The Chinese Journal of International Politics, 2026, **19**, 1, 10–24
https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poaf016
Article

The End of the Liberal International Order? Globalization, Deep Contestation, and the Future

David A. Lake*

Distinguished Professor of the Graduate Division, University of California, San Diego, CA, USA
*Corresponding author. Email: dlake@ucsd.edu

Abstract

The Liberal International Order (LIO) that has largely structured relations between states since World War II is now deeply contested. Although the challenges to the LIO began long before Donald J. Trump was elected president in the USA in 2016, and especially before his second term, he has successfully transformed the Republican Party into a nationalist, unilateralist, sovereigntist and possibly imperialist coalition. While this essay is not a postmortem on the LIO, I seek to explain what was the LIO, its origins, the challenges it faces, and possible futures. Understanding how international orders are constructed, sustained, and challenged as well as the history of the LIO is important for analyzing the future of international order. Although I am pessimistic, I argue that the future is not foreordained but allows for choice by the new superpowers and other states.

Introduction

The Liberal International Order (LIO) that has largely structured relations between states since World War II is now deeply contested.[1] Its fundamental norms and rules are no longer shared and are being actively challenged. This extends beyond norms governing security, economic, and political relations to the very meaning of truth.[2] What will emerge from any period of deep contestation is inherently unknowable. Without fundamental norms and rules about how to construct norms and rules, politics becomes truly anarchic, unpredictable, and potentially violent.[3]

[1] Antje Wiener, David A. Lake, and Thomas Risse, eds., *Deep Contestations of the Liberal International Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2026).
[2] Emanuel Adler and Alena Drieschova, "The Epistemological Challenge of Trust Subversion to the Liberal International Order," *International Organization*, Vol. 75, No. 2 (2021), pp. 359–86.
[3] Peter Gourevitch, "The Governance Problem in International Relations," in David A. Lake and Robert Powell, eds., *Strategic Choice and International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

© The Author(s) 2026. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of The Institute of International Relations, Tsinghua University. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs licence (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/), which permits non-commercial reproduction and distribution of the work, in any medium, provided the original work is not altered or transformed in any way, and that the work properly cited. For commercial re-use, please contact reprints@oup.com for reprints and translation rights for reprints. All other permissions can be obtained through our RightsLink service via the Permissions link on the article page on our site—for further information please contact journals.permissions@oup.com.

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/cjip/article/19/1/10/8444526 by guest on 30 September 2026

Although the challenges to the LIO began long before Donald J. Trump was elected president in the USA in 2016, and especially before his second term, he has successfully transformed the Republican Party into a nationalist, unilateralist, sovereigntist and possibly imperialist coalition.[4] The President has broken NATO while flirting with Russia over Ukraine, imposed protectionist barriers to trade with close allies and started a trade war with China, eschewed principles of democracy and human rights that long dominated US foreign policy, and abused the rule of law at home and abroad. No longer concerned with sustaining an international order, Trump is pursuing a new transactional approach to international relations that aims to renegotiate new and "better" bargains for the USA. Meanwhile, China is rising despite its own internal economic problems, attempting to export its way to stability while taking advantage of the trade rules established within the LIO and seeking to build an alternative international order of unknown character and dimensions.[5] Europe is moving politically to the right even as it takes its first, tentative steps toward rebuilding its defense capabilities. The rest of the world is comprised of incredulous bystanders attempting to make sense of the chaos and steer a new course for an uncertain future. Taken together, these trends suggest that the LIO is, if not dead, then certainly on its deathbed. It may recover, but it will likely take a miracle.

This essay is not entirely a postmortem on the LIO. I seek to set out briefly what was the LIO, its origins, the challenges it faces, and possible futures. Understanding how international orders are constructed, sustained, and challenged as well as the history of the LIO is important for analyzing the future of international order. Although I am pessimistic, I argue that the future is not foreordained but allows for choice by the new superpowers and other states.

The LIO

International orders are patterned relationships, whether they be spontaneous like the balance of power system or rule-based, as was the LIO.[6] The LIO is (was?) comprised of norms of *sovereignty* (states as formal equals, national self-determination, non-intervention), *security* (collective efforts, Geneva Conventions, non-aggression, territorial integrity), *open markets* (free trade and capital mobility, but not migration), and *politics* (democracy, human rights), all embedded in multilateral institutions that gave members a measure of voice.[7] Long aspired to, the LIO was articulated following World War II in the United Nations Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), and the Bretton Woods institutions.

[4] On Trump as a "sovereigntist," a term usually applied to Quebecois, see Jennifer Mittelstadt, "Why Does Trump Threaten America's Allies? Hint: It Starts in 1919," *New York Times*, 2 February, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/02/opinion/trump-panama-greenland-foreign-policy.html.

[5] John M. IV. Owen, "Two Emerging International Orders? China and the United States," *International Affairs*, Vol. 97, No. 5 (2021), pp. 1415–31; David C. Kang, Jackie S. H. Wong, and Zenobia T. Chan, "What Does China Want?" *International Security*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (2025), pp. 46–81.

[6] Spontaneous and rule-based orders clearly exist along a continuum and are a matter of debate. Even for the balance of power order, Waltz understands it as a spontaneous system while Kaplan and Bull describe it as more rule-based. See Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Boston, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979); Morton A. Kaplan, *System and Process in International Politics* (New Jersey: Wiley, 1957); Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

[7] This description of the LIO, see David A. Lake, Lisa L. Martin, and Thomas Risse, "Challenges to the Liberal Order: Reflections on International Organization," *International Organization*, Vol. 75, No. 2 (2021), pp. 225–57; David A. Lake and Antje Wiener, "Introduction: Deep Contestations of the Liberal International Order," in Wiener, Lake, and Risse, eds., *Deep Contestations of the Liberal International Order*; G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); G. John Ikenberry, *A World Safe for Democracy: Liberal Internationalism and the Crises of Global Order* (London: Yale University Press, 2020). On multilateralism and the LIO, see John G. Ruggie, *Multilateralism Matters: The Theory and Praxis of an Institutional Form* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Amitav Archarya, "After Liberal Hegemony: The Advent of a Multiplex World Order," *Ethics and International Affairs*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (2017), pp. 271–85.

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/cjip/article/19/1/10/8444526 by guest on 30 September 2026

Identifying the "birth" or "death" date of the LIO is difficult. Ideas undergirding the order were floated for decades if not centuries before it congealed.[8] Although its norms were articulated in its founding documents, implementation was often slow. Trade was liberalized gradually, currencies became convertible in the late 1950s, capital did not become fully mobile until the 1980s. States began to punish one another for violating human rights conventions only in the 1970s, and then only sporadically.[9] Though never fully realized, and often honored in the breach, the LIO likely reached its apex in the decades after the end of the Cold War. Even today, while norms on open markets and democracy are under attack, those on sovereignty remain robust. Whether it's time to sound the death knell is unclear. But there is little doubt that the LIO is in crisis.

Complicating any attempt to date the LIO, key to its success has always been its structure of "variable geometry," a term coined in the European Union but equally appropriate here. Comprised of many dimensions and norms, countries could selectively join institutions (or not) and embrace principles (or not) as their national interests required. For instance, countries could champion norms of self-determination but not open markets, as did many of the non-aligned countries during the Cold War, or integrate into the world economy, benefiting from freer trade and open capital markets without embracing democracy, as did China after 1989.[10] The LIO has always been an à la carte rather than fixed menu. Only the core members in North America and Europe adopted all (or nearly all) of the norms of the LIO, even as they occasionally violated them in practice (e.g., the USA and the Iraq War). Throughout, the LIO was more aspirational than real, but it nonetheless defined and guided what was and was not legitimate practice. That violations could be called out and sometimes punished is, in fact, evidence of the LIO's effectiveness rather than hypocrisy or simple *raison d'etat*. Its variable nature is both a strength, drawing states into the order—at least in part, but also a source of ambiguity as to when and to whom it applied.

Overall, the LIO has been a remarkably successful institution.[11] It has maintained peace between and within its core members, creating a "democratic peace"[12]; contained a potentially expansionist Soviet Union during the Cold War; supported the rise of free trade and capital mobility which, in turn, have tripled real per capita incomes in the core states since 1950; consolidated democracy in the formerly fascist or militarist Axis countries and facilitated the spread of democracy globally; and improved human rights practices in many countries.[13] The LIO has not been an unmitigated success, of course. It has not coped well with global climate change, the drug trade or other illicit activities, or civil wars outside its core members. Income inequality has increased within or across countries. Nonetheless, for many people in many countries, the LIO has substantially improved their quality of life. We will likely miss it when it is gone.

How International Orders Form

All orders—whether domestic or international—rest on a social foundation. That is, orders require the backing of powerful political coalitions who create, enforce and benefit from their

[8] Ikenberry, *A World Safe for Democracy*.

[9] David A. Lake and Wendy H. Wong, "The Politics of Networks: Interests, Power, and Human Rights," in Miles Kahler, ed., *Networked Politics: Agency, Power, and Governance* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), p. 147.

[10] Alastair Iain Johnston, "China in a World of Orders: Rethinking Compliance and Challenge in Beijing's International Relations," *International Security*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (2019), p. 2.

[11] Lake, Martin, and Risse, "Challenges to the Liberal Order."

[12] Bruce Russett and John R. Oneal, *Triangulating Peace: Democracy, Interdependence, and International Organizations* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001).

[13] Christopher J. Fariss, "Respect for Human Rights Has Improved Over Time: Modeling the Changing Standard of Accountability," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 108, No. 2 (2014), p. 2; Kathryn Sikkink, *Evidence for Hope: Making Human Rights Work in the 21st Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/cjip/article/19/1/10/8444526 by guest on 30 September 2026

rules. Supported by the powerful, orders are never neutral or equitable; even when all may benefit, politically powerful coalitions will typically benefit more than others. Orders are composed of both substantive policies that benefit and unify the coalition, such as private property, regressive taxation, or free trade, and procedural rules by which policy is made, including democracy, monarchical rule, multilateralism or more specific rules on, say, legislative delegation. Effective or long-lasting orders almost always contain a compelling narrative or social purpose that legitimates the order and binds members of the coalition together.[14] This social purpose often becomes the label that defines the order, as in the New Deal coalition discussed below or, indeed, the LIO itself. Regardless of their social purpose, however, orders—like ideas[15]—do not float freely. Rather, they are grounded in the interests of the politically powerful coalitions that undergird them.

Beyond a necessary social foundation, leadership is often essential to the formation of an order.[16] There are many possible coalitions at any moment in time. Although institutions can induce an equilibrium coalition, in cases of deep contestation following major wars or as now they are typically weak and ineffective. With multiple possible coalitions, politics is often "chaotic" or prone to cycling between alternatives.[17] As in Arrow's well-known impossibility theorem, coalition AB can be displaced by coalition BC, which can be displaced by coalition CA, *ad infinitum*.[18] Leaders through personal charisma or sheer power can sometimes orchestrate a coalition that "sticks" or becomes equilibrium. They are often essential to the construction of the compelling narrative that defines the social purpose of the coalition. If the coalition is large enough or sufficiently strong, it can impose its substantive policies on others, even those who do not necessarily benefit from its norms and institutions.[19]

International orders, in turn, rest on a "coalition of coalitions." That is, groups within countries form coalitions based on similar interests and then countries with similar coalitions form a super-coalition to create and enforce an international order. In this way, domestic political coalitions come together to form an international coalition that supports a set of transnational norms and rules that regulate expectations and behavior. Such international coalitions—like the orders they support—may come together spontaneously, presumably from shared values or some process of diffusion,[20] or by design. In the latter, leadership takes the form of a lead country intervening in the domestic affairs of others to favor the rise of coalitions similar to its own. Elsewhere, I have referred to this as a process of (dyadic) indirect rule, here generalized to the macro-level and the formation of international orders.[21] In the case of powerful, dominant, or "hegemonic" states, they solve the cycling problem or tip the balance of power in favor of groups within other states whose interests are most closely aligned with those of their own domestic coalitions. In doing so, they generalize their own domestic political systems to other

[14] John G. Ruggie, "International Regimes, Transactions, and Change: Embedded Liberalism in the Postwar Economic Order," in Stephen D. Krasner, ed., *International Regimes* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983); Ruggie, *Multilateralism Matters*.

[15] Thomas Risse-Kappen, "Ideas Do Not Float Freely: Transnational Coalitions, Domestic Structures, and the End of the Cold War," *International Organization*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (1994), p. 2.

[16] Yan Xuetong, *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

[17] Richard D. McKelvey, "Intransitivities in Multi-Dimensional Voting Models and Some Implications for Agenda Control," *Journal of Economic Theory*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (1976), pp. 472–82; Thomas. Schwartz, "Votes, Strategies, an Institutions: An Introduction to the Theory of Collective Choice," in Mathew D. McCubbins and Terry Sullivan, eds., *Congress: Structure and Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

[18] Kenneth J. Arrow, "A Difficulty in the Concept of Social Welfare," *The Journal of Political Economy*, Vol. 58, No. 4 (1950), pp. 328–46.

[19] The coalition that forms the social foundation may not constitute a majority of society. In authoritarian societies the "selectorate" may be quite narrow. See Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, et al., *The Logic of Political Survival* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003).

[20] Beth A. Simmons, Frank Dobbin, and Geoffrey Garrett, "Introduction: The International Diffusion of Liberalism," *International Organization*, Vol. 60, No.4 (2006), p. 4.

[21] David A. Lake, *Indirect Rule: The Making of U.S. International Hierarchy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2024).

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/cjip/article/19/1/10/8444526 by guest on 30 September 2026

core members of the emergent international order. As in the old phrase "its turtles all the way down," in this case it is coalitions all the way down.

The Origins of the LIO

Although presaged in the League of Nations under President Woodrow Wilson, the LIO took shape in the New Deal coalition formed in the USA during the Great Depression. To cope with the economic crisis of the 1930s, Germany chose fascism under Adolf Hitler and Russia followed Joseph Stalin into communist central planning. By contrast, the USA moved incrementally toward embedded liberalism,[22] adopting new social welfare policies coupled with bilateral efforts to reopen international trade—itself a casualty of its earlier Smoot-Hawley Tariff. In one of the most fundamental political realignments in US history, the New Deal coalition reshaped American politics and, in turn, international politics and order.

After the war, the USA sought to extend its New Deal coalition abroad. In the late 1940s, after the conclusion of hostilities, Western Europe was torn between the political left, mainly communists (in France and Italy) and social democrats who advocated an even deeper social welfare state and political neutrality in the emerging Cold War, and center-right coalitions that embraced embedded liberalism and an anti-communist, pro-Western orientation in foreign policy. Japan was in a similar position, with an even stronger left party structure. To tip the balance of political power within West Europe and Japan in its favor, the USA extended a security umbrella over these states, thereby reducing the costs of joining its alliances, provided reconstruction aid tied to free market and free trade reforms, and sometimes intervened directly in national elections.[23] As a result of these efforts, the USA helped bring "friendly" or center-right governments to power across the continent and in Japan. Based on now similar coalitions, these governments naturally adopted policies aligned with Washington. Under the euphemism of leadership, the USA ruled its allies indirectly.[24] What appeared to be voluntary cooperation under anarchy as its allies appeared to be acting according to their self-interest was, in fact, a hierarchy in which the USA generalized its norms and policies to others. These shared norms, in turn, later became the basis for the LIO.[25] In this way, the USA built a coalition of coalitions that formed the foundation of the LIO.

The success of the postwar order soon "locked" the US allies into the emergent LIO. The return of prosperity, the suppression of territorial conflicts, and security "on the cheap" under the US umbrella all served to build support for the emerging LIO within the core states. With growing majorities, countries in Western Europe voted for governments that would join and uphold the LIO, and in fact extended them further into the European Union—now a paragon of the LIO. As member states became more prosperous, other states that did not adhere or did not want to adhere to the norms of the LIO were drawn in, especially through the opening of trade and finance. Success bred success, or like a sun the LIO drew satellites large and small into its orbit. Over time, as the USA and Europe began to make some benefits and access contingent—tying

[22] Ruggie, "International Regimes, Transactions, and Change."

[23] Sallie Pisani, *The CIA and the Marshall Plan* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1991); Dov H. Levin, *Meddling in the Ballot Box: The Causes and Effects of Partisan Electoral Interventions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

[24] Lake, *Indirect Rule*, chapter 4.

[25] In the postwar "constitutional moment" other states contributed to the UN Charter and human rights conventions, including many of the Latin American states, see Marcus Tourinho, "The Co-Constitution of Order," *International Organization*, Vol. 75, No. 2 (2021), pp. 258–81. Nonetheless, the United States was the guiding force behind the norms and rules that were codified into the postwar institutions, especially so in the case of the Bretton Woods institutions.

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/cjip/article/19/1/10/8444526 by guest on 30 September 2026

human rights practices to trade and aid[26]—other states began to adopt additional principles of the order. With success and through the efforts of norms entrepreneurs, liberal norms diffused beyond the initial core.[27] All this was premised, however, on the embedded liberalism that prevailed in the core states in North America, Western Europe, and Japan.

Challenges to the LIO

The LIO has always been contested, at least at the margins. Indeed, contestation is integral to any liberal political system, both within and between countries; it is the hallmark of such systems that those bound by norms and rules have rights to challenge those norms and rules.[28] In both theory and practice, contestation enhances accountability and ensures responsiveness to changing circumstances and societal demands. Within the LIO, states have certainly exercised this right at various times, most visibly in the call for a new international economic order put forth by the developing countries in the 1970s.[29] The success of the LIO and its ability to accommodate dissent nonetheless blunted these early challenges.

What is unique about the current era is challenges to the fundamental norms and rules of the LIO are coming from disaffected groups within core countries. While there have always been "external" challenges to the LIO,[30] as discussed below, what is new is the "internal" challenges. Starting around 2010 with the rise of China and the Great Recession of 2008–09, the LIO has entered a period of *deep contestation* in which the fundamental norms of the order are no longer taken for granted and are themselves contested.[31] Periods of deep contestation are rare. Most of the time, the pushing and hauling of politics takes place within established norms and rules—"normal" contestation within existing institutions, if you will. As the interests of the actors evolve and potentially diverge, they may grow inconsistent with the existing order and lead to fundamental challenges in which the norms and rules are disputed by those same actors. Institutions may prove resilient, adapting to challenges but retaining the essentials of their prior forms.[32] At other times, however, challenges are sufficiently severe that the old norms and rules are forsaken, and politics becomes "anarchic" in the true sense of that word, both indicating a lack of authority and predictability. In deep contestation, politics become raw, unstructured, potentially violent. What comes out of a period of deep contestation is, therefore, hard to predict ex ante. We know the new "order" only once it emerges.

The argument below is illustrated in Figure 1. In an almost dialectical way, the very success of the LIO created greater income inequality that, in turn, led to a political alignment around populist challenges in both the USA and Europe, although my focus is on the former. The surge of populism led to the current era of deep contestation that, when amplified by ongoing external challenges, has undermined the LIO.

[26] Emilie Hafner-Burton, *Forced to Be Good: Why Trade Agreements Boost Human Rights* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009); Rachel J. Schoner, "Empowering Your Victims: Why Repressive Regimes Allow Individual Petitions in International Organizations," *Review of International Organizations*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (2025), pp. 87–123.

[27] Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

[28] Antje Wiener, *Contestation and Constitutions of Norms in Global International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[29] Stephen D. Krasner, *Structural Conflict: The Third World Against Global Liberalism* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1985).

[30] Ayse Zarakol and Rebecca Adler-Nissen, "Struggles for Recognition: The Liberal International Order and the Merger of Its Discontents," *International Organization*, Vol. 75, No. 2 (2021), pp. 611–34.

[31] Wiener, Lake, and Risse, eds., *Deep Contestations of the Liberal International Order*.

[32] Thomas Risse, "Deep Contestations and the Resilience of the Liberal International Order," in Wiener, Lake, and Risse, eds., *Deep Contestations of the Liberal International Order*.

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/cjip/article/19/1/10/8444526 by guest on 30 September 2026

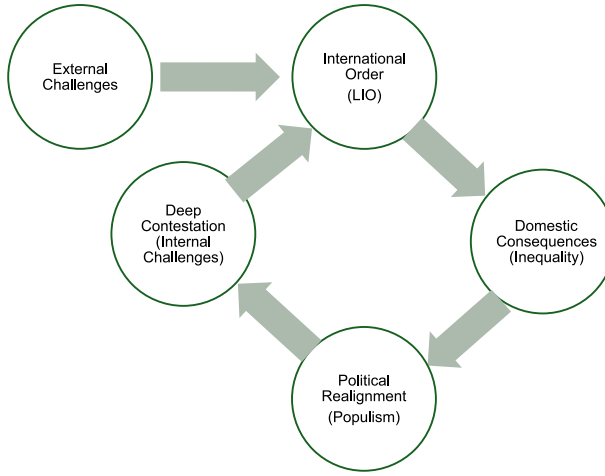


Fig. 1 The Dialectics of the LIO

External Challenges: The Excluded

International orders survive by the threat of exclusion from their benefits, especially a measure of security allowing for lower defense expenditures and economic trade and investment. Lacking any formal mechanisms, ostracism is the primary enforcement tool. If countries cannot commit to the norms of the order or violate its provisions, they are excluded from participation. The benefits of order, in other words, are always contingent. As soon as the USA understood that the Soviet Union would not accept the principles of the LIO, for instance, it excluded Moscow from the order it was formulating. Not trusting Stalin to adhere to the norms of territorial integrity and self-determination, in particular, the USA made the Soviet Union offers it "could not accept" and denied it membership in the Bretton Woods institutions, excluding it from the benefits of freer trade and investment and leading to the division between Eastern and Western Europe. North Korea, Iran after the fall of the pro-American Shah in 1979, Iraq under Saddam Hussein, and other so-called rogue states suffered the same fate. With its war on Gaza and creeping annexation of the West Bank, both of which are generating international opprobrium, Israel may be in the process of "self-excluding" itself from the LIO, though it remains protected by the USA.

States that are excluded from the current international order often attempt to form an alternative order, especially one in which they are the dominant power or "leader" and from which they cannot be excluded.[33] Today, China appears to fear possible future exclusion from the LIO. After Mao's death, Deng rapidly embraced economic reform and opening to the world economy. No country has benefited more from the LIO while accepting fewer of its norms than has China. Beijing fits the classic definition of a spoiler, benefiting from the system while at the same time ignoring or seeking to undermine its rules. Since opening to the world economy in 1989, by 2023 China's economy has grown from $347.77 billion to $17.8 trillion and GDP per capita from $311 to $12 614.[34] China certainly has not been excluded from the LIO to date. Expecting Beijing to accept the norms of the LIO, including economic liberalization that would lead to political liberalization, the West embraced China. Yet, as it became clear that China

[33] Ayse Zarakol, *After Defeat: How the East Learning to Live with the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[34] "China GDP," *Macrotrends*, https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/CHN/china/gdp-gross-domestic-product.

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/cjip/article/19/1/10/8444526 by guest on 30 September 2026

would accept only limited reforms—moving from a socialist to a state-capitalist system and continuing to reject democracy—the West became disillusioned. As its economy developed rapidly, its trade surplus grew to enormous proportions, and the "China shock" devastated manufacturing in the USA and Europe[35] , opposition to tolerating China's only partial adherence in the LIO grew as well.

As it became the world's largest economy and now demands recognition as a superpower equivalent or even superior to the USA, China appears to have anticipated the backlash and has begun preparing for possible exclusion from the trade and financial pillars of the LIO from which it had previously benefited.[36] The USA and China are now trapped into a spiral of mutual misunderstanding and hostility. Which came first is a useless "chicken-and-egg" debate, with the USA taking actions that are interpreted as exclusionary by China and Beijing taking actions that are understood by Washington as seeking an alternative order.

China's more assertive foreign policy suggests that it may be attempting to break out of the LIO and construct an alternative set of norms and rules. The Belt-and-Road Initiative (BRI) seeks to expand China's economic relations with countries largely outside the core members of the LIO,[37] although a few European countries did sign agreements, and Beijing has created the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, which it hopes will provide an alternative to Western-dominated development banks. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, founded in 2001 and composed of autocratic states, aims to provide an alternative to Western security institutions. From a Western perspective, China appears primed to pursue an alternative international order that it will lead and from which it cannot be excluded. In doing so, it has pushed back especially hard against the political principles of the LIO.

By an inverse logic, the USA is moving to contain China. Although it remains mired in the Middle East, US defense strategy "pivoted" to Asia under President Barack Obama. President Trump initiated a trade war with China in 2018, which carried over into the Biden administration and has been expanded even further in the second Trump administration. In recent years, it has attempted to block technology transfers to China, reasonably understood in Beijing as attempting to constrain the country's economic development. All this reinforces fears of China's exclusion from the LIO, especially its economic benefits so central to the country's economic success, and further incentivizes Beijing to seek an alternative order.

A key question, addressed below, is what such a Chinese order might look like and what norms it might embody. Even if China's effort fails, its emerging challenge has contributed to a deep questioning of the principles undergirding the LIO. For the first time since the end of the Cold War, there is a potential alternative order on the table which may attract other countries.

Internal Challenges: Backlash to Globalization

The progressive liberalization of trade and finance after World War II "lifted all boats" on a rising tide of aggregate income. Unprecedented levels of wealth were created in the advanced industrialized democracies. Even in developing countries more people were also lifted out of poverty than at any time in human history.[38] Specializing according to comparative advantage made humans far more productive than otherwise. At the same time, increasing trade and capital mobility had strong distributional effects that eventually led to extraordinary gains for owners

[35] David H. Autor, David Dorn, and Gordon H. Hanson, "The China Shock: Learning from Labor-Market Adjustment to Large Changes in Trade," *Annual Review of Economics*, Vol. 8 (2016), pp. 205–40.

[36] Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

[37] Bruno Macaes, *Belt and Road: A Chinese World Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

[38] David Dollar, "Globalization, Poverty, and Inequality since 1980," *The World Bank Research Observer*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (2005), pp. 145–75.

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/cjip/article/19/1/10/8444526 by guest on 30 September 2026

of capital and human capital and falling real wages for less skilled workers throughout the core LIO countries (effects were largely reversed for developing countries with more abundant labor).[39]

In the early postwar years, increasing economic openness produced large, economy-wide benefits. American industry in particular was competitive and the "creative destruction" of World War II, to distort Joseph Schumpeter's famous phrase,[40] allowed all the core countries to redeploy factors of production into their areas of comparative advantage with little economic stress.[41] Openness was complemented by the expanded social welfare programs championed in the New Deal coalition that cushioned some of the pain from this process of specialization. The smaller and more open the economy, the larger the social welfare state grew in order to buffer the winds of change from the international economy.[42] Tariff liberalization at least through the Kennedy Round of the GATT increased trade while duties remained sufficient to cushion less productive industries. The Tokyo Round reductions went further and began to "bite" into traditional industries—but were offset by side deals like the Multifiber Agreement[43] and Voluntary Export Restraints,[44] especially with Japan.

As globalization (and technological change) accelerated, however, real wages for less skilled workers in the USA froze in the early 1970s and have remained stagnant or fallen ever since. At the same time, the incomes of more highly educated workers grew rapidly, more than doubling over the same period.[45] As Figure 2 shows, using education as a common proxy for skill, real wages for college-educated workers uniformly increased over the 30-year period from 1979 to 2019 while real wages for high school graduates or less, typically classed as "low skill" workers, declined. Combined with favorable tax policies on capital, driven in part by capital's new international mobility, income inequality has expanded to levels not seen since the late 19th century—the era of "robber barons" and the first period of populism in North America.[46] In 1989, the top 1% of households in the USA held 20.3% of all wealth while the bottom 50% held only 7.2%. By 2024, the top 1% of households increased to 28.0% and the bottom 50% declined to only 5.5% of all wealth—a startling change.[47]

A victim of its own success, the embedded liberalism of the New Deal coalition was displaced by neoliberalism in the 1980s. As both international markets and returns to capital and human capital expanded, the political power of increasingly wealthy elites and highly educated individuals grew,[48] leading to both the Reagan Revolution and President Bill Clinton's "centrism" of the 1990s. Under neoliberalism, international markets opened further, leading to what Dani Rodrik has called hyperglobalization, and the social welfare policies of the New Deal—the embedded

[39] Ronald Rogowski, *Commerce and Coalitions: How Trade Affects Domestic Political Alignments* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); Thomas M. Flaherty and Ronald Rogowski, "Rising Inequality as a Threat to the Liberal International Order," *International Organization*, Vol. 75, No. 2 (2021), pp. 495–523.

[40] Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

[41] Mancur Olson, *The Rise and Decline of Nations: Economic Growth, Stagflation, and Social Rigidities* (London: Yale University Press, 1982).

[42] Peter J. Katzenstein, *Small States in World Markets: Industrial Policy in Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985); Dani Rodrik, "A Primer on Trade and Inequality," *Oxford Open Economics*, Vol. 3, Supplement 1 (2024), pp. 1076–82.

[43] Joseph Pelzman, "The Multifiber Arrangement and Its Effect on the Profit Performance of the U.S. Textile Industry," in Robert E. Baldwin and Anne O. Krueger, eds., *The Structure and Evolution of Recent U.S. Trade Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 111–41.

[44] Robert C. Feenstra, "Voluntary Export Restraint in U.S. Autos, 1980–1981: Quality, Employment, and Welfare Effects," in Baldwin and Krueger, eds., *The Structure and Evolution of Recent U.S. Trade Policy*, pp. 35–65.

[45] Jonathan Haskel, et al., "Globalization and U.S. Wages: Modifying Classic Theory to Explain Recent Facts," *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (2012), pp. 119–40.

[46] Flaherty and Rogowski, "Rising Inequality as a Threat to the Liberal International Order."

[47] Source: https://www.federalreserve.gov/releases/z1/dataviz/dfa/distribute/table/#quarter:140;series:Assets;demographic:networth;population:all;units:levels. Calculations by author.

[48] Rogowski, *Commerce and Coalitions*.

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/cjip/article/19/1/10/8444526 by guest on 30 September 2026

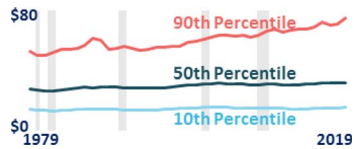
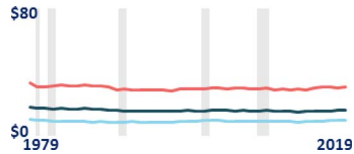
Education Group	Real Wage Trends	Cumulative % Change in Real Wage Levels over 1979- 2019		
	Shaded Bars = Recessions	*10th percentile*	*50th percentile*	*90th percentile*
College Degree Holders		6.9%	15.2%	42.1%
High School Diploma or Less Education		-5.4%	-11.1%	-8.3%

Fig. 2 Wage Trends by Education and the Higher-Education Wage Premium. Sources: CRS estimates using Current Population Survey Outgoing Rotation Group data for 1979–2019. Recession data (in gray) are from the National Bureau of Economic Research, at http://www.nber.org/cycles.html. Notes: Sample comprises nonfarm wage and salary workers who are 25–64 years old and provide sufficient information to compute an hourly wage. Periods of recession are shaded in gray. Dollar amounts are adjusted for inflation using the CPI-U. Source: Congressional Research Service, "Real Wage Trends, 1979–2019, Report 45090 (updated December 28, 2020)," p. 11, https://sgp.fas.org/crs/misc/R45090.pdf.

part of liberalism—were gradually dismantled.[49] Although social welfare expenditures as a whole increased in the USA, this was driven by Social Security and Medicare, which apply for all Americans. Programs for displaced workers and the poor shrank.[50] Less skilled workers were caught between the two arms of the scissor—flat or declining real wages and the reduced social safety net—fully exposing them to the vicissitudes of globalization. The squeezing of the working class is not unique to the USA, of course, and is found across Europe as well.

Neoliberalism exacerbated cleavages within American society, leading to a partial realignment in US politics. In mobilizing "social values voters" into his coalition, largely Christian conservatives who were already inclined to vote Republican, Reagan consolidated the race-tinged strategy begun under President Richard Nixon that transformed the South from a solid Democratic voting bloc into the core of the Republican Party. Despite this change, however, politics remained relatively quiescent until the global financial crisis of 2008–09. Like the shifting tectonic plates of the Earth's crust, tension slowly built until finally erupting in a major earthquake. The Great Recession as it was called had devastating consequences, especially for

[49] Dani Rodrik, *The Globalization Paradox: Democracy and the Future of the World Economy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[50] Peter S. Goodman, "Workers Who Lost Jobs to Trade Needed Help. Washington Cut the Funding," *New York Times*, 25 August, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/08/25/business/trade-layoffs-job-assistance.html.

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/cjip/article/19/1/10/8444526 by guest on 30 September 2026

low-income workers.[51] For less wealthy Americans, real estate has always been their largest and most important asset. In the speculative bubble that preceded the financial crisis, many workers borrowed and overinvested in real estate, whose value quickly plummeted as the recession hit. This led directly to the Tea Party movement in the USA with its seemingly contradictory demands for lower taxes and expanded social insurance programs.[52] While early populists Pat Buchanan ran in the Republican primary in 1988 and Ross Perot ran a relatively successful third-party candidacy in 1992, both of which emphasized the devastating effects of globalization on unskilled labor, neither of the major political parties in the USA was particularly responsive to the growing frustrations and disillusionment of working-class Americans throughout this period. Drawing more heavily on its liberal coastal elites, the Democratic Party drifted away from its blue-collar roots with both Presidents Clinton and Obama moving to the center. This created the opening into which Donald J. Trump entered the political arena.

In the name of populism, President Trump has drawn working-class Americans harmed by globalization into the Republican Party, stripping the Democrats of this core voting bloc. In playing up his personal grievances against other US elites, Trump has captured the grievances of long-ignored working-class Americans. Though he has governed more as a traditional fiscal conservative with his major legislative achievements in both 2017 and 2025 being tax cuts that favored the rich, Trump has broken decisively with core tenets of the LIO, questioning the value of international institutions, especially NATO, eschewing democracy promotion and human rights as goals of US foreign policy, and embracing protectionism even against traditional US allies and starting a trade war with China. After the Biden interregnum, Trump has doubled down on all of these policies in his second administration, combining traditional conservatism aimed at shrinking the size of government with upending US foreign policy and undermining every tenet of the LIO. As in the New Deal, Trump has led a fundamental realignment in American politics and orchestrated a new class coalition, a change mirrored in the rise of right-wing parties in Europe. This realignment is embodied in Trump as president but not limited to him. The Republican Party is now nationalist, unilateralist, and even isolationist. Even if Trump abides by the Constitution and leaves office in January 2029, this new Republican Party will live on.

As a consequence, the USA can no longer be trusted to be a good ally or reliable partner.[53] Regardless of who holds power in the future, allies and partners must recognize that the 75-year-old commitment to the LIO is broken. We now see that any commitments made can be overturned in a future election. A Democratic or non-populist Republican might win the presidency in 2028 and seek to restore US leadership with a refurbished liberal order, but as Trump demonstrates such commitments can be negated by simple executive orders. This was always the case, of course, but there remained a sufficient consensus on foreign policy through 2016 or so and enough veto players across the government that continuity in policy was assumed. In the highly polarized USA today, this assumption no longer holds.[54] In 1976, Richard Rosecrance published a book entitled *America as an Ordinary Country*, by which he meant that the USA was no longer hegemonic and willing to lead the Western alliance and would, like other

[51] Menzie Chinn and Jeffry A. Frieden, *Lost Decades: The Making of America's Debt Crisis and the Long Recovery* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2021); Miles Kahler and David A. Lake, eds., *Politics in the New Hard Times: The Great Recession in Comparative Perspective* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).

[52] Kevin Arceneaux and Stephen P. Nicholson, "Who Wants to Have a Tea Party? The Who, What, and Why of the Tea Party Movement," *PS: Political Science & Politics*, Vol. 45, No. 4 (2012), pp. 700–10.

[53] Rachel Myrick, "The Reputational Consequences of Polarization for American Foreign Policy: Evidence from the US-UK Bilateral Relationship," in Gordon M. Friedrichs and Jordan Tama, eds., *Polarization and US Foreign Policy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), pp. 373–403.

[54] Rachel Myrick, "Do External Threats Unite or Divide? Security Crises, Rivalries, and Polarization in American Foreign Policy," *International Organization*, Vol. 75, No. 4 (2021), pp. 921–58.

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/cjip/article/19/1/10/8444526 by guest on 30 September 2026

countries, now put self-interest first. This prediction was premature and failed to anticipate the fall of the Soviet Union and the period of unipolarity that followed. He now appears prescient.

The Future

As the LIO fades, we are in a new era of superpower competition between the USA and China, with Russia playing the role of spoiler and Europe standing on the sidelines. Other, smaller countries stare helplessly as the LIO unravels. There are three key questions, the answers to which will shape the future of international order.

First, what kind of orders do the superpowers want—and how attractive are these orders to other states? The LIO was, in part, a projection of American values onto the global stage. The liberal order at home was imprinted on the liberal order abroad.[55] This was never a one-to-one transposition, for reasons embedded in the next question. But there certainly was a family resemblance between the liberal, democratic, and free market system of the USA itself and the LIO. What the new, more nationalist, unilateralist, sovereigntist, and above all transactionalist USA wants for a new international order is far less clear—or even if it cares about international order at all compared to a series of ad hoc, bilateral, and potentially inconsistent deals. In Saudi Arabia, President Trump even declared that the USA "would no longer chastise other governments over human rights issues" and that it is no longer America's role to lecture them on "how to live and how to govern (their) own affairs."[56] While the USA is undermining the LIO, there is no articulated vision of what might replace it—nor even a brewing debate about the content of some future international order.

Similarly, what does China really want from an international order? Other than championing the principles of sovereignty, self-determination, and non-intervention to insulate the Communist Party against the democratic impulses of the LIO, it is not clear what China actually aspires to internationally.[57] Highly dependent on export-led growth and development, would a Chinese world order be one of free trade? Or one of economic exploitation in which trade and financial imbalances are always in Beijing's favor? Would China exert effort to stabilize and possibly protect potential economic partners? Would Beijing attempt to enforce the territorial integrity norm that has helped limit interstate conflict for the last eight decades?[58] These remain, in my view, open questions. Realists assume that, as a global superpower, China must be pursuing power and, therefore, is locked into a zero-sum competition with the USA.[59] Others maintain that China is still largely a status quo power.[60] Like the USA, what China envisions as a future international order is unclear. As the old order falls, there is surprisingly little discussion of a replacement. My own view is that the USA and China, assuming the worst about each other, are engaged in a spiral of mutual misunderstandings and hostility. A frank discussion of their views of international order might well reveal that we risk fighting over small differences in priorities.

Second, and following from the first, can either or both of the superpowers actually lead? It is an immutable fact of politics that leaders need followers, and others follow only if the leader is taking them where they want to go. The success of the LIO grew from US efforts to rebuild the political systems in Europe and Japan after World War II in ways that were compatible with its interests.[61] But it also partly sublimated its interests to those of its allies and created institutions

[55] Ikenberry, *A World Safe for Democracy*.

[56] Ellen Knickmeyer, "Trump's Mideast Trip Splashes out on Deals and Diplomacy but Is Quiet on Human Rights," *Associated Press*, 16 May, 2025, https://apnews.com/article/trump-saudi-arabia-human-rights-f005cb14a8a0d51b1963a05215305d04.

[57] Johnston, "China in a World of Orders."

[58] Mark W. Zacher, "The Territorial Integrity Norm: International Boundaries and the Use of Force," *International Organization*, Vol. 55, No. 2 (2001), p. 2.

[59] John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001).

[60] Kang, Wong, and Chan, "What Does China Want?"

[61] Lake, *Indirect Rule*.

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/cjip/article/19/1/10/8444526 by guest on 30 September 2026

that at least allowed its partners some voice in collective decision-making, thereby constraining its own range of diplomatic maneuver.[62] In this way, the USA led rather than commanded or coerced. Whether the post-LIO USA will be able to lead others is uncertain, though I remain skeptical. There is too much "America First" at present to attract new allies. Likewise, can China subordinate its own national interests to those of its partners? To date, Beijing has prioritized its own growth and stability with little apparent concern about the wishes and needs of others, as witnessed by its renewed export drive to solve its domestic financial problems. Rather than seeking to stimulate domestic consumption, as desired by virtually every other country, China continues to export its problems to the rest of the world. How much it might be willing to sacrifice in deference to the needs of its potential followers is unknown.

Third, will others choose to follow? Despite their status, the superpowers are not all powerful. They might be able to coerce some states some of the time, but they cannot coerce all states all the time. Other states have agency and can choose their own fates within and in conjunction with the orders offered by the two superpowers. States can choose to align with China. Beijing is certainly attempting to make the choice more attractive through the BRI, but its financial terms and questionable implications for development now lead some to wonder just how advantageous such a relationship might be. To succeed, China will likely need to rebalance the benefits of the BRI toward its clients and potential client states. States might also choose to align with the USA, though this choice may be less attractive than in the past. Under a Trumpist regime, states will be forced to pay more for their own security while facing more significant barriers to trade. In new transactional relationships, the USA will focus more on short-term advantage to the detriment of its smaller clients rather than long-term investments in cooperation. This will make aligning with the USA less attractive than in the past but, perhaps, still better than the alternatives.

I expect both the USA and China will seek to recruit new and rally old allies to their side as competition intensifies.[63] I further expect they will do so in ways similar to those employed by the USA after 1945 in supporting factions within target states whose preferences are more closely aligned with their own.[64] The USA has so far been slow to engage in this strategy, apparently assuming that the conservative, pro-Western governments it brought to power and institutionalized after World War II remain friends. Yet, in breaking the LIO, the USA has alienated its past allies and those relationships will need to be rebuilt at a time when trust in Washington has plummeted to new lows. China is already pursuing indirect rule in supporting pro-China factions in Taiwan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, the Solomon Islands, and elsewhere in Asia. As its investments through the BRI in the rest of Southeast Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East, and East Africa expand, it will be drawn into the domestic politics of countries in those regions as well.[65] The interests of the USA and China overlap most intensely in the Middle East, and this will likely be the flashpoint in any future conflict. The key question for the future of international order is how successful each superpower will be in attracting and supporting new clients. Despite the lack of trust noted above, how many other countries can the USA recruit to its sphere-of-influence? How many states will join a Chinese sphere? Though much depends on it, the answers to these questions remain deeply uncertain. Without a clear answer, China has been restrained from an all-out assault on what remains of the US-led LIO. If China becomes more

[62] David A. Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009).

[63] David A. Lake, "Economic Openness and Great Power Competition: Lessons for China and the United States," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (2018), p. 3.

[64] Lake, *Indirect Rule*; Wan Yujia and David A. Lake, "Strategic Sponsorship: Great Power Competition in Polarized States," Unpublished manuscript, 2025, CA: San Diego.

[65] David A. Lake, "Domination, Authority, and the Forms of Chinese Power," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (2017), p. 4; Georg Lammich, "China's Evolving Security Engagement in Africa: Policies, Strategies, and Implications," *European Journal of International Security*, (2025), pp. 1–18, https://doi.org/doi:10.1017/eis.2025.3.

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/cjip/article/19/1/10/8444526 by guest on 30 September 2026

confident that more states will join a Chinese-led world order, the more likely that the challenge to US leadership will expand. Thus, much depends on the choices of third-party states. What the post-LIO world will look like depends not only on the actions and aspirations of the superpowers but also those of states that may or may not join their orders.

Depending on the answers to these three questions, three scenarios seem likely, though to repeat a refrain in a period of deep contestation, the future is extremely hard to predict. First, if the USA and China recognize that their differences over the nature of world order are not as large as they seem and negotiate their way to a common understanding, there is a strong prospect for managed pluralism in some form. Along with Europe and perhaps Russia, though the latter is likely to remain more of an outlier, the great powers might together manage both the international economy and political conflicts that have to potential to escalate to war. Successful summits between the USA and China would be suggestive of this path.

Second, if the superpowers do not converge and do not succeed in building successful alliances, we can expect fragmented minilaterals in which other states ay strive for neutrality by either hedging—maintaining ties to both superpowers—or developing their autonomous capacities.[66] This was the aspiration of the non-aligned movement during the Cold War, but its members were never truly able to escape the gravitational pull of the USA and the Soviet Union during that period of international struggle. The smaller the country, the more costly is security autonomy and economic autarky. Small states will almost inevitably be drawn into the orbit of one or the other superpower. Only in deep coordination with other regional partners are states likely to be able to resist. If Europe is able to build a more autonomous defense capacity, it may be able to stand as a third pole in the international system. ASEAN may have sufficient vitality to remain neutral, though China is chipping away at its potential for independence with investments in Myanmar and elsewhere. States do have agency but they must incur at least some costs to themselves to realize it. Efforts to build stronger regional organizations and increase their own defense capacities would indicate trends in this direction.

Finally, if the USA and China continue in the current spiral of misperception and hostility and they each manage to exert some leadership, we are likely to see separate spheres of influence arise. Unlike during the Cold War when the US and Soviet spheres were defined mostly in terms of territory and military alliances, the spheres that might be formed by the USA and China will likely cluster around economic relations—who trades and invests with whom. Supply chains will form around "trusted" partners, who side with one or the other of the superpowers. This is path we are already on, in my view, and it is likely to be the most conflictual, unfortunately.[67] The Cold War crises that so threatened peace and stability revolved around where to draw the boundaries between East and West: was Berlin, a frequent flashpoint, part of the Soviet or Western bloc? Only once the territorial boundaries solidified after the Cuban missile crisis was détente between Washington and Moscow possible. In a world of economic spheres of influence, trade patterns will likely be more ambiguous. The spheres will not be hermetically sealed, some exchange according to comparative advantage will likely continue, rendering who belongs in which sphere less than clear. This might soften competition between the superpowers—as allies do not have to belong solely to one or the other—but it may also heighten conflicts as the USA and China risk intruding into regions each thinks are in its sphere. If this is where the world is headed, and I unfortunately think it is, then relations between the superpowers will have to be carefully managed.

[66] T.V. Paul, "Soft Balancing in the Age of U.S. Primacy," *International Security*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (2025), p. 1; John D. Ciorciari and Jurgen Haacke, "Hedging in International Relations: An Introduction," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (2019), pp. 367–74.

[67] Lake, "Economic Openness and Great Power Competition."

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/cjip/article/19/1/10/8444526 by guest on 30 September 2026

Conclusion

The outcome of any period of deep contestation is inherently unknowable. When fundamental norms and institutions are questioned, politics become anarchic in both senses of that term, as a system without authority and as one of chaos. Without rules over how rules get made, who has the right to make decisions is ambiguous, likely devolving into struggles of raw political power. Coalitions at home and abroad form, break apart, and reform into some other constellation, with outcomes cycling through possible alternatives. When orders are deeply contested, even what constitutes knowledge, expertise, and truth can be challenged, making rational discussions and decision-making even more problematic. Violence within and between countries becomes possible. Some see the LIO as resilient and likely to survive in some perhaps modified form.[68] I am more skeptical and, at the same time, uncertain about what will replace it, whether this be competing spheres of influence or something beyond current imagination. What emerges from deep contestation, however, is neither beyond nor entirely within our control. Whether deep contestation results in continuing anarchy and World War III, some compromise order under the tutelage of a multilateral coalition of great powers, or separate American and Chinese spheres of influence is and will remain a choice.

Conflict of interest statement

None declared.

Downloaded from academic.oup.com/cjip/article/19/1/10/8444526 by guest on 30 September 2026

[68] G. John Ikenberry, "The End of Liberal International Order," *International Affairs*, Vol. 94, No. 1 (2018), pp. 7–23; Risse, "Deep Contestations and the Resilience of the Liberal International Order."

© The Author(s) 2026. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of The Institute of International Relations, Tsinghua University. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs licence (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/), which permits non-commercial reproduction and distribution of the work, in any medium, provided the original work is not altered or transformed in any way, and that the work properly cited. For commercial re-use, please contact reprints@oup.com for reprints and translation rights for reprints. All other permissions can be obtained through our RightsLink service via the Permissions link on the article page on our site—for further information please contact journals.permissions@oup.com.
The Chinese Journal of International Politics, 2026, 19, 10–24
https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poaf016
Article