Challenges to the contemporary global order.

Cause for pessimism or optimism?

Mark Copelovitch
University of Wisconsin - Madison
copelovitch@wisc.edu

Sara B. Hobolt
LSE
s.b.hobolt@lse.ac.uk

Stefanie Walter[1]
University of Zurich
walter@ipz.uzh.ch

Abstract

Is the contemporary global order under threat? This contribution weighs the case for and against the notion that we are witnessing an existential challenge to the contemporary global order. We show that there are grounds for optimism with respect to the endurance of the first two ordering principles of the contemporary global order: a state-led global order and economic liberalism, because states remain key actors in the current world order and because support for economic liberalism overall remains strong. However, we see greater challenges to the procedural principle of inclusive, rule-based multilateralism, such as unilateral disintegration challenges and rising popular scepticism about international institutions that provide considerable reasons to worry about the future of the global order. Yet, given that the global order has proven robust time and again in the past, we see some reasons for cautious optimism overall, despite considerable risks.

Key words: global order, international institutions, liberalism, public opinion

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[1] *corresponding author*

In this last contribution to the debate section, we assess whether we may be witnessing an existential challenge to the contemporary global order, and whether we have grounds to be optimistic or pessimistic about its future. Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Hofmann (this issue) argued in this debate section that although the contemporary challenges to the global order to date do not systematically violate its foundational principles, it also notes that these transformations *within* the global order may over time turn into a crisis *of* the order itself. Our contribution therefore focuses on the persistence and robustness of the contemporary global order by examining the potential 'breaking points' at which transformations *within* the order would turn into a fundamental threat *of* the global order itself. By examining ongoing developments, we consider the likelihood that to such a breaking point will be reached in the near future for each of the three foundational principles of the contemporary order identified by Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Hofmann: an international and state-led global order, economic liberalism, and inclusive, rule-based multilateralism. Based on their discussion about what would constitute a crisis of the global order, table 1 lists our criteria for what kind of developments we see as a systematic violation of each of the three foundational principles that would indicate a breaking-point at which the future of the contemporary global order is seriously threatened.

Table 1: Criteria for a systematic violation of the principles of the contemporary global order

International & State-led	Economic liberalism	Inclusive, rule-based multilateralism
Decline of the dominant role of states and the core principle of national sovereignty	Significantly declining levels of economic globalization (international trade, financial flows, etc.) Systematic and across-the-board increase in protectionism.	Disintegration of existing international institutions without replacement. Unilateralism and bilateralism replace multilateralism as the dominant procedural principle.

In the remainder of this paper, we evaluate recent developments against these benchmarks. Although our analysis is necessarily brief, we conclude that there are reasons for both optimism and pessimism. Overall, and in line with Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Hofmann's conclusions, we find that to date, the principles of the contemporary order remain widely upheld. However, whereas the first two foundational principles are currently not at risk (the state-centric nature of the system) or still far away (economic liberalism) from being systematically violated, the third foundational principle of the order (inclusive, rule-based multilateralism) faces higher risks of reaching a breaking point in the future.

International and state-led order

With respect to the first principle of the liberal order – its international and state-led focus – we remain broadly optimistic. To date, and as discussed in more detail by Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Hofmann, there is no serious challenge to the dominant role of states or the principle of national sovereignty in sight, neither in terms of the disintegration or collapse of any large or powerful states in the international system, nor in terms of the probability of supranational (world) government emerging anytime in the foreseeable future. This does not mean, of course, that states face no challenges to their policy autonomy or sovereignty in the global economy and international system. Nor does it mean that non-governmental and non-state actors are unimportant. Indeed, multinational corporations, NGOs, and other private actors play increasingly important roles – for better and for worse – in international relations. One could imagine these increasing roles generating crisis if they tilt the balance of power in ways that seriously restrict or undermine the power of national governments to provide for their own citizens. For example, concerns about tax

evasion and rising inequality raise questions about the ability of national governments to address the economic and political challenges of globalization, especially as evidence accumulates that the benefits of globalization have increasingly accrued to a handful of superstar firms and to specific geographies within rich countries. Nonetheless, it seems premature at best, in 2019, to forecast the end of the nation-state as a key ordering principle of the existing global order.

Economic Liberalism

With respect to the second core principle of the liberal order – economic liberalism – there are certainly more grounds for pessimism. Trade and cross-border investment flows have stagnated in the last decade, and the surge in protectionism since 2017 – illustrated most clearly in the US-China 'trade war'

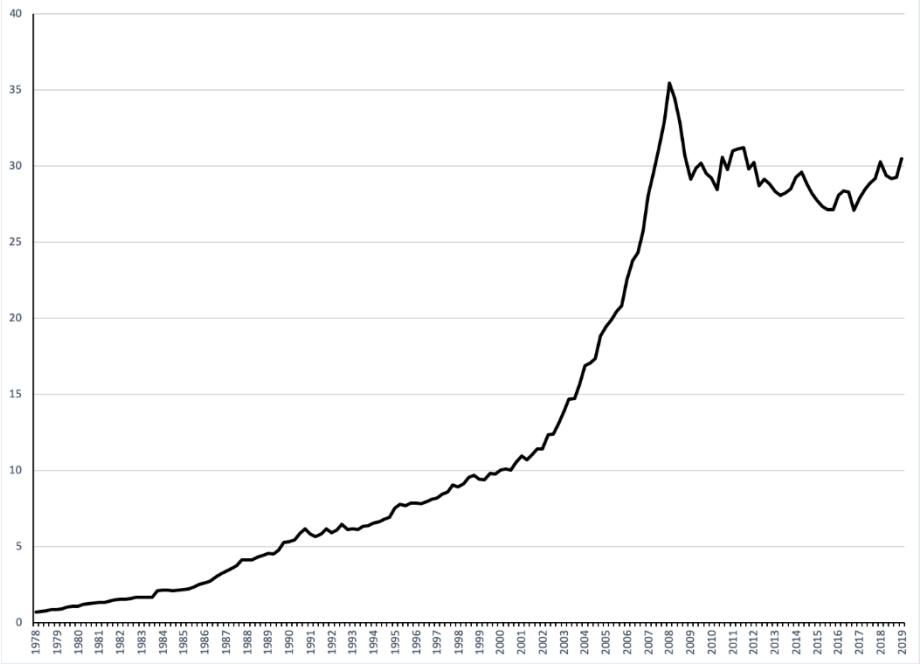
and the Trump administration's imposition of tariffs on the goods of a broad set of key US trading partners – marks a clear break from the long-term trend toward greater liberalization under the GATT/WTO system since the 1950s and the thickening web of preferential trade agreements (PTAs) since the 1990s. By the end of 2019, the world's most successful international arbitration mechanism designed to resolve trade conflicts, the WTO's dispute settlement court, will cease to function because the Trump administration is blocking new judicial appointments on the Appellate Body (Creamer 2019). Two of the erstwhile champions of economic liberalism (the US and UK) are now the two main major powers dragging their feet with respect to globalization and institutionalized economic cooperation. Finally, while China's deepening trade and financial ties to countries in Africa and Asia – through foreign aid, direct investment, and the Belt and Road Initiative – are evidence of the continued deepening of globalization, it is unclear whether these

ties support or pose a challenge to the endurance of economic liberalism (as well as political liberalism).

Yet, in spite of this recent backlash against the principle of economic liberalism, there are good reasons to remain optimistic that the economic foundations of the liberal order remain solid, both because levels of economic globalization are not significantly declining and because we have not yet observed a systematic and across-the-board increase in protectionism. With regard to the first criterion, there is currently no evidence of a collapse or rollback of international trade and finance, despite recent stagnation and some worrying parallels to the 1930s, when a wave of protectionism, capital controls, and competitive exchange rate devaluations triggered the total collapse of the global economy (Kindleberger 1973). The global economy has, of course, endured sustained threats and challenges in the last decade. Since the Great Recession, the growth of international trade has slowed down and global financial flows[2] have sunk to and stagnated at levels below those of 2007 (see figures 1a and 1b). However, these levels are still exponentially higher than in the 1980s. In contrast to the interwar era, however, the global economy did not buckle or collapse as many policymakers feared and pundits predicted. Rather, it has endured and persisted in the wake of the Great Recession and the turbulent years of the last decade. Given this experience, the most salient feature of globalization in the 21st century may well be its resilience.

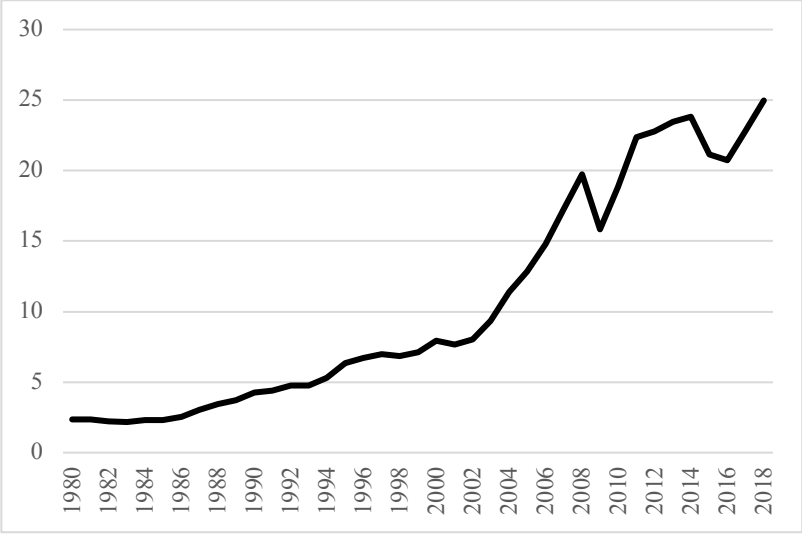
[2] Figure 1a illustrates the stock of outstanding claims and liabilities of internationally active banks against counterparties in more than 200 countries, a good proxy for overall levels of cross-border activity in the global financial system. See: https://www.bis.org/publ/qtrpdf/r_qt1509e.htm.

Figure 1a Cross-border financial claims (US$ trillions), 1978-2019



Source: Bank for International Settlements, Locational Banking Statistics

Figure 1b Exports and imports of goods and services (US$ trillions), 1980-2018



Source: UNCTADSTAT

Of course, new challenges have emerged, but their ultimate effect remains an open question. The US trade war with China has the potential to seriously disrupt existing trade flows, but it may ultimately not lead to an overall decline in trade. Rather, the trade war's primary effect may be a reorientation of existing trade relations through the economic decoupling of the United States and China, the world's two largest economies (Bown and Irwin 2019). Moreover, the changing nature of international trade relations such as the consolidation of market power, increasing product differentiation, and the development of complex supply chains are likely to make the high degree of international integration more persistent, even as they also lead to changes by empowering business interests (Johns et al. 2019).

There is also no systematic and across-the-board increase in protectionism. Although the Trump administration's trade war dominates headlines, the reality is that retaliation by the world's other leading economies has been quite measured, and these countries have not engaged in increased protectionism with each other. Indeed, even China – as it raises tariffs on US goods in retaliation – has *lowered* its average tariffs on the rest of the world in 2018 (from 8% to 6.7%).[3] The embrace of mercantilism has thus been predominantly a US phenomenon. Because the US has always been one of the contemporary global order's main champions, this understandably generates considerable concern. At the same time, however, most other governments have not joined the US in becoming significantly more protectionist. Several new trade agreements among the world's other most powerful countries and economic blocs have been negotiated in recent years (CP/TPP, EU-Japan, EU-Canada, EU-MERCOSUR). Furthermore, a large majority of the public across the

[3] See https://www.piie.com/blogs/trade-and-investment-policy-watch/trump-has-gotten-china-lower-its-tariffs-just-toward.

world still believes that trade is generally good for their country (Stokes 2018). What is certainly clear is that free trade has become more contested, both for economic reasons (especially in the US, see for example Bisbee et al. this issue) and because of concerns about environmental issues as well as health, labour and consumer protection standards (Nguyen and Spilker 2019). Moreover, ratification of new trade agreements sometimes presents a significant challenge. It is also clear that migration continues to be contested and far from liberalized (Goodman and Schimmelfennig this issue). However, as Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Hofmann (this issue) point out, the free movement of people has never been part of the economic liberalism principle of the contemporary global order.

In sum, this discussion suggests that the backlash against economic liberalism is real, but also highlights how there has been no systematic and across-the-board increase in protectionism, with the exception of the US (and to a lesser extent the UK). This turn inward by the erstwhile champions of economic liberalism clearly poses challenges to the global order. But it does not represent a wholesale rejection of this foundational principle of the contemporary global order.

Inclusive, rule-based multilateralism

Thus, on balance, we remain optimistic that the two core foundational principles of the liberal order endure, despite recent challenges. It is with respect to the third, procedural principle – inclusive, rule-based multilateralism – where we see the greatest challenges and the most serious grounds for pessimism. It is here, that ongoing developments raise concerns about systematic violations of the principle in line with the criteria laid out in table 1: the disintegration of existing international institutions without a replacement and the replacement of multilateralism as the dominant procedural principle by unilateralism and bilateralism.

Regarding the disintegration of existing international institutions without a replacement, the most concerning development is that unilateral disintegration challenges to inclusive multilateralism have become more prevalent. These come in a variety of forms, but have in common that individual countries try to disengage from the international commitments they have made in multilateral (and sometimes bilateral) agreements. The most visible form of these challenges are unilateral withdrawals from international institutions. Such withdrawals are, while rare, not new (von Borzyskowski and Vabulas 2019). The recent wave of unilateral withdrawals, such as Brexit or the increasing number of unilateral withdrawals from the International Criminal Court (ICC), have however been more consequential than in the past. At times, such as in the case of the US America withdrawals from the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA) or the INF nuclear treaty, withdrawals have threatened or doomed the entire institution. International institutions regularly cease to function or are dissolved (e.g., Gray 2018; Leeds and Savun 2007): Between 1815 and 2005, 39% of IOs have ceased to exist (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni 2018). So this itself does not constitute a violation of the principle of inclusive, rule-based multilateralism. However, past decisions to dissolve an institution have usually been taken in a consensual manner by all member states, and the functions of a dissolved or dysfunctional institution have often been taken up by new international institutions (Crasnic and Palmtag 2019). In contrast, withdrawals in recent years have been increasingly unilateral and politicized, making it harder for governments to compromise. This, in turn, has made withdrawals more disruptive.

Two additional disintegration challenges do not aim at exit from or the dissolution of international institutions, but nonetheless threaten the contemporary global order's principle of inclusive, rule-based multilateralism. The first are unilateral attempts to renegotiate existing international agreements in one country's favour. International cooperation is typically established

because both sides benefit from such cooperation, even if the gains of cooperation are not always shared equally. While most treaty renegotiations tend to benefit both partners (Castle 2019), member states increasingly try to change the balance of costs and benefits of cooperation in their favour. Again, this challenge is not entirely new, but the existing evidence suggests that they have become more frequent (Nowrot, 2016), even if the success of countries to secure concessions varies considerably. Whereas the US was able to successfully renegotiate the US-Korea free trade agreement and NAFTA, recent Swiss and Greek attempts to renegotiate their relationship with the EU and the Eurozone, respectively, were met with significant resistance and did not lead to any significant changes (Walter et al. 2018).

Another challenge is non-compliance with institutions' core norms. Once again, non-compliance with international agreements is nothing new. But non-compliance can turn into a serious challenge to the rule-based order when it threatens the core norms or pillars of an international institution – especially when it takes the form of explicit, overt attacks. Such serious non-compliance has proliferated in recent years, as in the case of President Trump's decision to block the reappointment of WTO judges or political reforms in Hungary and Poland that undermine key pillars of democracy and the rule of law, which are core EU norms (Kelemen 2017). Unilateral refusals to comply with core norms of international institutions are dangerous because they can fundamentally undermine both the specific institution in question *and* the broader principle of inclusive, rule-based multilateralism at the heart of the contemporary global order.[4] This is especially the case when the remaining member states lack the ability to sanction such non-compliance and to incentivize the non-complying government to change course.

[4] It also clearly undermines the principle of political liberalism, which some scholars also see as a core principle of the 'liberal international order.'

These disintegration dynamics are problematic because they reduce the share of the cooperation gains other member states can enjoy. This lowers the attractiveness of international institutions for the remaining member states, which raises the risks that additional countries will no longer be willing to pay the price of membership, let alone create new institutions to solve pressing transnational problems (ee the discussion of the migration problem in Goodman and Schimmelfennig this issue). A second, related, risk is political contagion. The historical record shows that when powerful states withdraw from IOs, smaller countries tend to follow suit (von Borzyskowski and Vabulas 2018). Moreover, a breakdown of cooperation in one institution or issue may fuel further distrust and resentment among states in other institutions or issues. This can also be observed in the current EU-UK relations as well as in US President Trump's claims that the other states are 'taking advantage of the US' in the current system. Multilateral, rule-based cooperation is much harder to achieve in such a context of distrust and resentment, than in a context of trust and goodwill.

A particularly worrying development is that disintegration challenges now confront many different component institutions of the liberal order at the same time: the ICC, UNESCO, the Paris Climate accord, and even NATO are battling actual unilateral withdrawals or threats of withdrawal. The US is trying to renegotiate existing trade agreements in its favour, and institutions such as the WTO, the European Human Rights Convention, or the ICC are faced with member states that are defying some of its core norms (Voeten 2019). The EU faces all three disintegration challenges at the same time: unilateral withdrawal of the UK, Switzerland's attempts to renegotiate its bilateral relations with the EU,[5] and non-compliance with core norms from Hungary, Poland,

[5] Switzerland will hold a referendum in 2020 whose approval would force the Swiss government to renegotiate or terminate the Swiss-EU bilateral treaty on free movement of people, which risks putting the entire institutional framework of Swiss-EU bilateral relations into question.

and more recently even Italy. The fact that so many disintegration challenges to inclusive, rule-based multilateralism are occurring in so many places and institutions at the same time, in many different forms, and with increasing frequency threaten the bedrock procedural principle of the existing global order – rule-based multilateralism.

There is also cause for concern regarding the second criterion: that unilateralism and bilateralism replace multilateralism as the dominant procedural principle. Here we are seeing some movement in the direction of unilateralism and bilateralism, especially in the realm of public opinion. Whereas disintegration challenges in the past have typically originated among the foreign policy elites and governments of individual member states, they are now increasingly rooted in member states' mass publics (Bisbee et al. this issue; Walter 2018). Across the world, the number of people viewing international organizations positively has declined over the past 20 years (Bearce and Joliff Scott, 2019). In Europe, Euroscepticism has become a widespread phenomenon that is no longer limited to the fringes of the political spectrum (Hobolt and de Vries 2016). Candidates and political parties with cooperation-sceptic and nationalist programmes, such as Bolsonaro in Brazil, Trump in the US, or the Lega in Italy, have seen resounding electoral successes. And popular referendums have proliferated whose outcomes provide national policymakers with a strong popular mandate to pursue withdrawal, renegotiation, non-compliance, as well as resistance to new or deeper international cooperation (Hobolt 2009; Walter et al. 2018). Since 2010, voters have voted down proposals for more or continued international cooperation in the majority of referendums (De Vries et al. 2019). Such voter-based disintegration is particularly challenging for international institutions because these instances tend to be much more politicized and salient in the political debate both at home and abroad than disintegration decisions taken by a small foreign policy elite, which limits the room for compromise at the international level.

However, there are also some silver linings: First, these challenges have brought the benefits of the contemporary global order into clearer focus and have rallied supporters of embattled international institutions. For example, public support for the EU increased after the Brexit referendum (De Vries 2017) and after the 2016 US presidential elections (Minkus et al. 2018). Moreover, governments worldwide have been stepping up efforts at creating or maintaining multilateral agreements without US participation – examples are the CP/TPP treaty that replaced the originally negotiated TPP treaty after the US's withdrawal in 2017, or the EU-Japan trade agreement.[6]

Second, there are reasons for cautious optimism about the durability of rule-based multilateralism. State withdrawals from IOs and IO dissolutions remain rare events that are dwarfed by new IO accessions and the establishment of new IOs (von Borzyskowski and Vabulas 2019; Crasnic and Palmtag 2019). Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Hofmann (this issue) point to an empirical trend of increased multilateral cooperation and regionalism, a trend that is exemplified by the EU. Through all the trials and crises of the last decade, the Euro has survived, Brexit has not had any significant contagion effect so far, and overall, a vast majority of Europeans still supports the European project. Indeed, it can be argued that the history of the EU is one of 'integration-through-crisis' (Scicluna 2019) or '*failing forward'* (Jones et al. 2016: 2012). Certainly, as others have noted, 'integration through crisis' raises concerns about legitimacy and accountability in European integration (Börzel and Risse 2018; Hooghe and Marks 2018; Kreuder-Sonnen 2018). Nonetheless, the durability of European integration and popular support for it highlights the staying power of rule-based multilateralism despite serious challenges to the global

[6] Although not always successfully, as the recent decision by the Austrian government not to ratify the EU-MERCOSUR trade agreement shows.

order. Other major international institutions such as the IMF or (so far) NATO have displayed similar resilience.[7] And although scepticism about international organizations has increased worldwide, only about one in five people worldwide think that international organizations are taking away too much power from their national governments (Bearce and Joliff Scott, 2019: Table 1).

Taken together, we conclude that the procedural principle of inclusive, rule-based multilateralism faces significant and increasing challenges which may, over time, result in a serious and systematic violation of this third foundational principle of the global order. Yet, such a development is not a foregone conclusion, as we also see some more encouraging developments.

Conclusion

Ultimately, we arrive at a cautiously optimistic assessment regarding the endurance of the core substantive principles of the contemporary global order – state-centrism and economic liberalism – and more serious concern about the challenges to the core procedural principle of rule-based multilateralism. Based on these concerns, we conclude that there are considerable reasons to worry about the future of the global order.

And yet, history also suggests that this order has proven robust time and again in the face of serious challenges. Indeed, the global order and its core principles have, in many ways, been in a state of permanent crisis throughout the post-war era and has been successful in changing and adapting from within. In every decade since the 1950s, we have seen a series of major institutional

[7] A notable exception is WTO, which has however faced accumulating problems have been accumulating over the past fifteen years.

failures (e.g., the IMF's failure to perform its initial task of managing fixed exchange rates; the UN's periodic and repeated failure to manage collective security problems), ad hoc fixes (e.g., the Marshall Plan or NATO's Balkan intervention), partial collapses (such as the end of the Bretton Woods gold-dollar monetary system in 1971-73), the repurposing of institutions for new missions (e.g., the IMF's rebirth as global crisis lender starting in the 1980s), and long periods where key institutions have fallen dormant (e.g., the stagnation of WTO negotiations for the last 17 years) or stumbled along in secular decline (e.g., the World Bank today vis-à-vis other foreign aid providers). The contemporary global order has never operated fully as intended, or absent bias, power politics, and the seemingly existential threat of isolationist domestic politics in the US. And yet, nevertheless, it has persisted and the founding principles of the global order have endured.

This is not to deny the challenges facing the contemporary global order, or the significant changes which it may now be undergoing as a result, especially with regard to inclusive, rule-based multilateralism. It is ultimately too early to answer the question whether the ongoing challenges pose a fundamental threat to the global order *itself* or rather a crisis *within* from which it can recover and possibly grow. But together with our finding that the first two principles of the global order still stand quite firm, we see some ground for cautious optimism that the global order will endure.

Notes on Contributors

Mark Copelovitch is Professor of Political Science and Public Affairs at the University of Wisconsin – Madison.

Sara B. Hobolt is professor and the Sutherland Chair in European Institutions at the Department of Government at the London School of Economics

Stefanie Walter is professor for international relations and political economy at the Department of Political Science at the University of Zurich.

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