

# The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order: 1919–2019\*

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## Abstract

Reflecting on 100 years anniversary of the Paris Peace Conference, we need to focus on the two connections—the connection between Asia and Europe, and the connection between the past and the present. This century beginning in 1919 and ending in 2019 can be remembered as the rise and fall of the liberal international order. The impact and the meaning of 1945 in this time beginning in 1919 and ending in 2019, as well as the importance of the legacy of 1945 upon the current international order cannot also be ignored. The Cold War division is the first phase of the post–Second World War international order, and the second phase signifies the consolidation of the liberal international order. We are now seeing emerging challenges caused by the retreat of the belief in the future of the liberal democracy. In that sense, we are now clearly facing the limits of the liberal international order, as well as the future of a liberal democratic regime. That is why, much more than before, European powers such as France and the UK are key for Japan to collaborate in defending the liberal international order.

The year 2019 marks a good opportunity to reflect on 100 years anniversary of the Paris Peace Conference. First, we need to focus on the two connections—the connection between Asia and Europe, and the connection between the past and the present—1919 and 2019.

Second, we should focus on the importance of the year 1945 as the most important turning point.

This century beginning in 1919 and ending in 2019 can be remembered as the rise and fall of the liberal international order. There are several reasons for reminding of the fall of such an international order. One of the reasons for this is that the UK, which has the mightiest military power within the European Union, is now leaving that group. The European Union has long exemplified the rise of the liberal order that brings both peace and stability in the region. However, the rise of both nationalism and populism so often weakens the perception that multilateral cooperation is essential for the region as well as for the member states. If the UK leaves the European Union by concluding it is no more relevant for the UK, this would damage the foundation of the liberal order in Europe.

Likewise, in the end of 2018, President Donald Trump decided to leave UNESCO, one of the key organizations of the United Nations. It is often reported that President Trump is interested in retreating from the most important multilateral organizations which the United States belongs to such as NATO, WTO, or even the United Nations. It does not seem probable that the United

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States government decides to leave these organizations soon, but the United States, particularly the current administration, is considering seriously that some of these multilateral institutions are harmful for American national interest.

These perception can have an important ramification for the future of the liberal international order. Thus, it can be argued that the century beginning in 1919 and ending in 2019 will be remembered as the rise and fall of the liberal international order. It is also important to link two regions, Asia and Europe. The Paris Peace Conference became an important link between the two regions, as Japan became one of the five great powers that won the war.

It is also important to remind that both Japan and France played, and are now playing, an important international role in these two years, namely 1919 and 2019. Both Japan and France were among the five great powers that created the Paris Peace Treaties. However, Japan's rose was not equal to French one, as France hosted and presided over this great conference.

We also need to remind that a non-European power, Japan, was included in the conference, and began to expand its international influence. In 2019, Japan hosted the G20 Summit meeting in Osaka, and France did likewise the G7 Summit meeting in Biarritz. Japan and France faced serious challenges, as they needed to prepare for agendas for the future of international order. If France and Japan can tackle these difficult tasks of responding to the challenges we face appropriately, we can perhaps enhance and strengthen the current liberal international order.

Then, we need to look at the importance of the year 1945, as well as the importance of the legacy of 1945 upon the current international order. First, it is important to recognize that there exist two phases in the post-Second World War international order. The first phase of the post-Second World War international order relates to the Cold War division. After 1945, we have seen the division of the world into the two camps—the Western camp led by the United States, and the Communist camp, which was mainly controlled by the Soviet Union.

The second phase signifies the consolidation of the liberal international order among Western countries. In other words, the meaning of the end of the Cold War is that we no longer see the division of the Cold War. After the end of the Cold War, we have seen the enhancement, and also enlargement of the liberal international order. In the 1990s, we were quite optimistic about the future of the liberal international order. We thought that we could continue to see the expansion of the liberal international order. But we were wrong.

In the last ten years, we clearly see the limits and the difficulty of expanding the liberal international order, largely because of the rise of authoritarian regimes such as China and Russia. Both China and Russia are now powerful enough to revise the current international order by using the threat of their huge military forces. Chinese government has been repeatedly arguing that the current international order is created by Western powers and China needs to modify it to be fitted to the current multipolar world.

We are now seeing emerging challenges caused by the retreat of the belief in the future of the liberal democracy. Many developing countries are attracted by the alternative vision of governance, the authoritarian regime. They see that authoritarian regime can be effective to promote their own economic growth, as they are fascinated by China's rapid economic growth. These developing countries have also been seeing that liberal democracies are now facing serious deadlocks in, for example, the United States, the UK, and many other European countries. As a result, we are now disillusioned by liberal democratic regime. It is natural for those countries to think that liberal democracy is not the only answer to their future. In that sense, we clearly see the limits of the future of the liberal international order as well as of the future of a liberal democratic regime. The year 2019 will possibly be the year in world history when many countries abandon their strong will to defend them.

There exist several remnants of the Second World War, and these have caused difficult problems among countries in East Asia. On one hand, Japan and the United States have solved

and settled difficult problems at the San Francisco Peace Conference of 1951. However, on the other hand, some of the major powers, such as the Soviet Union and China, did not sign the Treaty. South Korea also was not a participating country in the Peace Conference.

As these countries did not join in the postwar settlement in San Francisco, they tend to consider that the San Francisco system brought justice to them. After the San Francisco Peace Conference, Japan needed to negotiate individually with these countries. In 1965, Japan concluded the Treaty on Basic Relations with the Republic of Korea. In 1978, Japan concluded the Treaty of Peace and Friendship with the People's Republic of China. On the other hand, the Japanese government is yet to conclude a peace treaty with the Russian government because the treaty is still needed to be drafted.

These are the remnants of the Second World War, and they make Japan's political relationships with these countries difficult. The San Francisco Peace Conference was just a partial settlement of the Second World War in Asia, and still, Japan needs to tackle some of these questions which arise from the difficulty of the remnants of the Second World War.

In the end, it would be valuable to look at the prospect of defending the liberal international order. Japan's historical experience is quite indicative, as Japan has experienced both authoritarian regime and liberal democracy in the last century. In the 1930s, Japan became a challenger to the international order. But after 1945, Japan has been trying to become a defender of the liberal international order. In the latter 1940s and the 1950s, Japan was not powerful enough to defend the liberal international order.

However, after the end of the Cold War, Japanese government has been always aware that Japan can no longer remain a free-rider in the international community. Japan had been number two economy in the world until China occupied that place in 2010. Today Japan is number three economy in the world after the United States and China. As the US and China tend to act unilaterally, Japan becomes one of the major powers that respect and defend the liberal international order.

The largest problem that we face is that our alliance partner, the United States, is now much less interested in defending the liberal international order than before. That is why European powers such as France and the UK become major partners for Japan who are willing to defend the liberal international order. That would be the main reason why we have seen the rapid development in the security cooperation between Japan and France, and also Japan and the UK.

This year marks the beginning of Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) and Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) between Japan and the European Union. These forward-looking developments can best be understood as an important cornerstone to defend the liberal international order.