

# American exceptionalism as asymmetric multilateralism

By Caitlin Tierney

For four years, Trump's unilateralist, protectionist, populist and "America First" policies shocked citizens of the United States and the world. After seeing the damage unilateralist foreign policy (especially when in the wrong hands) can cause, US democrats long to return to the generally multilateral foreign policy approach that presidents have adhered to since WWII.<sup>1</sup> Although a leader of many major international organizations, America's unique position of arranging the post-WWII world order has created an asymmetric form of multilateralism that nominally is fully participatory and equal, but in fact gives favor to its founder. President Biden believes that "America is back" as the leader in the international field, but America cannot so easily return to this seat of preference and should assess that previous "American multilateralism" may verge closer to asymmetry or even partial unilateralism than the US may be willing to admit.

President Biden simply claiming that "America is back" as a world leader is a hollow cry until actions follow. Fortunately, on day one of his term, Biden reentered key agreements such as the WHO, UNHRC, New START and Paris Agreement<sup>2</sup> with more to follow. This gesture is important to signify an ideological change from the previous administration and agreement to multinational cooperation. The foundation of trust in the US, however, cracked with the election and actions of President Donald Trump, and, although Biden may be able to repair the rift, there will always be a weak spot of mistrust and uncertainty.

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<sup>1</sup> Jones

<sup>2</sup> Burke-White, William. "A New Geostrategic Environment Demands New Principles for US Multilateral Diplomacy." *Brookings*, Brookings, 25 Feb. 2021.

The main issues for Biden lie within US borders: COVID-19 mismanagement, vaccine rollout, racial discrimination and hate crimes, shootings and gun violence are only the start of issues a divided America faces. A presidency, under comparably distraught political conditions to now, could be that of Lincoln. While making far reaching comparisons between the Civil War and present-day America is neither accurate nor useful, noting Lincoln's preoccupation with a series of significant national crises is similar to present problems – both men do not have much time or resources to waste on anything superfluous to national stability and success.<sup>3</sup>

Another factor inhibiting an easy return to the United States as the sole international leader is the rise of China. As America retreated, China took the opportunity and initiative to strengthen regional and south-to-south partnerships.<sup>4</sup> Particularly during COVID-19, China worked closely with the WHO on safety measures and vaccine development, while Trump's "America First" strategy not only failed as an international leader, but also national safety.<sup>5</sup> China has been a dedicated participant in many multinational organizations, even designing some of its own, such as BRI and ASEAN; in the past four years China focused on increasing participation in the absence of the US, such as gaining greater control over UN specialized agencies.<sup>6</sup>

Despite these three substantial challenges US multilateral diplomacy faces, there is another aspect of the American perspective that gives reason to worry. The aforementioned rhetoric of Biden at his inauguration that, "America is back" reiterates American asymmetric multilateralism. America has long enjoyed a privileged place at the international table, and the

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<sup>3</sup> Note: Relations with the Confederacy could be considered as foreign policy, however, I do not want to get into complicated details on this considering it is a different circumstance in comparison to foreign policy with historically separate national partners.

<sup>4</sup> "Trace China's Rise to Power." *Council on Foreign Relations*, Council on Foreign Relations.

<sup>5</sup> "Trace China's Rise to Power." *Council on Foreign Relations*, Council on Foreign Relations.

<sup>6</sup> Burke-White, William. "A New Geostrategic Environment Demands New Principles for US Multilateral Diplomacy."

new administration should be weary of presumptuously returning. Continuing to shove an “ideal model” onto a multilateral system is just a form of unilateralism in disguise, since nothing else would be acceptable.

This begs the question of whether America should really “be back,” so to speak - as in, what is important about America that we should assertively push to be heard and respected? To add perspective, the US ranks 46<sup>th</sup> in terms of life expectancy (2018)<sup>7</sup>, 37<sup>th</sup> in terms of healthcare (2021)<sup>8</sup>, 45<sup>th</sup> in terms of press freedom (2020)<sup>9</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup> (with a downward trend) in terms of economic freedom (2021)<sup>10</sup>, and 53<sup>rd</sup> in terms of measures of gender equality (2020)<sup>11</sup>. These are some of the strongest ideals that the United States values and wants to uphold, but why does the US fail itself while criticizing others?

A US foreign policy that is truly focused more on internal change and growth could be a key to a more genuine multilateral approach. Allowing competition within the international structure should not necessarily be a problem. The example of China, although America may not agree with them, proves the true power of multilateral foreign policy (one not tainted by American exceptionalism) to succeed, even within an international structure the US designed to work against them. A part of multilateralism the United States finds particularly difficult is compromise. American moral values are so deeply rooted in American policy, both domestic and foreign, that it is almost impossible for the US to imagine a different outcome. The path forward for reengagement in the international community lies in humbling ourselves and potentially loosening the American grip on the reins. The Biden administration’s plans will ultimately be

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<sup>7</sup> “Life Expectancy of the World Population.” *Worldometer*, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> “Best Healthcare In The World 2021.” *World Population Review*, 2021.

<sup>9</sup> “2020 World Press Freedom Index.” *RSF, Reporters Without Borders*, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> “Country Rankings: 2021 Index of Economic Freedom.” *Country Rankings: World & Global Economy Rankings on Economic Freedom*, The Heritage Foundation, 2021.

<sup>11</sup> “Global Gender Gap Report 2020.” *World Economic Forum*, 2021.

more successful than anything from the past four years of Trump; however, the US will not maintain its perception of respected global power without properly reflecting on the deep connection between American exceptionalism and asymmetric multilateralism.