATO not as a simple military pact, but rather the first, shining, example of post-Westphalian governance by means of the "international state" – a transnational, multilateral, entity able and willing to assume certain functions previously only fulfilled, if fulfilled at all, by the territorial state.<sup>31</sup>

Amongst those functions, none was as essential as the provision of security, which is what NATO supposedly achieved by dint of its “joint control of organised violence potential in a transnational space”.

To those who during the post-Cold War decade and ever since so rhapsodised the transatlantic alliance, it has become child’s play to understand what had gone so horribly wrong with multilateralism over the past few years. They imagine Trump’s election in November 2016 drove multilateralism past the point of no return, because the forty-fifth president decreed its extinction. This means of identifying the problem, however alluring to some, nevertheless remains unpersuasive. Trump was more a symptom than a cause of the much deeper malaise associated with the variant of multilateralism symbolised by the LIO. Because of the apparent seamlessness in correspondence many have established between the LIO and multilateralism, it is easy to assume that the perils facing the former must also put paid to the latter. What are those perils? For a country that supposedly possessed such a constitutional if not genetic inclination toward multilateralism and liberalism, the record of the past few years must constitute quite a puzzle. How could there have been such second-guessing of late regarding America’s own continued belief in the order it worked so hard to erect following the Second World War? The easy answer, as noted above, is to put the blame squarely on the shoulders of Trump, who made no secret of his own lofty disregard for multilateralism and strong preference for bilateralism and, to some, unilateralism in his dealings with other states, friends or not, allies or not. A writer for the *New York Times*, on the final weekend prior to the November 2020 election that chased Trump from power, was only engaging in slight hyperbole when observing that the president had

dominated news cycles and frayed nerves in almost every corner of the earth like few leaders in history. Having lived through his impulsiveness, and his disdain for allies and dalliances with adversaries, the world is on tenterhooks waiting to see whether the United States will choose to stay that rocky course.<sup>32</sup>

Tempting as it is to lay all the blame on Trump, one might be better guided by turning to a decidedly non-Trumpian ideological perspective, “neo-conservatism”, and reflect on the witticism of that perspective’s leading intellectual luminary, Irving Kristol. This one-time Trotskyite-turned-conservative famously reflected on what occurs to people making them abandon previous ideological convictions and embrace ideas they once held to be abhorrent. Liberals, Kristol quipped, morphed into conservatives because they had been “mugged by reality”.<sup>33</sup> With apologies to Kristol, one might better understand the recent retreat of America from the LIO of its own creation as being the consequence of a bruising confrontation with reality. The irony is that LIO’s *failure* did not lead to American disillusionment with it; rather, its *success* did so. In this sense, it is crucial to address three aspects of that “successful” record, to see what has led to such a radical rethinking in the United States about the merits – or lack thereof – of liberal multilateralism.

The first of these explanations for cooling the ardour of so many Americans for the LIO can be traced to a kind of cost-benefit calculus owing to “rational” contemplation of the relative distribution of gain from hyper-globalisation, rather than from overheated imaginations of an untutored and blinkered public said to be too stupid to understand its own interests. Put at its simplest, there has been over time a growing belief that the gains from liberalised trade and investment flows have not been captured by America to anything like the extent initially envisioned by the architects of the post-1945 multilateral order. It results from the frustration of the earlier promise contained in the idea of “embedded liberalism”,<sup>34</sup> whereby workers in

the domestic marketplace were to be protected against the ravages of de-industrialisation by a combination of a social-welfare safety net and “adjustment” assistance aimed at retraining them for more remunerative employment.

Correct or not, there is a belief widely shared throughout the political class that hyper-globalisation has fed the rise in inequality at home, and with it, the concomitant rise of social problems, including especially alarming increases in what two economists have tellingly referred to as “deaths of despair” across vast swaths of the country, in particular its hinterland.<sup>35</sup> To put it mildly, these were not supposed to be the fruits of what some like to call “liberal hegemony”, a phenomenon probably better captured through Bacevich’s “Emerald City” metaphor. Hyper-globalisation has left too many Americans behind, which at least is what so many of them believe, and it is not possible to demonstrate that they are wrong.

As hinted above, some say that the reason the LIO ceased to operate in America’s favour is not that it has worked so *poorly*, but that it worked so *well* globally. In this view – for there to be a growing distribution of wealth in the heartland of the liberal order, not just the United States but also other developed Western lands – it required exploitable surpluses available for skimming from the labours of those on the periphery of the international economic order. But as that periphery grew progressively more prosperous in step with the spread of globalisation, there was a natural decrease in the surplus available to the rich world, since the once-poor precincts of the planet were becoming greater consumers of scarce resources, whether goods or capital. A critical International Relations theorist, Beate Jahn, explains the otherwise curious phenomenon of an order’s undoing by its own success: “The much despised ‘cosmopolitan establishment’ could now pursue its economic interests unimpeded across the globe”, she writes:

Instead of protecting domestic populations in core liberal states from the inevitable downside of capitalism by importing and redistributing economic benefits from the international sphere, these populations now experienced the exact opposite: the export of investment and jobs into the international sphere ... Instead of being able to export political conflicts, populations in core liberal states saw themselves confronted with the import of political tensions in the form of refugees and migrants.<sup>36</sup>

This diagnosis is hardly limited to critical theorists, and this leads to the second strike against the LIO, summarised in the notion of the “new Cold War”. Many realists have of late come around to the conviction that the system has ceased functioning in its interests, even though it has been America’s *own* creation – aided and abetted by the British. Not only has it failed for reasons identified by those who focus on domestic inequality, there is another explanation, they say, of why the LIO has proved such a bust for America. Hyper-globalisation has been the single most important “cause” of China’s ascent in the international pecking order. And whilst critical theorists might shed few crocodile tears for what they perceive as America’s “decline” – some would say comeuppance – things are different amongst other International Relations theorists, realists in the vanguard, who worry about the strategic implications of that mooted decline.<sup>37</sup> Some of these analysts subscribe to “power transition theory”, which fosters a dim view of the prospect of continued peace at a time when the relative capability of the system’s dominant Power is being challenged by another state’s bid for “parity” if not supremacy.<sup>38</sup> In this variant of pessimism, the “relative gains” from hyper-globalisation have obviously favoured China, not America. In so bolstering China’s economic and technological capability, the LIO has also bolstered its military capability. Put crassly but accurately, the United States, along with other Western countries, has given to China the rope by which the American-led order has been able to be hanged.

Adding insult to injury has been the third strike, the coronavirus pandemic. The causal “blame game” aside, it is incontrovertible that one of the new truths to emerge from the pandemic has been the danger – from the perspective of public health – of reliance on complicated and distant “supply chains” for essential goods, in the first instance personal protective equipment, but much, much more. Yet it is not just concerns for public health that motivate the current American – and other Western – desire to “de-link” as much as possible from the Chinese economic orbit. The LIO was already on a shaky basis prior to the pandemic. What the latter has done – and it is important – is administer the final blow against the crumbling edifice. And to some, it also carries the risk of signing the death warrant for multilateralism, not only given the distressing record of international “co-operation” in response to the pandemic, captured in the new worries about the rise of “vaccine nationalism”,<sup>39</sup> but also in justifiable fears about demographic transfer. In a world reluctantly forced to embrace “social distancing”, there is a growing worry about hyper-globalisation’s easy appearance as a necessary – though not sufficient – “cause” of pandemics. And with vaccines emerging by late 2020 to defuse the current pandemic, many think that another zoonotic plague similar to, if not worse than, SARS-COVID lurks in the planet’s not-too-distant future.

In light of the analysis above, what about the guarded optimism promised earlier in this chapter regarding the future of multilateralism? Ironically, it resides in one of the very same conditions said – more rightly than wrongly – to imperil the LIO: China’s emergence. A decade or so ago, it was possible for scholars to downplay the idea that China’s ballyhooed “rise” need prove problematical. To the contrary, it could be a “win-win” for the world, with everyone growing richer together and, in the bargain, all “converging” around the political norms of liberal democracy. This is why one Australian scholar could airily dismiss “China-threat” scenarios predicated in part on misleading analogies between the experience of the United States in dealing with Soviet expansionism and the challenges likely to face it from China’s increase in relative capability – otherwise known as “power”. It was simply fallacious to draw any comparison between what *had* been a genuine problem posed by Soviet Russia and the overblown – in this view – claim that China, too, must appear as some sort of threat to American and, by extension, Western interests.<sup>40</sup> Fears that China would act as a “successor state” to the Soviet Union because of presumed ideological isomorphism between the two communist Powers – the Soviet Union and the “successor” China – were groundless.

More than a decade on, this optimism regarding a “threat” held to be more bogus than real looks misplaced, including and especially in Australia, where attitudes toward China have hardened considerably over the past few years. Yet if the optimism of a decade ago may be easy to fault, the analysis was certainly on the right track in highlighting – even if in criticising – the “successor-state” analogy. In so doing, it actually signalled, however willy-nilly, why a chapter such as this can conclude on a relatively optimistic note. To say again, whilst the LIO may be in danger, it does not follow that Western multilateralism is similarly imperilled. It is not just – or even mainly – because of the restorative tonic that Joseph Biden’s electoral victory over Trump provided to an American alliance network whose co-operative juices desiccated during the Trump Administration. Even more, it is the prospect that the return of a bipolar, Cold War-like competition between the United States and a Great Power adversary will breathe life into an evolving American-led “bounded” international order.<sup>41</sup> Another International Relations scholar writing at the dawn of the post-Cold War era of “unipolarity” observed that one of the virtues of bipolarity had been that it created incentives for the United States to commit to multilateralism. The logic here seemed impeccable: bipolarity helped to have allies close by one’s side.<sup>42</sup>

So whilst it may well be that the time has come to say “Rest in Peace” for the LIO,<sup>43</sup> one can foresee a great deal of life ahead for a Pax Americana whose geographic ambit admittedly is going to become a lot more “bounded” than that entertained by enthusiasts of the now-defunct Emerald City consensus. There is a final irony here to complement the irony of success rather than failure undoing the ILO. For the more that the “risen” China, through its self-destructive “wolf-warrior” diplomacy, parades itself as a threat to the international system, the greater will be the likelihood of the re-establishment of a reasonably healthy, security-impelled, multilateralism amongst the cohort of America and its traditional allies. It will be redolent of the multilateralism that flourished between 1945 and 1990 prior to the American embrace of an Emerald City consensus that really envisioned for a time the Americanisation of the world.

## Notes

- 1 See E.H. Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis, 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (London, 1940).
- 2 Charles Emmerson, *1913: The World before the Great War* (London, 2013).
- 3 Norman Angell, *The Great Illusion: A Study of the Relation of Military Power to National Advantage*, Fourth Revised and Enlarged Edition (NY, 1913).
- 4 Michel Winock, *La Belle Époque: La France de 1900 à 1914* (Paris, 2002).
- 5 From his song, “Keeping the Faith”, featured in his 1983 album, *An Innocent Man*.
- 6 Philip Blom, *The Vertigo Years: Change and Culture in the West, 1900–1914* (NY, 2008), 113.
- 7 Niall Ferguson, *The War of the World: Twentieth Century Conflict and the Descent of the West* (NY, 2006).
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