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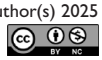
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The Upsurge, Overreach and Unravelling of the 'Liberal International Order'

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Abstract
The idea of a 'Liberal International Order' has a long and controversial history. Until 1989, it was a fiercely contested project, but during the 'unipolar moment' of the 1990s, it underwent an unprecedented upsurge and appeared to achieve hegemonic status. This article offers a retrospective analysis, viewing the ensuing cycle as a discursive metanarrative, and covering the ensuing overreach and its more recent unravelling. It concludes with an overview of alternative conceptions of liberal order, and some brief reflections on how a revised Liberal International Order (LIO) might regain some of the ground it has lost, and what that would involve.

Keywords
Convergence, liberalism, metanarrative, overreach, unipolarity, unravelling

Game-changing after the second coming of Trump

The discourse of the so-called 'Liberal International Order' (LIO) has been on life support for at least the past decade, but it could not be fully disconnected until a fully-fledged alternative world-view had taken shape to replace it. 'Make America Great Again' (MAGA) has now crystallised into a sufficiently structured doctrine and practice to perform that function. This article sketches a review of the past LIO record from the perspective of mid-2025.

It is too early to know how stable and effective the emerging narrative substitution will prove. But it is already clear that a major discontinuity has occurred. Prior expectations and commitments have broken too drastically to permit a return to the *status quo ante*, even if the Washington authorities had second thoughts (not a real option before 2029). Whatever else it means MAGA involves Making America Grate Again from the standpoint of its traditional allies and liberal democratic partners. The Global Order is therefore in flux, and a Washington Dissensus has taken hold, even if most international thought leaders are struggling to grapple with the emerging dispensation. Multilateral institutions and understandings are being radically destabilised; security alliances are breaking; trade commitments are being overturned; financial expectations and guarantees are no longer so predictable; patterns of international migration are being drastically reconfigured; and

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the pre-existing moral and normative codes may now be disregarded. Evidence and expertise (like 'checks and balances' and the rule of law) count for less as public discourse becomes unanchored. This is the perspective from which the tired language of the LIO may now be reassessed.

What follows is an interpretation of current disruptions drawing on the historical background, as dominant 'top down' ideas about world order were developed and then, at crucial junctures, modified. This approach treats the LIO as an evolving and contested discursive metanarrative. The idea is that metanarratives provide overarching conceptual frameworks that enable their users to find macro-historical patterns that can order their understanding of the complex and bewildering flow of global political configurations. Such discourses build on more specific and well-grounded historical narratives but extend beyond the confines of a precise time frame or geography. They can be projected backwards or extrapolated into the future and generalised across diverse locations. They rest on linguistic commitments that embody unspoken preferences and tacit presuppositions. They may derive their persuasive power at least in part from the hegemonic services they incidentally provide. Since such metanarratives stand at one remove from the historical patterns that they claim to capture, they are not directly falsifiable. Instead, they are liable to periodically gain such traction that they appear beyond question, but also to retreat and fade in the face of subsequently visible failings and inadequacies, without completely imploding. The LIO belongs in this schema, which also applies to other overarching discursive frameworks, including not only liberalism in general but also environmentalism, traditionalism and so on.

The pre-history of the LIO

The focus of this article is on the LIO as it evolved after the end of the Cold War. But some brief pre-history is required. Theorists of world politics claim to have traced some liberal internationalist doctrine and practice back into the 19th century, or even to Kant's essay of 1795 (Kant, 1996 (1795)) – although critics have long argued that such justificatory language often served liberal imperial purposes and screened out many injustices. In post-independence Latin America, the major powers did in due course accept the emergence of a score of republican regimes nominally organised according to constitutional principles. Although on closer inspection the liberalism of this emerging regional order was provisional and superficial (including slavery in Brazil until 1889; discriminating against indigenous, black, female and poor majorities; tolerating arbitrary military rule; etc.) it was relatively peaceful and inclusive, at least compared with the 'scramble for Africa' or the aggressions of European empires in Asia and the Middle East. But even in those less favoured regions some signs of an incipient LIO might be detected – for example, in relation to Australia, Japan or even the Cape Colony of South Africa. Respectful treatment of non-European peoples was indisputably a rarity, and for that matter Afrikaners, Irish Catholics, and many other marginal European groups were also left aside. But as international commerce expanded the geographical scope and societal range of liberal protections were somewhat expanded and deepened around the world until the 'long nineteenth century' came to an abrupt halt in 1914.

Thereafter, the disintegration of core European empires and the creation of the League of Nations may have signalled a renewed and more ambitious drive to project global principles of mutual recognition and respect between states regulated by universal principles of law and conflict resolution. Undoubtedly this Wilsonian model of liberal internationalism was both flawed in conception and failed in implementation.[1] But it left a legacy that was taken up with renewed vigour under the 1941 Atlantic Charter. The UN System created in 1945 (with major input from the Latin American republics as well as controlling direction from the Western alliance) revised, amplified and universalised a complex set of liberal conceptions and initiatives, arguably providing a loosely guiding framework for postwar international relations – at least as far as the non-Soviet world was

concerned. This incomplete and lopsided, but resilient and widely attractive, approach to the construction of a global political order is conventionally thought to underpin the upsurge in LIO assertiveness that followed from the disintegration of the Soviet bloc at the end of 1989 and the ensuing reinforcement of US ascendancy.[2]

Post-1989 unipolarity, ideological convergence, and the supposed 'end of history'

The year 1989 is mostly remembered for the sensational November breaching of the Berlin Wall, but this was only one highpoint in a worldwide upsurge of liberal democratic optimism. A referendum in Algeria terminated four decades of socialism and authorised multi-party elections. The new constitution in Brazil returned the military to barracks after a quarter century in power. In Chile the Pinochet dictatorship lost its plebiscitary bid for continuity. Thirty years of military socialism in Myanmar were challenged by the 1988 uprising that culminated in an overwhelming electoral victory for the National League for Democracy. Likewise, the voters of Namibia brought white supremacy to an end, foreshadowing the fall of *apartheid* in South Africa. In Moscow the Mexican soap opera *Los Ricos Tambien Lloran* (the Rich Weep Like Us) secured a record viewership. Student protesters in Beijing rallied to a replica of the US Statue of Liberty. Paraguay's eternal dictator General Stroessner was at last overthrown and exiled. Kenneth Kaunda stood down after almost as long a tenure in power in Zambia. In short, the whole international *zeitgeist* of 1989 provided a powerful background impetus projecting the LIO discourse across the globe and propelling an upgrade of its ambitions.

For more than four decades after 1945, the main framework regulating world affairs had been provided by the bipolarity of the Cold War. Over the ensuing three decades an apparently hegemonic LIO generated a guiding set of ideas that reshaped much of the prevailing analysis of international relations – although, as can now see, this narrative was always more dominant at the discursive level than controlling in practical terms (cf. Homolar and Turner, 2024). Indeed, the remarkable speed of the Soviet collapse, and its unexpectedly negotiated progression towards acceptance of liberal internationalist prescriptions, left little scope for dialogue and reflection concerning the lessons to be learnt or the range of principles that might be needed to reconcile competing worldviews. Triumphalism was an inevitable and understandable feature of the resulting dominant narrative. The two most canonical testimonies to this post-Berlin mindset were Francis Fukuyama's (1992) 'End of History' and Samuel Huntington's (1991) 'Third Wave' manifesto. As for the losers (not only traditional Marxists, but also many others whose worldview was constructed around the assumption of a world politically divided between left and right), often they either fell silent or hastily repositioned themselves within the emerging LIO discourse.

There were some compelling reasons for key actors to rally to a turbo-powered narrative of endless liberal democratic ascendancy. In some settings this vision provided the confidence needed to overcome previously insoluble conflicts (the reunification of Germany; the acceptance of universal suffrage in South Africa; the termination of civil wars in Central America). In the old democracies doubting politicians could be lured on board by hopes of distributing a historic 'peace dividend'. Across Sub-Saharan Africa discredited experiments with 'one party' rule could be discarded to widespread relief. A 'lost decade' after the 1982 debt crisis most Latin American leaders were only too ready to embrace liberalising economic reforms as the policy shift required for democratic normality.

The key difference between pre- and post-Cold War variants of the LIO narrative concerned their assumptions about universalism and 'convergence'. So long as the Communist bloc presented

an at least nominally equivalent alternative to the liberal narrative vision of a global future, the 'Free World' variant was imprecise on these key dimensions. Western ideology assumed that eventually all humanity would be enlisted in a universal democratic market system, but this was mostly pictured as a remote end-state. The timing and trajectory for arriving at this destiny remained distinctly indeterminate. After 1989, by contrast, with the supposed elimination of non-liberal models and the termination of historical alternatives, confidence was reinforced in a new liberal version of historical inevitability. It seemed clear that political and economic best practices were already in operation in the developed democracies, so the question at issue became simply what routes should be followed to bring the rest of humanity to that prescribed end-state. Since such 'convergence' was now just a matter of time, the remaining historical tasks were to smooth the way for those peoples ready to move (e.g. through EU enlargement); to prod laggards into tackling the obstacles to inevitable reforms (e.g. through conditional incentives and sanctions); and to overcome resistance from any remaining intransigent opponents (e.g. unrepentant autocracies, doctrinal fanatics, or criminal saboteurs). Such was the implicit mindset guiding leading policymakers during the upsurge phase of LIO assertiveness.

Among the many episodes that might be cited to illustrate this thesis, there is only space here to mention the two most telling examples – the denuclearisation of Ukraine; and the pursuit of coercive 'regime change' in Afghanistan after 2001:

A. In January 1994, Washington joined with Moscow and Kiev in a Trilateral statement promising security assurance for the new internationally recognized nation state of Ukraine, on condition that it unilaterally relinquished its nuclear stockpile and signed up to the Non-Proliferation Treaty. At the time, this was seen as a pivotal LIO achievement. Moscow was under the impression that the counterpart was a Western assurance that Ukraine would remain neutral. Three years later newly re-elected Clinton and Yeltsin signed the NATO-Russia Founding Act under which Russia supposedly 'acquiesced' to the eastern expansion of the alliance. In reality, this did not 'bury the Cold War' as LIO advocates imagined but was viewed by Yeltsin as a mistake and false step (for details, see Savranskaya and Blanton, 2024). Bill Perry, the Defence Secretary to Clinton who stood down in early 1997, later argued that Moscow's subsequent hostility was partly caused by US contempt for Russia as a 'third-rate power' (Borger, 2016).
B. A month after the Twin Towers atrocity of 11 September 2001, Washington and some NATO allies launched 'Operation Enduring Freedom' to oust the Taliban government from Kabul. In principle NATO was a defensive security alliance providing multilateral protection to its sovereignty-respecting liberal member states. But during the upsurge phase of the LIO it began undertaking expeditionary military missions against ill-defined adversaries located 'out of area' (Kuwait in 1991, Bosnia 1992, Kosovo 1999, then Afghanistan 2003, and Iraq 2004). The foundational defensive contours of its activities faded from view and its sovereignty and democracy-promoting profile was sullied. In the case of Afghanistan, the initial rationale was that the Taliban regime in Kabul had sheltered the Al Qaida terrorists who had assaulted the USA. However, Bin Laden's first sponsors were located elsewhere (notably Saudi Arabia) and his main protectors were also Western allies who remained unscathed (in the Pakistani military). With hindsight it is evident that the vast Western commitments that followed Operation Enduring Freedom inflicted untold suffering on the Afghan people, did nothing lasting for gender rights, and fell into complicity with various poppy-growing warlords. Two decades later the Taliban returned to reclaim Afghan sovereignty, while NATO's LIO credentials were indelibly tarnished.

In contrast to the 1990's international chorus of endorsement for such upgraded LIO pretensions, such outcomes invite reconsideration of the quiet or unspoken resistance practised by other major players. With hindsight, we can see that the Chinese Communist Party was always a crucial source of dissent, albeit tactically inconspicuous for most of the first two decades until the rise of Xi. Another current of opposition came from the 'Asian Values' community. Under that rubric India was initially the least vocal, although over time, as the Malaysians and Singaporeans allowed the polemic to subside, it was the BJP that provided the greatest practical contestation. In terms of frontal opposition, it was of course the radical wing of global Islam that embodied the most full-scale rejection of the LIO and all its works. But violent jihad distracted attention away from the more subterranean sources of resistance that never dissipated – for example, the military and security lobbies that fell silent as defence spending was curtailed, but that remained in reserve to await the return of a harsher *realpolitik.* A wide variety of other marginalised or alienated illiberal currents also had to bide their time but never yielded in their doctrinal/sectoral/or nationalist hostility to the prevailing orthodoxy. (One telling illustration of this broader phenomenon is the map of German districts supporting the AFD in 2025, which almost perfectly replicates the East–West boundary line supposedly dissolved 36 years previously.)

Overall, then, whatever mainstream democratic leaders might have hoped or imagined, the superficially irresistible rise of faith in the LIO in the 1990s has proved a mirage. This verdict will come as little surprise to citizens of the many bystander countries exposed to its collateral damage – a long list notably including Balkan states, Iraq, Libya, Somalia and Yemen, as well as Afghanistan and now Ukraine. For all too many of them the traumas of history have proved far from ended, and the world was never likely to become 'flat' (*contra* Friedman, 2007).

Millennial overreach

In fact, the LIO showed many signs both of overreach and of unravelling well before its current disintegration. At the outset Western operations in the Balkans and Rwanda might be disregarded as aberrations. But the Iraq intervention was a watershed, and the unravelling accelerated with the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, the EU treatment of Greece and Portugal, followed by the Libya and Syria crises, and the electoral shocks of 2016 both in Britain and the United States. But it took Covid, the Ukraine War and the return of Trump to the White House to deliver the coup de grace. What global dispensation comes next, how internally coherent and lasting it may prove, remains very much in doubt in 2025.

During the Cold War the language of 'bipolarity' reflected a genuine reality but also distracted attention from the divergent perceptions of such secondary actors as Iran or South Africa, and downplayed reservations held by such major players as Gaullist France or Maoist China. Under the LIO something similar could be said about the briefly popular notion of a new 'unipolar' dispensation – discourse which clearly alienated Iran, Russia and Venezuela, and also provoked varying degrees of dissent and resistance across the globe. As China gained strength and began capitalising on this widespread discontent the early 21st century alternative of 'multi-polarity' gained traction. This also reflected the 2004 major enlargement of the European Union, and the accelerating rise of India. In truth, the shift from unipolarity to multi-polarity was at best partial and incomplete. In fact, this more pluralist version of the LIO framework – like its predecessor – over-simplified the true geopolitical situation. Among other things a multi-polar framing distracted from the digital transformation of world communication systems and underestimated the accelerating destructiveness of anthropogenic climate change, together with the multiplication of refugee flows and the spreading tentacles of organised crime. Indeed, both the unipolar and the multi-polar variants of the

LIO masked the contested and unstable background conditions eroding liberal hegemony and undermining the Western world's assumed claims to moral and practical ascendancy.

LIO overreach was abundantly in evidence at the turn of the millennium, both under the outgoing Clinton and incoming Bush Jr. administrations. With hindsight the US Supreme Court ruling of 12 December 2000, halting the vote recount in Florida and thus denying the Democrat claim to the presidency may be seen as a pivotal act of judicial partisanship. The unipolar political authority failed to live up to its pretensions as a trustworthy beacon of democracy.

Two international examples of overreach must suffice here – Western policies grouped under the rubric of 'democracy promotion'; and the democratic conditionality clauses adopted by many regional organisations.

A. The 'democracy promotion' industry gained momentum as the Cold War wound down. For example, in 1982 the US Congress created a bi-partisan National Endowment for Democracy, somewhat similar to West Germany's publicly funded party foundations (Adenauer for the Christian Democrats, Ebert for the Socialist International, etc), and the United Kingdom followed with its modest pro-democracy initiative, the Westminster Foundation for Democracy. During the 1990s, this epistemic community gained prestige from the impression that it was now on the winning side of history. In addition, the EU added the Copenhagen Criteria to its requirements for admission to the Union and also adopted similar language (though with much weaker conditionality) to its objectives for enhanced engagements with neighbours judged ineligible for full membership (such as the Barcelona Process in North Africa). Other democracies followed suit, and a variety of multilateral institutions also came on board. Ten years ago, Laurence Whitehead (2015) drew attention to the risks of groupthink and ideological conformity as these proselytizers gained in standing and became more shielded from self-doubt. The author suggested they might be 'lured . . . into mythmaking and overreach, as they competed with each other to bestow the benefits of their doctrine on the as-yet-unconverted . . . perhaps even regardless of whether the putative beneficiaries were receptive or resistant' (Whitehead, 2015: 11). However, he also argued that such strong versions of a democracy promotion ideology 'encountered mounting difficulties and increasingly well-organized resistance after 2001, with the emergence of 'democracy prevention' and 'anti-democracy promotion' responses' (Whitehead, 2015: 13) that have subsequently become predominant.
B. Reflecting the same temporary *zeitgeist* a succession of large regional communities of states (mostly created with quite different objectives in mind) climbed on the bandwagon by adopting new conditions requiring members to commit to templates democratic political practices, at the risk of suspension or other sanctions for non-compliance. However, as Whitehead (2024) recently noted, 'the precise commitments they adopted were actually quite flexible and contextually varied'. Reviewing the African Union, the Arab League, the OAS Charter, Caricom and the Commonwealth's Harare Principles, among others, Whitehead found that they 'shared soft power and 'shaming' ingredients, but promised more than they could deliver, and over the ensuing two decades they both diverged and decayed. This was partly due to the shallowness of the initial liberal international consensus, and partly due to the underlying sources of latent resistance and disbelief present . . . in each region' (Whitehead, 2024: 642). Here also retreat from the hubris of the turn of the century has accelerated further since this was written.

Autocratic learning and dissentient pushback

During the enhanced LIO's post-1989 upsurge phase, momentum drew in an ever-widening array of actors to the expanding opportunities it promised to whoever learnt the new script. Even so there

were always many non-participants, some of them just inflexible or slow to react, together with an illiberal old guard who realised that their interests were potentially under attack. The Chinese Communist Party was an early resister together with a select group of similarly alert resisters. As the early upsurge morphed into overreach, initial hopes were converted into defined patterns of benefit and constraint, the alienated and disenchanted attracted a wider following, and their grounds for resistance became more clearly defined. But such reactions took time to crystallise and spread. This gradually strengthening illiberal camp drew on many diverse sources of thought – nationalist, leftist, religious and traditional. In many settings it took a generation to generate coherent and articulate pushback against the overall LIO narrative, and even after three decades that process of resistance is still taking shape and gaining ground. World leaders such as Erdogan, Orbán, Putin and Xi are now clearly identified as figureheads of this movement, but they only achieved that status gradually, and their emergence rested on a broad-based followership composed of many lesser-known opinion formers. Islamists, securocrats, nostalgic historians, sharp-eyed financiers, and media tycoons all played their part, with different configurations of opposition to the liberal order in each of many diverse settings. These complexities require separate examination elsewhere.[3] Here it will suffice to distinguish between two broad types of pushbacks: (1) autocratic frontal opposition and (2) the more passive resistance of uncommitted bystanders and illiberal dissenters.

A. Although a range of illiberal and authoritarian powerholders felt threatened by LIO assertiveness most hesitated to engage in outright frontal confrontation until they had fully assessed the challenge and had identified allies and resources to guide and stiffen their opposition. Whereas the democracy promoters had ‘first mover’ advantages, the resisters benefited over the longer run from a ‘learning curve’ (Dobson, 2012) and an asymmetry of concern. LIO-inclined actors generally lacked the urgency and existential anxiety that motivated their autocratic antagonists. For example, the signatories to the Commonwealth’s Harare Declaration of 1989 were only mildly committed to its noble principles, whereas it triggered a red alert of intransigence in the Mugabe regime (which was eventually expelled from the Commonwealth in 2002). Similarly in the Western hemisphere, most liberals viewed the OAS Democracy Charter as a nice-to-have aspirational document whose main use was for virtue-signalling, whereas Caracas and Havana saw it as a mortal threat. Likewise, Western opinion generally viewed the ‘colour revolutions’ of Georgia and Ukraine as natural expressions of the underlying sentiments of those populations. By contrast, for the securocrats of Moscow and its international sympathisers such upheavals were understood as sinister and externally orchestrated conspiracies directly threatening social peace that needed to be thwarted at all costs. (More recently the Belarus election of 2020 was similarly appraised, as was the 2024 election in Venezuela.) As for Hong Kong, while the British were content to pull back in 1997 and wait until 2047 for their former colony to evolve into an electoral democracy and beacon to the rest of Asia, the authorities in Beijing never vacillated in their resolve over time to block any such challenge to their alternative model of governance.

Seen from an LIO perspective if the final liberating outcome to all these contests was foreseeable an interim stance of steady containment might be prudent, democracy promotion was desirable but not necessarily urgent (or even that convenient, at least in the near term). Seen from the other side of the divide, however, this posture was disrespectful and insincere. It relegated existing autocratic governments to the status of illegitimate temporary placeholders and therefore fed their paranoia. In response, they were inclined to view all indications of internal liberal restlessness as confirmation that the LIO world was bent on aggressive expansionism. In this way, regimes targeted by the democracy promotion community often took its declarations more

seriously than was justified by its actions. Over time, autocratic regimes studied all the possible avenues of what they saw as liberal subversion and paid their opponents the compliment of imitation. If liberal NGOs and foreign media had encouraged anti-government activism in target nations that made it worthwhile to strike back with comparable tactics in the internal politics of core democratic regimes. Since the LIO narrative had proved so persuasive even in unfavourable settings, it made sense to collaborate in the forging of a counter-narrative that might prove similarly destabilizing to the old democracies. Through trial and error, such experiments in autocratic pushback gradually gained momentum until eventually it played a substantial role in the unravelling of the LIO hegemony. But it took a generation for such resistance to achieve traction, and only recently has LIO hubris given way to alarm and dismay. What stood in the way of quicker recognition of this dynamic was the liberal assumption that democratic regimes were inherently resilient, while autocracies were fundamentally flawed. The record indicates that in fact both sides of this binary divide can share some similar structural vulnerabilities.

B. Beyond the democracy/autocracy binary divide many of the world's other nations and societies were neither fully captivated by the LIO narrative nor strongly aligned with the opposing camp. Across much of the Global South, and also among substantial bystander communities throughout the world, liberal triumphalism was always viewed with scepticism or bemusement, while the backlash from its antagonists was also seen as excessive, or irrelevant to their main concerns. Nationalists, traditionalists, and the religiously inclined could all find doctrinal arguments for dissent from liberal orthodoxies. Ideals of universal equality, fundamental human rights, gender balance, secular tolerance and social inclusion were far removed from the collective imaginaries of many of the world's peoples and communities. Many illiberal reflexes and practices were deeply embedded, prompting doubt and dissent whenever LIO pretensions were laid out in detail. More importantly, even when such doctrines attracted curiosity and potential sympathy, the real test was how they might apply in practical terms in each specific social setting. Both elite judgements and mass opinions were liable to remain agnostic or passively sceptical until it became clear what the LIO entailed for particular actors and communities. Thus, while peace, freedom, dialogue, and accountability all sound like unobjectionable principles, many doubts need to be addressed to convert bystanders into supporters. Whose resources would expand, and which interests would be required to pay more? If impersonal rules were extended which privileges would be at risk, and how would disputes be arbitrated? If elections became competitive what protections would there be for the losers? Under a unipolar LIO only one ultimate authority would have the last word, whereas multipolarity promised more diversity, but also more conflict of interpretations. All these considerations provided avenues for autocratic pushback, so it is unsurprising that a large part of humanity remains detached from the LIO worldview more than a generation after its triumph.

One specific source of dissent requires mention. The most damaging criticism of the LIO perspective has been the charge of hypocrisy, or double standards. What became of the much touted international 'responsibility to protect' in Iraq, Libya, or most recently in Gaza? Who protects the rights of refugees in an era of anti-immigrant electoral politics and mass deportations? When the WHO declared a global pandemic emergency how were vaccines supplies prioritised, distributed, and paid for? As climate change accelerates, how are the polluters made to pay, or their victims to be compensated? An LIO unresponsive to such questions seems unlikely to attract the allegiance of the unconvinced, or to face down the challenges of illiberal backlash.

Liberal overreach and autocratic pushback may provide the general headings to explain the retreat and then unravelling of the LIO that has been underway over the past generation, but two more specific factors require brief consideration before this article can conclude with an attempt at stock

taking. These are the 2008/9 global financial crisis and its aftermath, and the retreat from liberalism in Washington after the Obama administration.

The global financial crisis

Although the public face of the LIO stressed such political features as multilateralism and democratisation, the economic and financial components of the package were integral, and of equal significance. After 1989, a single world market in traded goods and international investment (although not, of course, in employment) replaced the 'two system' model that had included the Soviet bloc with its centrally planned resource allocations. Multinational corporations extended their reach. The World Trade Organisation was established in 1995 and expanded thereafter to include first China (and then in 2012 Russia), including almost all UN member states – although operating with diminished authority in recent years. Financialisation reinforced trade and investment liberalisation and also came to encompass the entire globe – although the 1990's drive to dismantle capital controls lost impetus after a 1998 setback. Equity markets were established in even some of the most unpropitious of locations. The core of this global system was provided by the American economy, based in particular on the US dollar managed by the Federal Reserve Board. The upsurge of liberal internationalism was boosted by the strong performance of these economic components of its prescription, and reinforced by the failure or discredit of alternative scripts. No doubt the optimistic *zeitgeist* of the early 1990s was somewhat dented by economic and financial excesses such as the 1998 sudden stop, and the 2001 Dotcom bust. But such setbacks could be seen as temporary market fluctuations rather than fundamental failures of the liberalisation philosophy. The Twin Towers shock and the aftermath of the Iraq invasion did more to faith in the LIO outlook than such market downturns. With some adjustments, the prevailing *zeitgeist* retained its hegemony until 2008.

The 2009/9 global financial crisis could not be set aside so easily, however. It exposed major flaws in core banking and credit markets that required large-scale co-ordinated public policy responses to rescue the entire system. Both US and European government interventions and re-regulations were required, and indeed it was a huge stimulus by the Chinese government that led the way in restoring stability. The aftermath lingered for a decade in the form of central bank 'quantitative easing' and its redistributive sequels, with the result that both market fundamentalism and institutional complacency lost a large part of their public support (Trubowitz and Burgoon, 2024).[4] The resulting indicators of LIO delegitimation and unravelling include mounting electoral hostility towards immigrants, loss of confidence in economic expertise, and the eruption of 'far right' challenges to Western democratic incumbent politicians. The Brexit referendum and first Trump election of 2016 foreshadowed a succession of illiberal innovations in the traditional heartlands of liberal democracy. The Covid pandemic accentuated these tendencies, and Trump's Second Coming appears to be completing the shift to a new dispensation.

For over a decade the LIO narrative persisted despite its inapplicability – no coherent alternative emerged. But its hegemonic dominance was draining away. The core governments at the heart of the system were no longer so committed to its maintenance. Indeed, liberal political norms were visibly eroding in the core Western democracies that had presented themselves as the 'end of history' models towards which all the latecomers would need to converge.

'Fish rots from the head' – Brexit, and Trump

Unexpected electoral outcomes in two core Western democracies shattered remaining illusions about the permanence of the LIO framework. Revelation came from the liberal heartland rather than from latecomer backsliding.

The 2016 Brexit referendum was directed against one particularly accentuated version of the LIO – the project for an 'ever closer' process of European integration orchestrated from Brussels. Westminster ambivalence over the United Kingdom's commitment to this prospect had deep historical roots, and some kind of divergence may have been unavoidable even in the absence of this shock decision by the British electorate. But it was a more of protest vote against austerity and unregulated immigration than a full-fledged rejection of liberal internationalism. The balance of opinion was tilted by the lingering effects of the 2008 financial crisis and the temporary sentiments provoked by a mass exodus from traumatised Syria. Still, it constituted a moment of rupture that precipitated cumulatively more radical forms of dissent from the prior London elite consensus. In isolation this might not have drastically ruptured the Western democratic commitment to the LIO, had Hilary Clinton succeeded Barack Obama in the White House. But coming only a few months later in the United States, a second electoral shock more fully upended conventional liberal assumption. Here too the initial breach with LIO orthodoxy was tentative and perhaps reversible. But a decade later it is clear that these two expressions of voter disenchantment in the Anglo-Saxon heartland of the liberal world would trigger a cumulative unravelling of a worldview that no longer commanded general acceptance. The 'roadrunner' metaphor (suddenly discovering no support below one's feet) could be added to the ancient image of the rotting fish (if decomposing at its head there would be no chance of stabilising the decay of the peripheral organs).

After the 2020 Covid pandemic and then following Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the collapse of international normative guardrails proceeded apace. Since then, the LIO has come under simultaneous assault from three directions. The pushback from autocrats has taken further shape in China, Iran, Korea and of course Russia and its remaining satellites. The radical right has captured a much wider electoral base in the old democracies. Moreover, across the world as a whole, non-aligned and bystanders have also pulled back their LIO engagements. To the surprise and consternation of many Western observers, most governments and public opinions in the Global South were only modestly offended by the occupation of Donetsk and the Crimea. Russia was effectively backed by China in this aggression, and India also took a lenient view. Even Brazil (just emerging from Bolsonaro's authoritarian experiment) and South Africa (still governed by the ANC, although no longer subject to the state capture practices of the Zuma administration) hesitated to embrace traditional Western narratives. BRICS leaders who had united in criticism of the Iraq invasion, the confrontation with Iran, and the West's lopsided distribution of vaccines during the pandemic, proved reluctant to fall out between themselves on this issue. By the following year, Western reactions to war in Gaza and then in Lebanon were seen as confirmation that the Global South needed to tread cautiously on such matters, and the second election of Donald Trump to the US presidency only reinforced this perception.

The evidence of LIO unravelling is massive and beyond question. But care is needed over how far to extrapolate this dynamic into the future. Just as the 1989 narrative proved time-limited, so too the current repudiation may prove far from permanently hegemonic. Although the post-1989 LIO has faltered and come under siege in the 2020s, its practical legacy of institutions and collective remedies remain available for potential reactivation. An 'active' Global South would be composed of secondary players that combine substantial domestic state capacities with relative weakness as international actors. International liberalism and multilateral cooperation provide a particularly appealing framework of action for such nations. The European Union has been constructed on foundations of multilateralism and mutual recognition between sovereign member states that were always partial and may now be further compromised, but that can only be supplanted under extreme duress. Short of a catastrophe these principles will not be directly repealed and may instead be reasserted in an effort to attract wider partnerships from other nations (such as Canada and Norway) that have good reason to resist unfettered Great Power impositions. China,

Russia and the USA might find some common ground concerning exclusive regional zones of influence over their respective 'backyards', but no international consensus can be stabilised around the construction of such neo-imperialist projects. Too many secondary states have too much at stake in upholding national sovereignties, and the global dynamics of extra-territorial factor mobility and accelerated technical progress pose almost insuperable barriers to such efforts.

The LIO metanarrative has been unravelling due to its internal failings rather than because of displacement by a coherent superior alternative. Indeed, it was the absence of a viable normative challenge that extended the hegemony of liberal internationalist ideas so long beyond their sell-by date. Even now, any substitute plutocratic or power transactional doctrines can be expected to provoke early and widespread resistance and pushback. Near-term responses to LIO failure are more likely to involve mounting dissensus (a turbulent cacophony of unstable and unviable experiments), and more likely to generate 'polycrisis', than any credible new metanarrative or durable order. If this proves correct, then although broadly 'liberal' conceptions of world order are undergoing a major retreat, this could eventually prove another case of *reculer pour mieux sauter.* To conclude on a speculative note, what might that involve?

Which conception of liberal order could perhaps be resurrected, and if so how?

If it is to regain traction, liberal democracy must first reassess its failures, and then return to its (embattled) roots. One recent contribution in this sense has been provided by none other than Francis Fukuyama (2022).[5] Although it has the merit of going back to first principles, his latest book does not dwell on the issue of international overreach and so omits a lesson implicit in the preceding pages. That lesson is that Western liberal democrats who wish to reconstruct the international credibility of an LIO need to uphold the highest possible standards of democratic performance at home. Domestic best practice provides the missing ingredient for others to follow. Without it, there can be little hope of countering the pushback from autocratic rivals, let alone of winning back support from those many bystanders currently convinced that the liberal narrative is insincere, and that its advocates practice double standards.

An alternative to Fukuyama's idealised account of classical liberalism would be that the liberal camp can be pictured as a large and sprawling family of discourses grouped around a jelly-like core of commitments. A varied package of ideas cluster within the umbrella term of 'liberalism'. Here it is not so much their intellectual rigour as their imprecise inclusiveness that explains why they proved so widespread and resilient. This elasticity is how liberal reflexes spread and permeate adjoining conceptions, and why liberalism is so hard to eradicate. Notwithstanding recent setbacks, it seems unlikely to be fully rebutted or disavowed. Indeed, as a tacit set of embedded assumptions and social practices (some say the secular successor to Christianity) it may prove irrefutable. Yet, to regain its recent ascendancy as a framework for international order requires a major rethink and renewal. Can it generate bold new formulae capable of contending with such phenomena as surveillance capitalism, artificial intelligence, cryptocurrencies and even ecological upheaval?

On one view, the mainspring of its attraction is the inexpugnable and foundational validity of its core commitment to the expansion of human freedom. If so, now would be the time for liberalism to go on the offensive, championing such embattled causes as electoral integrity, media truthfulness, minority rights, equitable provision of quality education and healthcare, the suppression of criminal violence and international money laundering, peaceful dispute resolution, and environmental protection. Its core value of individual freedom is under direct threat on all these fronts, and more.

Or alternatively, liberalism can be recast as a loose family of processes, rather than a unitary and timeless and scripted essence. Such a view highlights the amorphous and elusive features of its

core concerns. Here it is a relatively flexible, open, tolerant, and in general optimistic set of ideas, offering encouragement to its adherents that they can pursue their own inclinations in ways that are also beneficial to those around them, and that help make society become more supportive of the general interest over time. In this account liberalism is a meliorist outlook, which presents a positive contrast to other darker, less optimistic, and less tolerant doctrines and ways of living. But in this telling, it is not a crusading doctrine, and its capacity to recover from the unravelling of the LIO would therefore depend upon its deep embeddedness in the micro-foundations of society, rather than from the clarion calls of its top theorists. It could fall out of sight for a prolonged period, while remaining latent and potentially resurgent at some indeterminate future date when the time seemed right.

If the liberal disposition is something of a jelly, then it will take the course of least resistance and can provide no structural resistance to anything. On this second interpretation, the key source of LIO ascendancy has not been that its inner strength guarantees a strong fight against the most powerful of antagonists. In the absence of a dedicated phalanx of implacable liberals resolved to advance all varieties of the cause of freedom in all settings and regardless of the sacrifices required, what else could account for the prevalence of a liberal metanarrative? Could it be that the epistemic community of liberal activists simply hitched a ride on the coattails of a rising power, acquiescing to the inconsistencies and doublethink required to picture first Victorian Britain and later Gunboat America as reliable bearers of ineliminable freedoms for all? The sinews of the doctrine might thereby be provided not by its internal commitments, but rather by the powerplays which it endorses, legitimises and disguises. According to the sceptics, the scope of liberalism's contemporary appeal derives not so much from its hard-edged convictions, as from the way it eludes inconvenient confrontations, and accommodates itself to dominant hierarchies (including billionaires, securocrats, private media moguls and careerist politicians).

More positively, the many-stranded liberal tradition can also be plausibly identified with the delivery of a considerable inventory of social benefits over the past couple of centuries –educational expansion, entrepreneurial dynamism, international integration, dissemination of the rule of law and popular government, the propagation of universalizing claims and aspirations concerning human rights, and huge advances in scientific understanding. Although most of these features of what can be regarded as human progress may be only partially and indirectly attributable to any liberal metanarrative, and despite counter-arguments about various probable negative correlates (gross economic inequalities and injustices, indifference to structural racism, gender oppression, the legitimation of liberal crusading, to name a few) on balance liberals have made a strong pragmatic case for preferring their world view to most of the available alternatives. But the crucial point about pragmatic as opposed to foundational justifications is that they only carry conviction within contextual limits. Other options remain in contention and may in due course prove compelling alternatives whenever liberal complacency and overreach ceases to deliver further benefits, or when new challenges require tougher responses.

Thus, at the present time, pragmatists could be won over to the gloomier metanarrative of looming environmental catastrophe. Under this perspective, the consequences of continuing to pursue an outlook that places personal freedoms above all other considerations may prove so disastrous that a very different style of understanding has become indispensable. The COP agenda of limiting global warming to 1.5° by 2050 still attempts to reconcile liberal priorities with ecological necessities, but as it appears to falter a more drastic metanarrative of radical environmentalism might well trump the ideal of further expanding human freedoms. If the coming generations were to face existential challenges from climate displacement, overpopulation, pandemics, refugee tides, water wars and overwhelming resource depletion, the imperatives of physical survival and collective security could easily displace all dreams of freedom as the new prevailing *zeitgeist*.

In such circumstances, metanarratives of liberalisation might easily be submerged by ascendant doctrines of no holds barred struggle for self-preservation. From a pragmatic perspective, this would not mean that an eternal truth had displaced a liberal illusion, only that in a changed context a different set of understandings and normative priorities would be likely to capture the collective imagination.

The palatable if insubstantial 'jelly' of liberal ambition would not thereby be refuted but merely superseded by a harsher diet of grim survivalism. But if neither liberalism nor survivalism can be construed as timeless and eternal truths, displaced hopes to restore human freedoms would linger below the surface, only submerged by crisis, not eradicated, just as religious or scientific ways of framing the flux of human experience would not entirely disappear but merely shrink into the background. From a pragmatic standpoint, it is not that any one of these metanarratives is true while the others are false, but rather that each gains prestige and ascendancy under specific contextual conditions that are not eternal. In this sense, a compelling metanarrative is simply one that works well for the conditions of the time.

The contrasting frameworks of liberalism on offer

Which take on liberalism is correct? As Michael Freeden has pointed out, for nearly all of its long history (before 1989) liberalism was an embattled, rather than a hegemonic doctrine. It changed shape and emphasised different facets of itself depending on contours of its main antagonist at any given juncture (anti-hereditary; anti-superstition; anti-statist; anti-fascist; or anti-communist). Then, for a generation, it had no clear rival contender to galvanise its energies, and it therefore burst its bounds in all directions. Looking to the future it will be embattled once more and so will be forced to define itself more clearly again. A range of possibilities are currently in contention. Whichever one prevails will go far to determine the scope for reconstructing a refreshed LIO in the wake of the current unravelling process.

Here are four contending possibilities to consider:

1. An inspiring, universal, but also abstract and always – in the last resort – unattainable ideal of a liberal order.
2. A messier and more contingent standard of liberal ethics by which we might evaluate our own public conduct and perhaps guide our established institutions towards incremental further liberalisation.
3. A more righteous and indeed belligerent discourse, a battering ram states can use to weaken and demoralise their international antagonists, while also serving to distract domestic opinion from the abuses inherent in their actual practice of *realpolitik*.
4. A flexible, negotiable, and therefore somewhat slippery discourse designed to facilitate multilateral bargaining and the partial bridging of (always existing) international differences to help avert resort to the costly ultimate language of force.

Each of these options has a long historical track record, and a major constituency of theorists and practitioners. There is overlap and crossover between them, as well as rivalry and discord. The choice between them depends largely upon which threat to liberal freedoms is identified as the major concern to be addressed, and that in turn varies according to prevailing conditions and how they are assessed by contending political actors. The assessment that antiliberal forces could no longer claim a historical future was what led to LIO overreach. By contrast, currently prevailing conditions indicate a multiplicity of threats that not only restore embattled status to the liberal vision, but also raise foundational issues about how to redefine and reassert it.

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Notes

1. For a significant recent study of interwar endeavours to find common ground in forging an alternative to Wilsonian prescriptions, see Hirst (2024).
2. John Ikenberry has long provided an influential and reassuring perspective on the long run resilience and adaptability of this narrative concerning principled multilateralism and global governance. See, for example, his 'Why the Liberal World Order Will Survive' (Ikenberry, 2018), which distinguishes between US hegemony and the broader entrenchment of international liberal practices. In contrast see also John Mearsheimer (2019) 'The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities'.
3. A decade ago, I reviewed contrasting configurations in Honduras, Venezuela, Saudi Arabia and Ukraine and proposed an interpretative framework that still seems pertinent. See Whitehead (2014).
4. These authors highlight the mismatch between Western liberal promotion of globalisation and the failure to deliver benefits to domestic constituencies, creating what they term a democratic 'solvency gap'. For a parallel interpretation more focussed on the United States, see Gerstle (2022).
5. He advocates a return to 'classical' liberalism and detects two errors that require correction. On the one side, neoliberal economic policies have detracted from the core of liberal doctrine. On the other side – and in his telling equally destructive – has been the rise of 'identitarian' conceptions of rights that undermine liberal universalism.

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