

# THE TRUMP RUPTURE: HOW "AMERICA FIRST" BECAME AN UNWITTING AGENT OF DECOLONIALITY

## ABSTRACT

This article argues that Donald Trump's "America First" doctrine, though driven by a nationalist and protectionist worldview, unintentionally accelerated decolonial transformations within the post-1945 Liberal International Order (LIO). Using a decolonial theoretical framework as articulated by Aníbal Quijano and Walter Dignolo and drawing on secondary sources and policy analyses, the study demonstrates how American unilateralism exposed the LIO's hidden colonial foundations. By analyzing instances of U.S withdrawals from multilateral agreements, trade, confrontations and the recent expansion of BRICS, the paper shows how the rupture created institutional and ideational space for a resurgence of Global South agency.



Shalini Nanda

Political Science Honours, 3rd year  
Deshbandhu College, University of Delhi  
shalinii.0412@gmail.com

I argue that this disruption opened a pathway from Western-centric unipolarity toward a more fragmented and potentially pluriversal global order.

## INTRODUCTION: THE UNLIKELY DECOLONIZER

On 1 June 2017, President Donald Trump announced his intent to withdraw the United States from the Paris Climate Agreement, declaring he was "elected to represent the citizens of Pittsburgh, not Paris" (The White House, 2017). This moment was more than a policy signal; it was a symbolic rupture at the heart of the Western Liberal International Order (LIO). For decades the LIO - built on multilateral institutions, rules-based trade, and collective security- presented itself as a universal project for global governance. Yet beneath that veneer lies what decolonial theorists term coloniality; an ongoing matrix of power, knowledge, and social hierarchies that outlived formal empire and continues to privilege the West while marginalizing other worlds (Quijano, 2000; Dignolo, 2011).



Ironically, Trump's transactional and nativist mentality made his administration a potent, if unintentional, stimulus for decolonization. The LIO's vulnerability was practically exposed by the "America First" concept, which did more than just question American leadership. The Trump administration exposed how much the order's universal promises ultimately depended on continued Western stewardship. Trump's politicization of multilateral commitments exposed just how fragile that foundation really was and viewing international institutions as disposable tools of national advantage. This essay is divided into three sections: first, it dissects the coloniality ingrained in the LIO's design; second, it looks at the ways in which Trump's policies upended that design; and third, it investigates the subsequent claim of Global South agency as an example of pluriversality and epistemic disobedience.

## THE FACADE OF UNIVERSALITY: THE LIO'S HIDDEN COLONIAL CORE

The Liberal International Order that emerged after 1945 was never impartial or devoid of values. It was organized in ways that replicated Western supremacy under the pretense of liberal universalism, and it was mostly conceived and built by Western countries in the years following World War II. This continuity can be explained by Aníbal Quijano's idea of the coloniality of power, which refers to the long-term systems that combine labor, race, and knowledge into hierarchies that endure formal decolonization and influence contemporary institutions (Quijano, 2000). These legacies are embodied in the LIO's institutional architecture. With its five permanent members and veto power, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) is a legal holdover from the 1945 victors' agreements that formally established a worldwide hierarchy. Bretton Woods institutions - the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, headquartered in Washington, D.C., and governed by weighted voting shares, have historically promoted policies of structural adjustment and neoliberal reform that critics argue eroded economic sovereignty in many countries of the Global South (Stiglitz, 2002; Klein, 2007).



According to G. John Ikenberry, the stability of the postwar order depended on the United States acting as a benevolent manager, an actor that upheld institutions and laws that seemed universal while often interpreting and enforcing laws in ways consistent with Western strategic and economic interests (Ikenberry, 2020). By highlighting epistemic hegemony, Walter Mignolo expands on this criticism: Western modernity has been positioned as the only acceptable paradigm of advancement, marginalizing alternative knowledge systems and social structures (Mignolo, 2011). As a result, the LIO functioned as both an epistemic regime and a political-economic system, persuading many that its logic was the only one.

## **THE WRECKING BALL: "AMERICA FIRST" AS SYSTEMIC SABOTAGE**



A clear departure from the benevolent-manager paradigm was made during Trump's presidency. The administration's "America First" approach stressed immediate national gain over the upkeep of a cooperative institutional order and considered multilateralism as optional. These dynamics played out across three major fronts.

Trade disputes and the rules-based system's immobility: By preventing appointments to the World Trade Organization's (WTO) Appellate Body, the Trump administration weakened the WTO's dispute-settlement process and thus rendered it incapable of making decisions (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2025a). Unilateral tariffs and trade disputes supported by flexible national-security justifications occurred concurrently with this institutional deterioration. These actions demonstrated how core actors that prioritized short-term national gain might undermine or circumvent a rules-based system.

Unilateral withdrawals and the abdication of collective action: The administration's withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement and its announced exit from the World Health Organization (WHO) during a global health crisis signaled a retreat from shared-risk management. These symbolic and practical acts undermined the sense that the global community shared common stakes in addressing transnational problems, thereby weakening the normative foundation that supported cooperation (The White House, 2020).

Alliance recalibration and security rhetoric: Long-standing alliances were reframed as transactional agreements rather than reciprocal duties due to public mistrust of NATO's collective security pledges and ongoing demands that members boost defense spending (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2025a). Such language weakened faith in the endurance of security architectures that had undergirded the LIO for decades.

When combined, these acts did more than just undermine institutions; they openly exposed the limitations of an order that was once thought to be universal. The authority of the order is revealed to be dependent on the manager's willingness to enforce it when they leave or treat the regulations as negotiable.



## **CREATING THE VACUUM: THE RUSH OF PLURIVERSAL POSSIBILITY**

Political entrepreneurship is encouraged by geopolitical voids. Both existing and aspiring Global South actors have started to take advantage of the strategic and ideational gaps produced by the partial withdrawal of U.S. managerial power. These developments point to the potential for different institutional logics in addition to a redistribution of power.

Institutional options and BRICS expansion: The BRICS grouping's recent expansion reflects a strategic search for governance arrangements beyond Western control.

The widening membership signals a deliberate move toward alternative institutional logics, which was characterized by invitations extended in 2023 and membership procedures in 2024 for governments including Iran, Egypt, Ethiopia, and the United Arab Emirates (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024). A tangible institutional substitute for Bretton Woods funding methods is the New Development Bank (NDB), which was founded by the BRICS to raise funds for infrastructure and sustainable development initiatives (New Development Bank, n.d.). Financial infrastructure that could lessen susceptibility to Western financial coercion is discussed in relation to payment-system alternatives to SWIFT (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2025b).

Strategic independence in a country's foreign policy: States now have more flexibility in their foreign policy outside of official structures. India's ongoing purchases of Russian oil in spite of Western sanctions show that the country's energy and security interests are not strictly aligned with Western demands (The Economic Times, 2025). Gulf governments have sought a variety of alliances, striking a balance between strengthening economic connections with Beijing and Moscow and Washington. These decisions show realistic claims of autonomy that would have cost more in a setting with more stringent hegemonic enforcement.

These changes represent what Mignolo refers to as epistemic disobedience, which is the active rejection of Western narratives and the acceptance of alternative rationalities and policy logics. They are not just about material resources or diplomatic rebalancing (Mignolo, 2011). Actors in the Global South are challenging the epistemic monopolies that have traditionally characterized global governance as they increase their institutional capacity and strategic latitude.

## CONCLUSION: RUPTURE AS DECOLONIAL OPPORTUNITY

Donald Trump's views were motivated by a limited, frequently zero-sum conception of national interest; he was not a decolonization theorist. However, the goals of decolonial critiques are significantly aligned with the structural effects of his administration's policies. The administration unintentionally revealed the colonial roots of the LIO and diminished the United States' ability to effectively enforce established norms by withdrawing from or undermining important organizations and by redefining alliances and commerce as transactional.

This exposure has, in turn, opened space for alternative projects. The rise of institutional experiments such as the NDB, the diversification of strategic partnerships, and the increased assertiveness of Global South diplomacy indicate not merely a redistribution of influence but the possibility of different institutional logics and epistemic orders.



That said, the emerging pluriversal landscape is not without risks: new asymmetries, regional rivalries, and emergent forms of coercion could reproduce old hierarchies under different guises.

Whether the current rupture ultimately produces a genuinely pluriversal order or merely a rearrangement of great-power competition remains an open empirical question. What is clear is that the ideological authority of a single Western model has been weakened, and with that weakening comes both danger and possibility. The Trump rupture may therefore be remembered less for what it ended than for what it unintentionally began: a fraught but significant opening in which alternatives to Western epistemic and institutional dominance can be imagined and constructed.