

The Post's View

Opinion: Biden must learn the right lesson from globalization



BETWEEN THE fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the global pandemic of 2020, the global population grew from 5.2 billion to 7.7 billion. Yet the share living in extreme poverty fell from more than a third to less than 10 percent, according to the World Bank. In other words, hundreds of millions of premature deaths were avoided and a similar number of opportunities for human flourishing were created. While China accounted for much of the progress, World Bank data show that poverty fell at similar rates elsewhere. Not coincidentally, this colossal achievement occurred during three decades of U.S.-endorsed trade liberalization, which brought investment, jobs and income to previously destitute corners of the world.

We reiterate these facts **to rebalance the debate over globalization**, which is at risk of being won by those who view free trade one-sidedly as a job-destroying disaster for American workers. Alas, Biden administration foreign policy pronouncements this week show how much influence this critique has gained over both political parties.

In his first major speech, Secretary of State Antony Blinken all but apologized for past Democratic support of trade agreements, promising that “lessons learned” from those deals will henceforth guide policy. “We will make sure that the rules of the international economy

are not tilted against the United States,” declared a White House “Interim National Security Strategic Guidance” document released simultaneously with Mr. Blinken’s speech. “We will only pursue new trade deals after we have made investments in American workers and communities.”

There was a good sign in Friday’s mutual decision by the United States and European Union to negotiate an end to their dispute over aircraft protectionism, and the tariffs it had triggered on both sides. Yet in renouncing new agreements pending unspecified “investments,” or promising to put labor and environmental groups (selected how?) “at the table” in negotiating them, the administration’s statement all but eliminates hope that the United States would join broader tariff-reduction deals even involving advanced industrial democracies, such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which the Obama administration backed as a strategic counter to China.

Obviously, the failure of trade to induce political liberalization in China, as advocates promised and expected, is a reason to get tougher toward the People’s Republic on technology transfer, intellectual property and investment. This should be done in concert with allies, as President Biden has proposed. If the administration’s call for “reform” of global institutions means it intends to fix the World Trade Organization’s often biased forum for appealing trade rulings — without trashing or withdrawing from the WTO, as former president Donald Trump would have — well and good. The United States must counter predatory Chinese tactics and repair damage to manufacturing from unfair Chinese competition.

Yet Chinese behavior is not typical of all trading partners.

With Australia and South America, the United States has both free trade deals and trade surpluses. Only certain U.S. workers and industries benefited from Trump-era tariffs on China (which Mr. Biden is keeping, for the time being). Nor is it true that all or even most Americans lose out from globalization, which has on the whole boosted many exporters and helped consumers access a broader array of high-quality goods, both U.S.- and foreign-made.

Globalization greatly reduced inequality between rich and poor nations. Any policy that undervalues that side of the ledger enhances neither the United States’ moral standing nor, in the long run, its security.