



Trumpism and the Crisis of Liberal World Order: Decline, Adaptation or Transformation

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Abstract

Trumpism—the political ideology and praxis of the 2017–2021 U.S. administration—catalyzed the post-1945 Liberal World Order problem, according to this analysis. Based on the scholarly consensus that the LWO faced pre-existing stresses from geopolitical shifts, economic discontent, and institutional fatigue, the analysis uses a qualitative secondary methodology to determine if this confrontation caused systemic decline, adaptation, or transformation. The research synthesises International Relations literature, policy papers, and historical analysis to identify disruptive factors in institutional, geopolitical, and domestic-political domains. Trumpism accelerated a contentious international system shift, not its end. In contrast to a story of simple collapse, fundamental institutions like NATO and the WTO have survived but are now governed by conditionality and geopolitical negotiation. The investigation also finds a major ideational shift: the legitimisation of illiberal, transactional sovereignty as a challenger to liberal principles. Thus, the emerging order has a hybrid structure—a “multiplex” of interrelated fragmentation. This structure has competing technospheres, durable economic interconnectedness, and exclusive, interest-based minilateral clubs instead of inclusive multilateralism. A key finding is that democratic states, particularly the US, are most affected by domestic political volatility, which drives systemic uncertainty. A feedback loop between local polarisation and international legitimacy underpins the geopolitical shift. While the Universalist, hegemonic LWO is irrevocably changing, it is becoming more contested, less liberal, and geopolitically segmented. The study concludes that democratic states must strengthen domestic democratic resilience, pursue “principled minilateralism,” and adopt clear-eyed coexistence strategies to navigate an era defined not by the restoration of a defunct order but by the managed steering of an ongoing and uncertain transformation.

Keywords: Liberal World Order, Trumpism, International Order, Multilateralism, Geopolitics, Minilateralism, Democratic Resilience, Hybrid International System.

Review Article

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Introduction

The Liberal World Order (LWO) that emerged following World War II, founded on the unassailable

dominance of the United States, represented a crucial institutional and ideological effort grounded in the principles of open markets, multilateral governance,



democratic unity, and collective security. For decades, this framework, encompassing entities from NATO to the WTO, was hailed as the effective architecture of global politics, promising to create a rules-based system that would manage conflict and foster prosperity. By the early 21st century, this order faced considerable and increasing pressures, a persistent crisis that set the stage for a significant upheaval. The rise of revisionist powers like an economically assertive China and a territorially aggressive Russia has unsettled the geopolitical balance of the existing order from the outside. Simultaneously, the fundamental democracies of the LWO experienced deterioration as a result of the perceived effects of economic globalization—deindustrialization, significant inequality, and a sense of cultural dislocation—which ignited a populist reaction against cosmopolitan elites and technocratic institutions. The combination of these pressures led to a legitimacy deficit, as the 2008 financial crisis and contentious military interventions like the Iraq War weakened the moral and functional authority of the order's main guardians (Ikenberry, 2011).

Amidst an environment of increasing dissatisfaction and evolving global politics, Trumpism surfaced, not as the origin of the crisis but as its most influential and deliberate catalyst. The election of Donald Trump in 2016 marked a significant shift as populist nationalism evolved into a distinct foreign policy doctrine termed “America First.” This doctrine represented a notable departure from the fundamental tenets of the LWO. While the order valued multilateralism, Trump promoted a rigid view of sovereignty, describing NATO as “obsolete,” withdrawing from the Paris Climate Accord and the Iran nuclear deal, and undermining the WTO’s dispute resolution process. Although the order promoted free trade, Trump launched trade wars with both allies and adversaries, employing national security justifications to further protectionist goals. Trumpism significantly altered the relationship between domestic political identity and international alliances, showcasing a preference for authoritarian leaders while disparaging democratic partners, thereby weakening the transatlantic democratic cohesion that had been the cornerstone of the order

(Walt, 2018). This deliberate assault triggered an immediate scholarly and strategic assessment: was Trumpism simply a temporary divergence in the LWO’s trajectory, or a substantial force suggesting its impending decline or essential transformation?

The conversation focuses on three compelling arguments. The first, a Decline Thesis, posits that Trumpism acted as both a symptom and a catalyst for an irreversible collapse. By withdrawing from its position as a systemic guarantor, the United States has created a power vacuum, accelerating a transition towards a conflictual multipolarity or a leaderless “G-Zero” world, where the illiberal governance models of China and Russia, along with their sphere-of-influence politics, could become dominant (Haass, 2017). The structure of the institution seems to be coming apart beyond repair. Conversely, an Adaptation Thesis suggests that the liberal system has built-in resilience. In this context, Trumpism is viewed as a challenging but ultimately advantageous stress test, encouraging allies to pursue greater strategic independence and steering the system toward necessary reform. The Biden administration's continuous endeavours to restore alliances and frame strategic competition with China within a renewed, though more prudent, rules-based structure demonstrate this ability to adapt, suggesting evolution instead of replacement (Ikenberry, 2020). A third, more nuanced Transformation

Thesis suggests that even if the most extreme rhetoric subsides, the foundations of the old order remain fundamentally fractured. The anticipated future system is likely to feature a decline in liberalism and institutional structures, transitioning towards a landscape influenced by geopolitical blocs and relationships driven by transactions and interests. This transition signifies a shift from a universal “rules-based order” to a situation characterised by “rule by the powerful,” in which democratic and authoritarian realms deliberately diverge (Mearsheimer, 2019).

Regardless of which thesis ultimately prevails, the landscape of international politics has been irrevocably altered. The trust underpinning America’s alliance network has shifted to a conditional state, with partners increasingly

weighing the possibility of future retrenchment. China adeptly utilised the period of U.S. introspection to advance its own institutional alternatives, such as the Belt and Road Initiative. Furthermore, Trumpism has disseminated a populist approach worldwide, empowering nationalist leaders to challenge liberal internationalism from within their respective nations. The crisis ultimately highlighted the clear link between domestic political conditions and the nation's position on the global stage. The exploration of the LWO's future has transcended the boundaries of diplomatic dialogue and treaty texts; it now necessitates addressing the internal challenges of polarisation, inequality, and identity politics that exist within its member states. The legacy of the Trumpist interregnum shows that the future of the order will be influenced as much by the ballot box in Milwaukee or Marseille as by the politburo in Beijing.

Statement of the Problem

This study addresses the important and persistent conflict between the ideological and policy foundations of Trumpism—characterized by its "America First" nationalism, transactional unilateralism, and scepticism towards multilateral institutions—and the fundamental principles of the post-World War II Liberal World Order (LWO). This tension represents more than a temporary feature of a single U.S. administration; it marks a crucial juncture for global governance. The central issue is threefold: first, to assess whether Trumpism signifies a symptom of the LWO's deeper structural decline or serves as a primary causal factor in its potential disintegration; second, to examine the nature and resilience of the damage inflicted on the order's fundamental pillars, including alliance frameworks, trade systems, and normative commitments; and third, to evaluate the likely trajectory of the international system in the wake of this disruption.

The current situation necessitates a comprehensive analysis of whether the global system is undergoing an irreversible decline into fragmented blocs and strategic chaos, a period of significant adaptation and reform of liberal institutions, or a substantial transition towards a new, less liberal power framework. The diagnostic issue is further

complicated by the unclear stance of the United States, which has turned into a potentially unreliable anchor, alongside the simultaneous rise of assertive, illiberal powers ready to fill any gap. The issue goes beyond theoretical discussion and moves into practical application: understanding this dynamic is essential for policymakers, allies, and adversaries to navigate effectively through a time of heightened uncertainty, where the rules of engagement are changing and the future of collaborative internationalism is in jeopardy.

The Pre-Existing Crisis of the Liberal Order

A consensus in the literature indicates that the LWO was undergoing structural decay well before 2016, with Trumpism acting as a notable accelerant rather than a primary cause. Realist scholars have consistently raised concerns regarding the order's longevity, perceiving it as a historical artefact of a fleeting unipolar period. John Mearsheimer (2011, 2018, 2019) has consistently argued that the liberal international project was a "giant miscalculation," destined to provoke nationalist backlash and great-power rivalry as American hegemony waned. The rise of multipolarity, significantly driven by China's growth, has made a conflictual reordering inevitable. Alongside this geopolitical critique, a substantial body of political economy literature examines internal divisions. Scholars like Dani Rodrik (2011) articulated the crucial "political trilemma of the world economy," demonstrating how deep economic globalisation undermined democratic governance and social cohesion within nation-states, thus creating a setting ripe for populist revolt. The sociological unravelling was exacerbated by the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, which, as Mark Blyth (2013) and others have shown, eroded the technocratic credibility of elite institutions and exposed deep-seated inequalities inherent in the framework of neoliberal globalisation.

Liberal institutionalists, while holding a more positive view of the order's inherent value, acknowledge the increasing difficulties it faces. G. John Ikenberry (2011, 2018) describes the situation as a "crisis of authority," noting that the accomplishments of the LWO in promoting the rise of new powers and bolstering non-state actors have

led to a fragmented, gridlocked system. The institutions evolved into battlegrounds rather than exemplars of seamless governance. This analysis is expanded upon by scholars like Michael Zürn (2018), who discusses a "contestation of international institutions" and a "reflexive authority crisis," emphasising that the legitimacy of global governance is challenged not only by external actors but also by significant stakeholders within the West. As a result, the literature distinctly shows that Trumpism emerged within a context already weighed down by geopolitical redistribution, legitimacy deficits, and a domestic political-economic backlash.

Trumpism: Ideology, Doctrine, and Disruption

The discussion about Trumpism is divided between those who see it as a unified, radical ideology and those who view it as an impulsive, personality-driven doctrine. Historical and comparative analyses often place it within a wider illiberal trend. Historians like Timothy Snyder (2018) emphasise parallels with the authoritarian tactics of the twentieth century, concentrating on the politics of "eternal performance" and the deliberate erosion of shared factual discourse as crucial elements in undermining both domestic and international liberal norms. Robert Kagan (2018) and Yascha Mounk (2018) depict it as a manifestation of a global democratic downturn, where populist nationalism openly rejects cosmopolitan and institutional ideals.

In the field of IR theory, interpretations vary. Stephen Walt (2018) adopts a realist perspective, interpreting "America First" as a clear and recognisable expression of nationalist realism or offshore balancing, focused on reducing costly commitments and perceiving alliances as transactional liabilities. Liberal institutionalists, including Joseph Nye (2020), challenge this perspective by arguing that Trump's transactional approach significantly weakened the "soft power," credibility, and reputation essential for effective and legitimate leadership. The impacts of the policy are comprehensively recorded. Kristen Hopewell (2020, 2021) meticulously details the deliberate "crisis at the WTO," demonstrating how U.S. actions undermined the dispute settlement system and eroded the rules-based trading order. Similarly,

research by Luis Simon (2020) and Sten Rynning (2020) explores the detrimental effects of rhetoric that questions NATO's Article 5 and demands immediate burden-sharing, creating considerable uncertainty in the core of transatlantic security.

This work offers a valuable insight by effectively linking domestic and international politics. Researchers like Thomas Wright (2020) and Anatol Lieven (2020) explore how domestic polarisation, white identity politics, and a reaction against "establishment" elites have directly shaped a foreign policy marked by disengagement and civilisational rhetoric. This underscores that Trumpism represented not merely a shift in foreign policy but also an international expression of a domestic political realignment, an essential element for understanding its potential endurance.

Competing Prognostications: Decline, Adaptation, or Transformation?

The post-Trump scholarly debate presents starkly different visions of the future, largely aligned with IR paradigms.

- **The Decline/End of the Order Thesis:** The most pessimistic forecasts, frequently emerging from realist and certain critical viewpoints, anticipate fragmentation and a resurgence of traditional great-power conflict. John Mearsheimer (2019) predicts a "closed, Hobbesian world" in which great-power competition for spheres of influence makes liberal institutions insignificant. Richard Haass (2017) envisions a shift towards "nonpolarity" or a "G-Zero world," marked by a lack of global leadership, increasing chaos, and the failure to tackle transnational threats. From this perspective, as illustrated by Charles Kupchan's work (2020) on the "end of the American era," the LWO is not undergoing reform but is instead being actively dismantled and replaced.
- **The Adaptation/Resilience Thesis:** Liberal institutionalists emphasise the enduring and fundamental traits of the existing order. G. John Ikenberry (2020) argues that the "resilience of the liberal international infrastructure" will

endure, indicating that the interplay of networks, institutions, and the considerable costs tied to alternative systems will result in a reconsolidation, albeit one that is more modest and pluralistic in character. In *The Toddler in Chief*, Daniel Drezner (2021) discusses the "irony of global governance," emphasising how various states, subnational actors, and the private sector have maintained their support for international regimes—from climate to finance—despite the U.S. retreating, demonstrating notable systemic resilience. This literature highlights empirical trends, including European shifts towards "strategic autonomy" (Biscop, 2019) and the emergence of minilateral formats such as the Quad (AUKUS), serving as indicators of adaptation rather than decline.

- **The Transformation Thesis:** A sophisticated perspective indicates a core shift towards a novel hybrid system. Amitav Acharya (2018) theorises the emergence of a "multiplex world," characterised by various order-building projects (liberal, illiberal, post-western) operating simultaneously, akin to multiple films being shown in the same complex. This is not a simple division; instead, it represents a complex and overlapping regime complexity. Some foresee a more distinct separation shaped by technological and strategic competition. Henry Farrell and Abraham Newman (2019) explore the idea of "weaponised interdependence" in global networks, suggesting that the future order may be defined by competing techno-spheres (like digital and financial) led by the U.S. and China, leading to a situation of "dual hegemony" or "connected fragmentation" (Deudney & Ikenberry, 2021). This perspective suggests that the outcome is a transformed system that integrates the lingering liberal elements with the rising, illiberal forces of authority and conflict.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative secondary analysis approach, focusing on the systematic reinterpretation and synthesis of existing qualitative data and

scholarly literature to generate new theoretical insights, integrate various perspectives, and address innovative research questions. Taking into account the macro-historical, interpretive, and theoretical dimensions of the research problem—assessing the impact of Trumpism on the Liberal World Order—this approach is especially appropriate. This method enables a comprehensive and nuanced analysis by leveraging the vast array of existing scholarship, historical records, and policy documentation, while steering clear of the constraints linked to primary data collection. The design showcases a harmonious integration of themes and theories, all woven together within a framework that highlights comparative case analysis. The process involves the systematic collection and careful analysis of existing texts to create a unified explanatory model. The "cases" examined are not limited to nation-states; instead, they encompass crucial conceptual and empirical arenas of contestation: the institutional (such as WTO, NATO), geopolitical (including U.S.-China relations, transatlantic ties), and domestic-political (like U.S. populism, allied responses) domains. This design enables the tracing of causal mechanisms across these interconnected levels. The data consists of previously existing textual sources, meticulously chosen through purposive and snowball sampling methods to ensure theoretical saturation and a comprehensive overview of essential debates.

Discussion of Findings

The analysis indicates that the relationship between Trumpism and the Liberal World Order (LWO) is not merely a straightforward cause-and-effect scenario, but instead a complex and iterative process of mutual decline. The findings bolster a Transformation Thesis, though it incorporates significant aspects of contested adaptation and managed decline throughout various domains of the international system. The main conclusion is that Trumpism served as a catalytic stressor that revealed and intensified the inherent weaknesses of the LWO, leading not to a straightforward collapse, but to a fragmented, less liberal, and more competitively negotiated system. This transformation is marked by three interconnected shifts: from automaticity to conditionality in alliances, from universal rules to

contested spheres of governance, and from a unipolar to a fragmented center of gravity.

The analysis indicates considerable institutional damage while countering the notion of complete collapse. As anticipated by resilience scholars such as Ikenberry (2020) and Drezner (2021), the fundamental infrastructure of the LWO exhibited notable stickiness. Nevertheless, this resilience has adopted a form that alters the essence of the system. NATO continues to exist, yet the findings indicate that it now functions under a widespread logic of conditionality, where the U.S. security guarantee, previously regarded as a public good, is approached as a transaction subject to reevaluation. This has not dismantled the alliance but has compelled a European shift towards “strategic autonomy”—not so much as a substitute for NATO, but rather as an expensive safeguard against potential American unreliability (Biscop, 2019). In a similar vein, the WTO remains intact; however, its primary dispute-settlement mechanism has been weakened, supporting Hopewell’s (2021) assessment of a transition towards “power-oriented” as opposed to “rule-oriented” trade diplomacy. The conclusion drawn is that institutions have not collapsed but rather been emptied of substance, with their liberal, rules-based essence diminished while their outer structures remain as platforms for geopolitical negotiations.

A notable finding emerges in the domain of ideas, bolstering the claims made by Snyder (2018) and Mounk (2018) concerning the worldwide proliferation of illiberal practices. The most notable impact of Trumpism could be its successful incorporation of transactional sovereignty and civilisational nationalism into the heart of great-power dialogues. This extends beyond a mere U.S. policy; it acts as a legitimising narrative adopted by numerous populist leaders and illiberal regimes. The research shows that the pre-Trump standard of at least recognising multilateralism has waned. China and Russia are currently advocating for ideas such as “sovereign democracy” and “civilization-states,” framing the LWO as a tool for Western supremacy instead of a universal advantage. This marks an important change in the ideological landscape: the liberal project is now merely one of several

competing visions, rather than the presumed endpoint of political evolution.

The findings align closely with the transformative visions articulated by Acharya (2018) and Farrell & Newman (2019). The new order can be described as a “multiplex” system undergoing “connected fragmentation.”

The analysis reveals an important conclusion: the primary source of the crisis is now domestic. The unpredictability of U.S. foreign policy has evolved from an external shock into a core systemic risk. Lieven (2020) and others emphasise that the deep partisan polarisation and identity politics in the U.S. have made it impossible to achieve a coherent, long-term grand strategy, leading to a credibility trap. Allies, perceiving Trumpism as a probable ongoing occurrence rather than a singular incident, are making enduring strategic decisions—broadening partnerships and strengthening local capacities—that will be challenging to reverse. This creates a feedback loop: allied hedging amplifies U.S. resentment about burden-sharing, potentially reinforcing isolationist tendencies. The division of domestic politics within the core state is thus the main driver of systemic change.

Conclusion

This study aimed to diagnose the nature of the crisis caused by the collision of Trumpism and the Liberal World Order, evaluating whether the outcome indicates a state of terminal decline, resilient adaptation, or fundamental transformation. The analysis reveals a complex and detailed process that defies simple categorisation. The primary conclusion is that the Liberal World Order is not simply adjusting or disintegrating in a clear-cut way; rather, it is undergoing a multifaceted and contentious evolution into a hybrid international system. This new configuration highlights the complex interplay between weakening liberal institutional frameworks, strong yet redefined networks of interdependence, and the assertive emergence of illiberal, transactional, and geopolitical dynamics. Trumpism did not create this crisis; instead, it served as a significant accelerant and illuminating force, exposing the deep fragility of the domestic political

foundations of the order and instigating changes that are now firmly established.

The transformation is evident in three significant domains. Initially, the unipolar governance of the United States has irreversibly fractured, resulting in a multifaceted environment where American power faces challenges, its leadership is contingent, and its internal politics contribute notably to systemic instability. Secondly, the universal, rules-based initiative has been framed within a context, emerging as one competing perspective among others—including China's state-capitalist framework and various expressions of populist sovereignty—in a contest for normative dominance. Third, the operational logic of international cooperation is shifting from inclusive multilateralism to exclusive minilateralism and club-based governance, emphasising trust and strategic alignment over universal membership. The resulting order will feature a decrease in liberalism and predictability, increasingly shaped by the dynamics of great-power rivalry in a world that continues to be interdependent. The altered landscape presents considerable obstacles to worldwide stability, democratic cohesion, and joint initiatives to combat transnational dangers. In light of these conclusions, the following recommendations are offered for policymakers, diplomats, and scholars as they navigate this new era.

Recommendations

- **Invest in Democratic Resilience at Home:** The main emphasis ought to be on addressing the internal elements that lead to dysfunction in foreign policy. This requires intentional policies to tackle inequality, rebuild social trust, and safeguard foreign policy from the most harmful effects of partisan polarisation. An international order that is sustainable cannot be founded on the premise of fragmented political entities.
- **Embrace Managed Pluralism and Pragmatic Reform:** Institutions must acknowledge that reverting to a romanticised period of technocratic consensus is unattainable. Reform agendas should focus on strengthening functional resilience

through improved early warning systems, creating flexible governance groups for crisis response (akin to the G20 during the 2008 financial crisis), and developing protocols to maintain essential functions in the face of great-power deadlock.

- **Develop New Analytical Frameworks:** Move beyond the basic division of "liberal order vs. anarchy" to develop theories that clarify hybridity, the simultaneous presence of cooperation and competition, and the broader impacts of domestic political instability. Enhancing interdisciplinary collaboration is essential by integrating international relations with comparative politics, political economy, and sociology.
- **Focus on Causal Mechanisms and Pathways:** Future research should concentrate on in-depth analyses that explore how specific domestic political changes result in alterations to foreign policy, and how these changes in turn elicit strategic responses from both allies and adversaries. This requires process-tracing and comparative case studies across different policy areas, such as trade, security, and climate.

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