

BOOK REVIEW

The Jungle Grows Back: America and Our Imperiled World

By Robert KAGAN

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The world, as we know, is changing fast and new actors emerge in global politics while the U.S. under the Trump Presidency pulls back from international engagement. As Washington is retreating from its “global responsibilities”, the U.S.-led liberal order starts to struggle for survival, while the emerging powers are jumping up to fulfil the power vacuum left by the U.S. at the international scene. But what happens when the U.S. decides to “mind its own business”? The answer is neatly set forth in the title of Robert Kagan’s latest book: “the jungle grows back”.

In his latest book of 2019, *The Jungle Grows Back: America and Our Imperiled World*, Kagan argues that America’s withdrawal is the worst possible scenario, because without the essential role of the U.S. to keep the balance in distribution of power, the world will fall into instability. For him, the world is full of dangerous actors, who remind us of an unstable jungle, and in a possible absence of the U.S. power and order, they have the ability and desire to make things worse at the international arena. As Kagan claims, without any U.S. commitment to preserve the liberal order, it will soon lead into a chaos because the U.S.-led liberal order is like a garden that needs constant care in order to prevent the above mentioned jungle to grow back and “engulf us all.”

The Jungle Grows Back is a well-written text, with comprehensive insights that analyze the current state of world politics and it aims to explain the historical and geopolitical circumstances beyond liberal order’s birth after WWII. At the heart of the manuscript lies the question of today’s U.S. role in the world and why the U.S. has to be so deeply involved in world affairs. For Kagan these are reasonable, but not new, questions and doubts that trouble the mind of Americans. The book can be seen as an answer to the Trump’s administration “hostility” towards the liberal order and shows why a support to the liberal order is a crucial factor for world’s stability.

The first part of the book, which serves as an introduction on the U.S. role in

creating and maintaining the liberal world order, describes in an easy-reading framework the historical, political and economic background of the liberal order. In Kagan's *weltanschauung* the American-led world order was not a natural phenomenon - far from it. Furthermore, the liberal order was not a result of the culmination of an evolutionary process towards the progress of the consciousness of freedom. Neither was it a production of iron logic of economic determinism nor a construction of "a common inevitable evolutionary pattern in the direction of liberal democracy." There was nothing inevitable in the emergence of the liberal order after the WWII. The story of human progress and the inevitable evolutionary path towards democracy is a *myth*, as Kagan concludes. In fact, the U.S.-led liberal order is an abnormal order, an anomaly and a great historical aberration. Despite sporadically horrors, genocides and oppression of our time, the liberal order by any historical standards has been a relative paradise. In the past seven-plus decades there have been no wars among the great powers, something never seen throughout the history of mankind.

In his "Return to the 1930s" chapter, Kagan warns that authoritarianism is enjoying a renaissance and isolationist feelings that tend to focus on the limitations of the U.S. involvement in the world have revived. However, the latest isolationist resentment is a return to the 1930s when politicians and writers suggested a "return to normalcy". The Americans of the 1920s and the 1930s were not so different from the Americans of today argues Kagan, because both could not fully comprehend the dangerous implications of the U.S. withdrawal. Both Americans lived in a modern, democratic and capitalist society and were informed by modern science and modern ways of understanding the human behavior. Both made choices based on same insight and not on an unusual ignorance or an unusual fecklessness. Therefore, according to Kagan, the admiration of some American conservatives for Vladimir Putin as "a strong leader" is not surprising. Some generations ago, Mussolini enjoyed the same admiration and was supported as the strong leader, the Italian people needed.

But Kagan thinks that this line of argumentation is mistaken, because we already know what a world not shaped by the American power really looks like. Without the exercising of American power, the world "as it is" produces geopolitical clashes, famine, forced collectivization and international disputes for world domination. To prevent the division of the world and to construct peace, the U.S. created the "environment of freedom" which let "the better angels of our nature" prevail and produced a safe ground for democracy. After the Second World War, a new conceptualization of national interest and geopolitics arose and America transcended the traditional notions of national interest. Furthermore, America's new strategy after the war created an unprec-

edented liberal order which meant accepting the international responsibility to protect the interests of those who shared Americans' worldviews. According to Kagan, the liberal order was exceptional less because Americans were exceptional than because America's position in the twentieth century world had become exceptional. Additionally, the U.S. accepted its "global responsibilities as world power" after the Pearl Harbor tragedy and its role as a guarantor of peace on an international scale.

America's role as a peace guarantor was essential to liberal order's survival and, as former Secretary of State, Dean Acheson wrote, the U.S. after WWII became the locomotive at the head of mankind. The historic consequences of the U.S. involvement in world politics after the WWII were greatly revolutionary and incomprehensible back at that time. America's postwar policies went beyond narrow national interest and created new geopolitical realities and new patterns of international behavior. Despite being realists, the architects of the postwar order established a liberal system based on universal ideals and irrefutable principles. In fact, it was realism in the service of liberalism. This American global enterprise established a liberal order as a by-product of a new configuration of power after WWII and the U.S. rise to prominence. One of Kagan's chapters, "Life inside the Liberal Order", was characterized by democratization, pacification, and economic resuscitation. Germany and Japan are the best examples of the transformations that occurred in the geopolitical trajectories in the post-war world. For Kagan, the effect of these transformations in Europe and Asia were revolutionary and far more significant and lasting than the rise and fall of the Soviet Union. Ultimately the transformation of Germany and Japan - once warlike countries - lead to geo-economic competition, which was never translated into the military or geopolitical competition.

In a normal world, Kagan suggests, the Japanese and German economic miracles would have led them to challenge the order and its hierarchy. But in the U.S.-led liberal order this did not happen, because the liberal order demolished the old geopolitical ambitions, spheres of interests and balance power. However, the key element holding the order together was the perception by other powers of the liberal order as just and fair, and its voluntary based engagement. On the other hand, Kagan writes that life outside the liberal order was characterized by old and very traditional brand of geopolitics. In comparison to NATO and the liberal order, the Warsaw Pact was not voluntary and was a power-based arrangement. Kagan argues that the Soviets were behaving normally in a world that was no longer normal. Furthermore, the growing power of the liberal world order that was historically unprecedented transformed the foreign and domestic behavior of the Soviet Union. Perhaps the transformation of the foreign affairs patterns caused by the liberal order

played a significant role in bringing the Cold War to a peaceful end.

The world that emerged from the ashes of the Cold War had never been seen before in the history and led to the extension of liberal world order across Europe and through Asia, Latin America, and Africa. In the “new world order”, arms races among great powers were seen obsolete; trade and financial systems were relatively open; and democracy was accepted as superior to communism. The liberal order created an environment where cooperation was stimulated instead of competition, geopolitics was replaced by geo-economics, cosmopolitanism ruled over tribalism, etc.

But today the jungle is growing back. History is returning and we are witnessing a time where nations are reverting to the old and traditional geopolitical patterns. Great-power spheres of interests and geopolitical ambitions are creating international instability and regional conflicts. In recent years, Russia and China have pursued - of course in different manners - a more aggressive geopolitical attitude and have tried to regain their historical greatness on the world stage. Kagan argues that Russia and China’s foreign attitudes were encouraged by the lack of cohesion and confidence in the liberal world order. And this is primarily caused by the American jungle, a cauldron of anger, hatreds, and resentments which have been a big part of American politics and history. It is hard to support a liberal order when liberalism is under attack at home, suggests Kagan.

Today’s criticism of the liberal order on both left and right wings of American politics is related to the U.S. identity, American foreign policy, and dissatisfaction with America itself. In this respect, Kagan argues that the U.S. should preserve the liberal world order. Otherwise, the liberal order will be replaced by another order, which will more likely produce disorder and chaos of the kind that was seen in the twentieth century. Therefore, the liberal world order as a garden needs constant protection against the jungle that tends to grow back and engulf us all. In summary, *The Jungle Grows Back* is a valuable contribution to the academics and students of IR as well as the foreign policy makers, who are concerned with the current situation of the liberal order and geopolitical implications of the U.S. retreat from world affairs.

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