SECTION III:
INTERNAL-EXTERNAL DYNAMICS

CHAPTER 5

The Declining Liberal World Order and the Rise of 'Great Men' and Hero Worship: A Foreign Policy Analysis

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Introduction

The liberal world order, built generally on principles of democracy, free markets, human rights and international co-operation, has faced increasing challenges in recent years. Once seen as the inevitable trajectory of global politics following the end of the Cold War, it now appears fragile in the face of rising nationalism, authoritarianism and a return to the politics of personality. This chapter explores the decline of the liberal world order and the resurgence of 'great men' and hero worship in global politics, drawing from historical, political and philosophical perspectives, with a focus on foreign policy implications.

The foundation of the current international system is deeply embedded in an ideological framework that seeks to rationalise politics through institutional mechanisms (Cox 1979). Karl Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia* (1954) provides a critical lens through which we can understand the aspirations and contradictions of the liberal order. Mannheim (1954) argues that political ideologies are not neutral but shaped by historical and social contexts, often rationalising the interests of dominant groups. The liberal order, particularly after World War II, sought to project itself as a rational, universal system based on rules and institutions rather than the whims of individual leaders. Institutions such as the United Nations, North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the Bretton Woods financial system were created to impose structure and predictability on international politics.

However, as Mannheim (1954) suggests, any ideological system risks

becoming utopian when it assumes universality while ignoring the inherent power dynamics at play. And just as Mannheim had warned, the post-Cold War belief that liberal democracy was the 'end of history' became a prominent view advanced by political scientists such as Fukuyama (1992), exemplifying this ideological optimism. Yet, as economic disparities, cultural resistance and geopolitical rivalries emerged, cracks in the system became increasingly visible. The attempt to impose liberalism as a rational, inevitable progression of history has faced resistance, leading to a crisis of legitimacy in global governance. This crisis has facilitated the resurgence of strongman politics, where individuals, rather than institutions, shape international relations.

This chapter will examine the origins of the liberal order, its current crisis and the return of the 'great men' paradigm, assessing its implications for global foreign policy. It will contrast bureaucratic, institutional approaches to diplomacy—epitomised by the European Union—with the transactional, leader-driven strategies of figures like Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin. Finally, it will evaluate the broader implications for Africa and other regions navigating this shifting global landscape.

The foundations of the liberal world order

The liberal world order was formed in the aftermath of World War II, with institutions like the United Nations (UN), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and later, the European Union (EU) shaping a global system founded on the principles of multilateralism. However, not much has been discussed about how the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and, in part, the greater strategic containment of Russia and China has further cemented liberalism as the dominant ideological force in most of the world to date.

Championed by scholars like Zbigniew Brzezinski, Robert Kagan and Aaron Friedberg, the United States (US) and much of the West have been actively encouraged to use containment strategies to ensure the 'free', 'democratic' world—interchangeably referred to as the liberal order— maintains its dominance into perpetuity. For instance, Kagan (2008) stated that 'the world has become normal again, and the return of great-power competition means the return of the classic struggle between liberalism and autocracy.'. He automatically equated the West with liberalism, whereas it is increasingly clear today that this is not the case.

In fact, the crisis of liberalism, which will be discussed in the following segment, shows that the liberal world order is facing opposition to its overarching dominance from within the West just as much as it is unpopular in some countries considered to be outside the Western periphery. Its emphasis on globalisation has been blamed for creating economic disparities, its enforcement mechanisms have been deemed inconsistent and its universalist aspirations are often viewed as a form of suppression of cultural and national identities. This is evident from the speech by US Vice President JD Vance at the Munich Security Conference on 14 February 2025 (Lu 2025).

The speech, which was a critique of the liberal international order, particularly globalisation, enforcement inconsistencies and cultural conflict, if anything, marked a significant turning point in the US commitment to maintaining the liberal world order.

Theoretical framework: Fukuyama, Plato and the limits of liberal institutionalism

Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) provides a crucial theoretical foundation for understanding the rise and decline of the liberal world order. Fukuyama argues that liberal democracy, as the final form of government, emerged to satisfy fundamental human needs rooted in Plato's tripartite soul: reason (the pursuit of knowledge and order), spirit (the need for recognition and honour) and appetite (material well-being and economic prosperity). The liberal international order, constructed in the aftermath of World War II, was designed to institutionalise these needs through a bureaucratic, rules-based system that manages anarchy and mitigates great-power competition.

However, Fukuyama overlooked a critical gap in his thesis. While he assumed that institutionalism would permanently satisfy human aspirations, he did not account for how this very system, designed to prevent chaos, could become a source of frustration and perceived oppression. The bureaucratic structures of liberal democracy, from supranational governance in the EU to the rules-based international development and economic system, often constrain self-determination and national sovereignty. As these institutions expand their regulatory reach, individuals and states increasingly feel stifled by bureaucratic inefficiencies and elite-driven decision-making.

A recent example of this can be illustrated by critics from both within the U.S. and the developing world, who have called for the dismantling of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) (Kurbalija 2025). Most critics cite concerns over inefficiency, bureaucratic bloat and lack of transparency, and perhaps more significantly, some developing nations perceive USAID's initiatives as vehicles for US political influence, undermining local sovereignty and fostering dependency rather than sustainable development.

An even clearer example was Brexit, which was in many ways a rejection of the bureaucratic structures of liberal democracy at the supranational level, particularly those of the EU. To be clear, it was not necessarily a wholesale rejection of liberal democracy itself, but rather, it reflected a populist and nationalist backlash against what was perceived as an unaccountable, distant and overly regulatory system of governance (de Búrca 2018).

It is now quite clear that dissatisfaction is not limited to the developing world; even within the West, growing numbers of citizens reject the constraints of liberal institutionalism. Many view the system as catering to technocratic elites while neglecting the spirit (*thymos*) of the people— their desire for national pride, recognition and agency in global affairs. Consequently, the appeal of strongmen and populist leaders grows, as they offer direct, decisive leadership that bypasses the slow-moving bureaucratic processes of liberal democracy.

The resurgence of strongmen such as Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping, Ibrahim Traoré and Narendra Modi reflects this global shift. These leaders embody an alternative governance model, one that prioritises national strength, unilateral decision making and symbolic leadership over procedural institutionalism. In doing so, they challenge the legitimacy of the liberal world order, positioning themselves as champions of sovereignty against a system perceived as an overbearing global bureaucracy.

This theoretical framework helps explain why both developing nations and segments of Western populations are turning away from institutionalised liberalism towards charismatic, centralised leadership. Fukuyama's optimism about the permanence of liberal democracy underestimated the enduring human need for identity and recognition, which cannot always be fulfilled within bureaucratic frameworks. As more people seek alternatives to the liberal order, the era of strongmen politics gains further momentum.

The crisis of liberalism: Symptoms and causes

The contemporary crisis of liberalism is multifaceted, encompassing economic instability, political disillusionment and ideological fatigue. Scholars such as Russell Blackford (*Liberalism is in Crisis*), Edward Luce (*The Retreat of Western Liberalism*) and Pankaj Mishra (*Age of Anger: A History of the Present*) have all argued that liberalism's decline stems from its failure to address economic inequalities, its overreach in international interventions and its inability to respond to populist movements. This section will further break down these key issues to understand how they weaken people's faith in institutions and cause a crisis of liberalism.

Economic discontent and inequality

Officially, the liberal ideological dominance saw its long honeymoon end with the 2008 financial crisis, which exposed deep structural weaknesses in the global economic system. Economic globalisation, which liberalism championed, disproportionately benefited multinational corporations and financial elites while leaving working-class citizens in the West and the Global South vulnerable. Luce (2017) notes that the erosion of middle-class jobs in industrial economies has fuelled resentment against liberal economic policies, leading to the rise of populist leaders such as Donald Trump in the United States and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil.

Consequently, anti-neoliberal movements have spread all over the Western Hemisphere since 2008, with most riding a wave of economic nationalism, as seen in Brexit, Trump's 'America First' policies and Javier Milei's economic revolution in Argentina. They all represent a direct backlash against the liberal economic order. Mishra (2017) has examined how the uneven distribution of globalisation's benefits has led to widespread alienation and political anger, and he has observed that societies organised around individual self-interest have descended into tribalism and violence, with many feeling cheated of modernity's promises. This discontent has fuelled the rise of populist and authoritarian leaders who exploit these sentiments.

The failure of democracy promotion

Another major symptom of liberalism's crisis is the failure of democracy promotion as a foreign policy strategy. The US and its allies invested heavily in exporting democracy after the Cold War, assuming that liberal values were universally desirable. However, interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya demonstrated the limits of imposing democracy through military force. Texts like Duncan Bell's *Reordering the World: Essays on Liberalism and Empire* (2016) critique the assumption that democracy can be imposed externally without understanding local political cultures.

Thus, not surprisingly, the failure of the Arab Spring further underscored this issue. While initially hailed as a triumph of liberalism, many movements either collapsed into chaos (Libya, Syria) or resulted in the return of authoritarian rule (Egypt). Similarly, scholars like Mearsheimer (2019) observe that the failures in liberal interventionism severely damaged the credibility of the liberal international order:

> "The early successes of the United States and its allies in building a liberal international order notwithstanding, the order contained the seeds of its own ruin. Even if Western policymakers had been wise stewards of that order, they could not have extended its longevity in any meaningful way. It was doomed to fail because it contained three flaws. First, intervening in the politics of countries to turn them into liberal democracies is extremely difficult and attempting such ambitious social engineering on a global scale is virtually guaranteed to backfire and undermine the legitimacy of the enterprise itself."

The rise of authoritarian states

The liberal world order is also being challenged by authoritarian states that promote alternative governance models. China, under Xi Jinping, has successfully combined state-led capitalism with authoritarian rule, offering a viable alternative to liberal democracy. Russia, under Vladimir Putin, has actively undermined democratic institutions abroad while consolidating power at home. Luce argues that these authoritarian-modelled states exploit the weaknesses of liberalism,

positioning themselves as defenders of sovereignty and national identity against Western interference (Luce 2017).

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) represents a direct challenge to Western economic influence, offering infrastructure and investment without the political conditions attached to Western aid. Similarly, Russia's foreign interventions in Ukraine, Syria and Africa demonstrate its willingness to defy liberal norms and assert geopolitical influence through military means.

One notable instance was during the Valdai Discussion Club in 2022, where Putin rhetorically asked: 'Who agreed to these rules? Who even saw these rules? Who approved them?' (Sputnik International 2024) as part of his broader critique that the so-called rules-based order is arbitrary, selectively applied and primarily serves the interests of the West rather than being a truly global consensus. He instead advocated for a multipolar world order based on state sovereignty and non-interference.

These developments suggest that liberalism is no longer an undisputed global ideology. As Blackford (2023) notes, the decline of liberal hegemony has created a multipolar world where authoritarian regimes feel emboldened to pursue their own interests without fear of Western retaliation. In his subsequent works, he also explores the emerging crisis of how Western liberal democracies have shifted away from traditional liberal principles such as toleration, individual liberty and freedom of speech, which further cement the decline of liberalism.

The return of the 'great man' theory

The decline of the liberal order has coincided with the resurgence of the 'great man' theory, originally articulated by Thomas Carlyle in the 19th century. This theory posits that history is shaped by extraordinary individuals rather than institutions or social forces (Carlyle 1840). While twentieth-century political science largely dismissed this view in favour of structural explanations, recent political developments suggest a renewed focus on individual leaders as drivers of historical change.

Populist strongmen and hero worship

In an era of political uncertainty, many societies have turned to strong leaders

who promise order, national revival and direct action. Leaders such as Donald Trump in the United States, Narendra Modi in India, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey and Vladimir Putin in Russia have cultivated cults of personality, portraying themselves as defenders of the people against corrupt elites, globalists or internal enemies.

This trend is not new. Throughout history, charismatic leaders have risen in times of crisis, from Julius Caesar and Napoleon Bonaparte to Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill. However, the contemporary resurgence of strongman politics is distinct in its global scale and the weakening of institutional checks and balances that traditionally constrained such figures. In the US, for example, it is hard to find a memorable figure in modern American politics to compare with Donald Trump, largely because of his character, which is unconstrained, charismatic and outright unconventional compared to past American presidents. Unsurprisingly, these qualities have made him a disruptive figure on the global stage.

The media and the cult of personality

The modern media landscape, particularly social media, has accelerated the hero-worship phenomenon. Leaders can now communicate directly with their followers, bypassing traditional gatekeepers. Platforms like X (formerly Twitter), Facebook and TikTok amplify strongman messages and encourage fanaticism, while discouraging nuanced political discourse. The result is politics driven by spectacle, emotion and personal loyalty rather than policy debates and institutional accountability.

Trump vs the EU: A clash of foreign policy philosophies

The discussion in this section is purely academic and serves to contrast the two parties that started as co-stewards of the liberal international order, but have diverged on notable ideological precepts. Whatever one's personal position, it is undeniable that there is a stark difference between Trump's foreign policy approach and that of the EU, which this chapter will investigate, to highlight the deeper ideological rifts and their potential impact.

For instance, the EU's foreign policy is institutional, bureaucratic and rooted

in multilateral agreements (Glencross 2014). In contrast, Trump prefers personal, transactional diplomacy, exemplified by his direct negotiations with leaders like Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong-un. For instance, retired Lt. Gen. Keith Kellogg, the president's special envoy to Ukraine and Russia, highlighted this approach by explaining that 'President Trump approaches diplomacy and engages in a very transactional manner, with economics as the foundation and driving force behind international affairs.' (Madhani 2025).

This perspective underscores Trump's focus on leveraging economic tools and bilateral negotiations to advance US interests, often sidelining traditional diplomatic protocols and multilateral institutions depending on what favours his agenda. The EU views Trump's unpredictability as a threat to stability, particularly regarding Russia. This is because the EU, committed to sanctions and legal mechanisms to pressure Moscow, sees Trump's willingness to engage Putin as a betrayal of Western unity (Batchik and Klain 2025). Fundamentally, Trump's approach, which prioritises pragmatic deal-making over institutional processes, undermines the EU's long-held foreign policy principles of multilateral co-operation, which in turn have upheld the belief in a rules-based order.

The Trump-Russia deal and EU anxiety

Trump's foreign policy towards Russia has always been markedly different from that of the EU. While European leaders have sought to maintain a firm stance against Russian aggression— imposing sanctions after the annexation of Crimea and supporting Ukraine— Trump has often been willing to engage in direct negotiations with Vladimir Putin. His Helsinki summit with Putin in 2018, where he questioned US intelligence findings on Russian election interference, alarmed European allies, who viewed his approach as undermining the transatlantic alliance (Lemire, Colvin and Isachenkov 2018).

The EU, bound by bureaucratic structures and multilateral consensus, has struggled to formulate a coherent and decisive strategy regarding Russia. While European institutions advocate for sanctions and diplomatic containment, individual member states, such as Germany and France, have pursued bilateral negotiations with Moscow and have continued purchasing Russian gas. This has not only been criticised by the Americans but also by some EU member states, notably Poland (Collis 2022). Trump's unilateral and personalistic diplomacy,

by contrast, is seen as unpretentious although it threatens to bypass these institutional frameworks entirely.

Trump's style raises concerns among EU leaders, who fear that a potential Trump-Putin agreement to end the Ukraine war might bypass European interests. If Trump were to negotiate a peace settlement independently, it would expose the inefficiencies of the EU's slow-moving diplomatic apparatus and question the validity of bureaucratic foreign policy. Ultimately, the situation here is that the EU, built on consensus and regulations, struggles to match Trump's rapid, leader-to-leader deal-making style, which, despite its risks, often yields tangible results. This can be particularly exemplified by the ceasefire and hostage-release deal in Gaza, achieved within weeks of Trump's return to office (Ravid 2025), especially when taking into account that this is less about US unilateralism and more about the leader's vision and character.

North Atlantic trade and defence spending clashes

Another contentious aspect of Trump's foreign policy was his stance on NATO defence spending, which exposed deep philosophical rifts between the allies. Trump repeatedly criticised European allies for failing to meet the alliance's two per cent GDP defence spending requirement, even suggesting that the US might not defend countries that did not fulfil their financial obligations (Taylor 2016). His transactional approach, rooted in the belief that alliances should function like contractual agreements where each party pays its fair share, clashed with the EU's commitment to multilateralism and collective security.

European leaders, including former German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron, rejected Trump's assertions, arguing that NATO's strength depended on political unity rather than financial contributions alone (RFE/RL 2018). However, Trump's rhetoric has emboldened some Eastern European states, such as Poland, to seek direct military agreements with the U.S. (Republic of Poland 2019), reflecting a broader shift towards leader-driven security arrangements rather than institutional frameworks.

This leader-centric approach also extended beyond military affairs and into economic policy, particularly in the trade disputes between the US and the EU. Trump's administration imposed tariffs on European steel and aluminium imports, citing national security concerns, and continues to repeatedly threaten

European automotive exports (Rushe 2025). In response, the EU threatened to join Canada's World Trade Organisation (WTO) case against the US, demonstrating its reliance on institutional mechanisms to mediate disputes (WTO 2025). While the EU favoured multilateral economic governance, Trump preferred direct, bilateral negotiations, often using tariffs as leverage in economic confrontations. The US-EU trade war exemplifies the growing divergence between Trump's transactional, nationalist approach and the EU's rules-based, institutionalist vision of a global economic order.

At its core, the contrast between Trump's foreign policy and the EU's approach reflects a fundamental philosophical divide. Trump's vision of international relations is rooted in hard power, direct bargaining and nationalist self-interest, where military alliances and trade partnerships are only as strong as their immediate material benefits. In contrast, the EU operates—as Fukuyama (2011) explained— within a framework of institutionalism, emphasising the power of treaties, collective action and long-term stability over short-term gains. Nowhere is this divide more evident than in NATO and in defence spending: Trump views NATO as a financial burden to be shared equitably, whereas the EU sees it as an enduring political alliance critical to European security.

In theory, international relations theory has always taught that foreign policy is determined by individual states. However, this fundamental mismatch in worldview underscores the ongoing broader struggle between personalised transactional diplomacy— with singular interests— and the liberal world order version of multilateral governance, in shaping the future considerations of foreign policy formulation and execution.

The divergence among strongmen: A shared paradigm with different goals

Although strongman leaders share a common disdain for liberal bureaucratic governance, their geopolitical approaches and their new world order assertions differ significantly. For this reason, this chapter attempts to categorise them into three main strategic paradigms:

1. **Economic Dominance**: Leaders like Xi Jinping and Donald Trump prioritise economic power as a means of asserting

influence. Xi's Belt and Road Initiative seeks to entrench China's global economic dominance, while Trump's trade wars aim to reshape global economic dependencies in favour of the US.

2. **Territorial Revisionism**: Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan fit into this category. Putin's annexation of Crimea and his military interventions in Ukraine reflect a strategy of redrawing borders to assert Russian dominance. Similarly, Erdoğan's military incursions into Syria and Libya demonstrate a neo-Ottoman ambition to expand Turkish influence.

3. **Ideological Nationalism**: Narendra Modi, Ibrahim Traoré and Kim Jong-un exemplify leaders who frame their foreign policy around ideological narratives. Modi's Hindutva-driven nationalism shapes India's global positioning, Traoré's Pan-Africanist and revolutionary image aligns Burkina Faso with countries rejecting Western ties, advocating for self-reliance and regional unity, while Kim's Juche ideology underpins North Korea's isolationist stance and nuclear ambitions.

Nevertheless, they all emerge from the same overarching paradigm—a world where institutions are seen as obstacles, vestiges of neoliberal institutionalist philosophies rather than facilitators of order at the international stage. To these strongmen, decisive leadership takes precedence over bureaucratic processes and foreign policy is increasingly personalised. For better or for worse, the liberal world order's decline has empowered these figures, who, despite their differences, thrive on the erosion of multilateralism and liberal institutional governance.

Conclusion: Africa's future in an era of strongmen

The decline of the liberal world order has ushered in a new era of global politics, one defined by the dominance of strong leaders over traditional institutions. The contrast between Trump's transactional foreign policy and the EU's bureaucratic approach illustrates the tension between these competing models. While the EU continues to champion multilateralism, the resurgence of 'great men' in global

politics, willing to lead populist movements, presents a serious challenge to the viability of institutional governance.

Furthermore, the long-held notions that liberal democracy—where the West leads the world by promoting global norms such as free trade, equality and multilateral co-operation—and liberalism construed to synonymise democracy, have led to great geopolitical miscalculations that have accelerated the decline of the liberal world order. Judging by the West's failed promotion of liberal democracy, especially in the Middle East, the rise of China as an alternative model of governance and the rise of populist movements determined to vote against liberal values in Western democracies, it is clear that the lack of distinction between liberalism and democracy has shaped current international alignments, ideological conflicts and global power struggles.

For Africa, this shifting landscape presents both risks and opportunities. Many African states, particularly those with fragile institutions, may find themselves drawn into direct dealings with strong leaders such as Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping and Donald Trump. The appeal of such relationships lies in the promise of quick agreements, infrastructure deals and economic investments without the bureaucratic hurdles that characterise Western institutions. However, this model of engagement carries significant risks. Bilateral agreements with strongmen can lead to dependency, where African states become beholden to the interests of powerful global actors rather than pursuing long-term national or regional interests. For example, China's Belt and Road Initiative has resulted in significant infrastructure investments across Africa, but has also raised concerns about debt dependency and sovereignty (Mutai et al. 2024). Similarly, Russia's security partnerships with countries like Mali and the Central African Republic have provided immediate military support but at the cost of increased foreign influence and reduced local governance capacity (Faulkner and Parens 2025).

At the same time, Africa has an opportunity to benefit from this new order by strategically engaging with multiple global actors to secure favourable agreements. Unlike the Cold War era, when African nations were forced to align with either the West or the Soviet bloc, the current multipolar world allows for more nuanced diplomacy. Countries like South Africa, Nigeria and Kenya have demonstrated that maintaining a non-aligned, pragmatic approach—allowing engagement in various international forums as well as pursuing independent foreign policies—can maximise benefits while avoiding over-reliance on any single power.

However, Africa's weaker nations face a particularly precarious situation. If they engage individually with global strongmen, they risk being dominated and losing their sovereignty to external forces. This is why regional co-operation is critical. Strengthening regional bodies such as the African Union (AU) and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), as well as sub-regional bodies like ECOWAS and the East African Community (EAC), can provide a collective bargaining position, ensuring that African states negotiate from a position of strength rather than as fragmented entities susceptible to external manipulation. A united front can also help mitigate the risks of foreign interference in domestic affairs, ensuring that Africa remains in control of its own political and economic destiny—avoiding a second scramble for and partition of Africa.

Ultimately, while the liberal world order faces an uncertain future, Africa must navigate this period of transformation carefully because it has much to lose. By reinforcing regional integration, promoting self-reliance and engaging strategically with global powers, a united Africa can avoid the pitfalls of great power politics while carving out a strong, independent role in the evolving international system.

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