
The Future of Global Governance and World Order

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Abstract This special issue of *International Organization* is composed of fifteen short essays that consider how longer-term trends (including the rise of China, the anti-globalization backlash, the rise of populism, the emergence of new technologies, the slowing or reversal of democratization in many countries, and the existential threat of climate change), along with recent developments in US foreign policy, are likely to affect the future of global governance and world order. The contributors consider a variety of different issue areas, as well as cross-cutting trends. Some contributors anticipate significant change; others predict incremental change; and still others expect mostly continuity. The collection suggests a future research agenda focused on the impact of long-term trends and immediate shocks on local, regional, and global equilibria.

Whither Global Order?

Shortly after US President Trump began his second term in January 2025, he took a range of actions related to international politics and US foreign policy. These actions, as well as related statements, generated tremendous uncertainty about the future of global governance and world order. President Trump's actions came at a time when longer-term processes of change were already underway, making this moment in history particularly striking.

For decades, scholars of international politics have studied how governments respond to technological changes; how international institutions adapt (or not) to shifts in power relations; and how global norms and practices evolve. *International Organization's* (IO's) roots lie in attempting to understand global governance in the immediate aftermath of World War II: in its inaugural issue, Harvey H. Bundy, President of the World Peace Foundation, wrote that IO had been created to "take definite action toward the dissemination of accurate information and informed

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comment on the manifold problems of international organization.”¹ He observed that international organizations had become fundamental to understanding international relations. In its early years, *IO*’s pages were filled with reports on the functioning of various bodies, including the United Nations Security Council, the World Health Organization, and the International Cotton Advisory Committee.

As the journal evolved, it sought to understand and explain developments in global governance and international relations. Throughout its history, *IO*’s editors have called special attention to major world events, via special issues of the journal. Most recently, these have included a special issue on the COVID-19 pandemic (2020) and a seventy-fifth anniversary issue on the future of the Liberal International Order (2021).

This special issue offers an outlet for scholars of International Relations to provide theoretically informed assessments about how longer-term dynamics and the second Trump administration’s disruptions will interact to affect global order. The future of international politics is very much open to debate, as illustrated by the range of predictions contained in these essays. Some of what we are witnessing may be thought of as the culmination of longer-term trends—for instance, the slowing or reversal of worldwide patterns of democratization; the rise of China and relative decline of the United States; and a backlash against economic openness, rooted partly in the failure of governments to compensate those who have suffered material losses, and rooted partly in the intersection of identity and culture with material concerns. Other phenomena are evidence of international institutions and norms that are no longer fit for the purpose of addressing emergent or intensifying changes, such as technology and climate change. And still other processes reflect the importance of domestic politics and ongoing norm contestation, which may be drivers of change (or stability).

Also contained in this volume is a debate about what will become of existing institutions and their associated rules and norms: they may prove resilient in the face of large challenges; they may continue in place legally, while the underlying practices shift substantially; they may adapt—highlighting the agency of IOs vis-à-vis their member states; or they may be replaced by alternatives. In the current moment, we can observe each of these processes at work, in different issue-areas and in different parts of the world. What remains to be seen is whether a “backlash against the backlash” will ultimately lead to the preservation of much of the liberal international order, or whether new forms of order—or an interregnum of fragmentation and disorder—will emerge. Related to this is a debate about how much China will exercise power within existing IOs versus building alternative structures, and whether other liberal democracies will act collectively in the absence of reliable US leadership.

We therefore may be facing a transitional moment in international politics. Is this the end of the “post-Cold War era” and the dawn of something new? Our authors identify several ways in which it is, and other areas in which they expect more

1. Bundy 1947, 1.

continuity. Importantly for scholars, the contributors identify areas in which our existing theories are robust and can help us understand the effects of changes in power and interests, and other areas in which new theorizing and new forms of global governance are needed.

The fifteen essays included in this special issue are the result of a process we initiated in spring 2025. On 1 May 2025, *IO* issued an open call for short peer-reviewed essays focused on the future of global governance and world order. We encouraged scholars of international politics to offer theoretically informed assessments of the future of international politics. We envisioned these pieces as sometimes responding to long-term trends, sometimes evaluating more recent policy changes in the United States and elsewhere, and always discussing the consequences of these shifts for global politics as well as for International Relations scholarship.

We were aware that our call was ambitious: we asked for manuscripts that were of a different type (the 4,000-word essay) than our usual submissions. And because we viewed it as important for scholars to engage with new developments in a timely fashion, we set a short deadline. Our scholarly community rose to the challenge: we received 208 submissions by our 15 June 2025 deadline. Our editorial team evaluated these submissions, sending a subset for external peer review (again, with short deadlines). Some of these we invited to resubmit after revisions, keeping in mind the limited number we were able to include in the special issue. We received revised manuscripts in mid-September 2025.

As editors, we made many difficult decisions about which submissions to send for review, invite for revision, and include in the special issue. At a moment when so many academic processes are under threat—from reduced financial resources, real or perceived constraints on freedom of speech and scholarship, and shifts in immigration policies, for example—we note the deep commitment of so many colleagues to scholarly inquiry. We are pleased to feature contributions from a total of twenty-nine scholars, including thirteen whose work is featured in *IO* for the first time. We very much appreciate the willingness of scholars to engage in our process, both as authors and as reviewers.

Change, Continuity, or Muddling Through?

This special issue features essays on a range of issues, although not all the important issues facing global politics are represented. Some essays focus on a single issue, such as the rise of large technology firms or the protection of refugees; others tackle cross-cutting themes, including the links between international finance and geopolitics, or the interplay between climate change and the rise of China. Some essays highlight significant changes in technology, governance, and ideas, while others argue that we are likely to observe important continuities in global politics.

First, there is a set of essays that focus on broad changes to the international order, changes that also present new tasks for International Relations theory. Goddard and Newman suggest that cliques are again becoming an ordering principle in

international politics. They view the return of royalism as a persistent feature of international politics; royalist cliques predate, and sometimes have co-existed with, the modern state-based system. These types of regimes challenge existing explanations about how states act. Gellwitzki and Moulton draw attention to the role foundational myths play in legitimating the international order. To the extent that the current set of myths has eroded, creating support for a future new international order will require new myths. At present, we know very little about how such myths are created and become widely accepted.

Morse and Pratt theorize about the effects of the increased prevalence of information disorder. They describe a media environment characterized by low barriers to content creation; the rapid spread of misleading or false material; and the algorithmic amplification of sensational and fragmented narratives. Information is important to many international processes: complete and accurate information can make war less likely; information about disease outbreaks is essential to global public health governance; and economic policy transparency facilitates governments' access to development finance. Information also allows publics to hold their leaders accountable, including for their foreign policy decisions. To the extent that mass publics' views regarding climate, trade, or security depend on information about those issues, information disorder also will shift leaders' foreign policy incentives.

The new (dis)information environment also reflects the rise and presence of very large technology firms, many of which now provide and employ artificial intelligence. One might imagine that cross-border flows (here, of information and digital services) could be governed by existing international institutions. Indeed, contemporary institutions have been adapted to deal with previous shifts, such as the rise in civil versus inter-state conflicts, the evolving definition of universal human rights, the liberalization of financial flows, and the evolution of global supply chains and production networks.

Weymouth argues, to the contrary, that existing global economic institutions are not fit for purpose when it comes to governing platform companies and artificial intelligence (AI). He describes an emerging set of alliances between very large technology firms and specific national governments, often made with the aim of restricting rather than liberalizing. A future with multiple rival firm-government alliances may feature more fragmentation than cooperation. We note that international political economy has long viewed most large, internationally active firms as forces for liberalization, advocating for trade openness and cross-border investment flows. Here, technology and artificial intelligence firms may instead be a force for restriction, reshaping many elements of international politics. Moreover, technology has become not only something to be governed, but something directly involved in governance—via algorithms, for instance.

Perhaps the most significant large-scale change is the erosion of democratic institutions and constraints in many countries. Many populist political parties, leaders, and candidates are engaging in actions that undermine the rule of law and government accountability. International Relations scholars have long acknowledged the importance of domestic political interests and institutions to states' foreign policy

actions and the credibility of their commitment to international cooperation.² Changes in domestic accountability affect IOs and international order in fundamental ways.

Changes in the United States may be especially important, given the role the United States has played as hegemonic leader. Hyde and Saunders consider the global implications of domestic political change within the United States, arguing that reduced constraints on the US executive may undermine the international order. These changes relate, in part, to disinformation and misinformation: without shared knowledge, it is more difficult for citizens to coordinate political behavior, making protest less likely.³ Dramatic shifts in the political institutions in the United States and polarization of its electorate also suggest an erosion of the democratic advantage. Accountability to large segments of the population and institutional constraints create consistency in foreign policy that facilitates credible commitments in both the short and long term.⁴ Scholars have argued that world order benefits substantially from the hegemon's ability to commit to consistent foreign policy and hegemonic restraint.⁵ The constraints provided by democratic political institutions have, for instance, allowed the United States to commit more credibly to alliances,⁶ to borrow on advantageous terms,⁷ therefore allowing it to more easily finance military and other expenditures, and to deepen its trade and investment ties.⁸ Without these constraints, even a willing United States might find exercising hegemonic leadership challenging.

Several other essays consider how current US policies and recent US actions undermine US leadership in both economic and military arenas. The second Trump administration's transactional approach to politics and disregard for allies' interests seems likely to reduce the United States' global influence. This approach also threatens to isolate the United States, eroding the leadership position that has provided many material benefits.

Along these lines, Carson, Metz, and Poast focus on the broad network of alliances that has been central to the maintenance of US hegemony. These alliances allowed the United States to gather intelligence, conduct military operations, and deter threats to its allies on a global scale. Recent US demands that its allies spend more on defense or cede territory, combined with US violations of core rules and norms (such as the unilateral and unpredictable imposition of tariffs), generate uncertainty about the credibility of US alliances commitments. As allies question the value of these relationships, they may work to develop alternatives to exclusive reliance on the United States for security and in turn be less willing to support US security operations. If allies are less willing to provide access to the United States in the future,

2. Maoz and Russett 1993; Milner 1997.

3. Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland 2018.

4. Leeds and Mattes 2022; Schultz 2001.

5. Cowhey 1993; Ikenberry 2001.

6. Leeds 2003.

7. Ballard-Rosa, Mosley, and Wellhausen 2021.

8. Chen, Pevehouse, and Powers 2023.

its global reach and power will be diminished. “America first” may well leave America alone.

Tan also considers US actions, focusing on efforts to coerce governments via non-military means. Economic and financial sanctions, especially those targeted at government-affiliated elites and institutions, have been an attractive instrument for US coercion. Their use is facilitated by the centrality of the United States to global payments, financial, and trade systems.⁹ But this “weaponization” of economic interdependence, Tan argues, can sow the seeds of its own demise. That is, governments that want to avoid being targeted in the future may begin to take actions to reduce their exposure. They may search for—or even help to create—alternative payments systems or vehicle currencies. In the short run, these alternatives may be of a technical nature, such as creating workarounds to avoid processing payments through US financial institutions. Over the medium to long run, however, governments may succeed in creating operational alternatives. In this way, coercion undermines its effectiveness, by creating incentives for decoupling.

Admittedly, the demand for alternatives to a US-led financial order is insufficient to create such an order. Supply also matters. Pforr, Pape, and Petry consider the role of the US dollar as the key global reserve currency—a role that has provided the United States with a range of “exorbitant privileges” since the creation of the International Monetary Fund in 1944. Other governments have long expressed frustration that, by virtue of the dollar’s role, the United States has been more able than others to run trade deficits and fiscal deficits.¹⁰ Pforr and colleagues note that there are now multiple reasons (including and in addition to the US use of sanctions) for current dissatisfaction with the US dollar. Yet there also currently is no alternative asset—issued by another government nor by private actors—that could fulfill the dollar’s functions as a store of value and a medium of exchange. Hence, we may be moving toward an interregnum, in which the dollar is less dominant, but not yet replaced. To the extent that a credible dollar alternative emerges eventually, however, US financial hegemony is likely to decline as well.

Shifts within the United States also have important consequences for addressing climate change. The US position on climate has varied markedly over the last decade, with the Biden administration rejoining the Paris Agreement and making large investments in the clean energy transition via the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA). The second Trump administration has undone many of these efforts, leading observers to argue that future climate policy should take a much more measured view of the contributions the United States is likely to make. Colgan and Genovese note that a divergence is emerging, with China staking out a position as the leader of a global green energy transition—an “electrostate.” Their analysis points to the importance of understanding the domestic politics surrounding climate—especially the emergence and persistence of anti-climate coalitions in some countries. These pieces not only underscore the importance of shifts in hegemonic leadership; they also underscore the

9. Farrell and Newman 2019; McDowell 2022.

10. Eichengreen 2011.

important connections among trade, climate, finance, technology, and security—domains that often have been treated by scholars as distinct but, in the current era, are very much related.

Another group of essays explains how the increased influence of autocratic states (especially, but not limited to, China) in international organizations, coupled with the changed domestic politics in many states that have traditionally supported the liberal international order, are affecting how international organizations operate. In the arenas of UN peacekeeping, human rights, and refugee protection, there is a hollowing out of regimes, and/or a drift in the operations of international institutions.

Reeder's contribution identifies changes in how United Nations peacekeeping operates. Although there have not been *de jure* changes, *de facto* shifts are evident. The post–Cold War tilt away from state sovereignty and toward the responsibility to protect is reversing itself. The assertiveness of China and Russia, the retrenchment of the United States, and a related increase in host state bargaining power has resulted in peacekeeping operations with more limited goals. Missions focus more heavily on stabilization and respect for sovereignty rather than democratization and human rights. Reeder highlights the role played by UN staff: they are pragmatic, and they want the institution to persist; they realize that this may require reduced ambition. The role of staff in maintaining international organizations during times of changed power and purpose by principals is a consistent theme in scholarship.¹¹

Cordell and Dukalskis also highlight the growing influence of autocracies on the international human rights regime. Again, there has not been a sudden rupture, at least for now; rather, there are increasing efforts by autocracies to undermine the global human rights regime. Disinformation and repression play a role in these efforts, but this is combined with an effort to redefine human rights in ways that prioritize state sovereignty and economic development over civil and political rights. The changes Cordell and Dukalskis describe also are accelerated and exacerbated by the US retreat from its commitment to global human rights; the leadership void is increasingly filled by those with nonliberal approaches. Cordell and Dukalskis underscore the potential for autocratic capture of existing IOs,¹² as well as for the creation of new, autocracy-dominated IOs. To the extent that liberal states are willing in the future to attempt collective leadership on human rights, the erosion of the rights regime may slow. But without the domestic political will in democracies for collective leadership on human rights, the drift may accelerate.

Looking specifically at the refugee regime, Davutoglu also describes a situation of institutional drift and legal substitution. The trappings of a liberal approach to refugees, driven by the normative goal of protecting refugees, remain intact. But many governments have shifted toward a practice of “flexible containment,” attempting to address refugee issues in ways that do not include the admission of refugees. The combination of border externalization, delegation to other institutions, and procedural delays suggests a regime whose underlying norms are eroding.

11. Barnett and Finnemore 1999; Lang, Wellner, and Kentikelenis 2025.

12. Cottiero, Hafner-Burton, Haggard, Prather, and Schneider 2025.

Hence, while a wholesale abandonment of refugee protection has not occurred, the current state of the regime illustrates how governments can undermine normative commitments while keeping legal and institutional structures in place.

A final group of essays predict that, despite changes in the United States and elsewhere, the future of international relations will look very much like the recent past. Even with the erosion of hegemonic leadership, the rise of new powers, and a shifting commitment to some shared norms, some existing equilibria are robust. Invernizzi and Dür assess the state of global trade governance in the wake of the second Trump administration's use of tariffs against a broad range of products and trading partners. They posit that, while current US behavior is extreme in its disregard for global trade rules, this is not the first time that the United States has wavered in its commitment to liberalization. US trade policy can be viewed in a two-dimensional space, one involving typical domestic politics pressures for liberalization versus protection, and a second involving the salience of security issues within the trade relationship. Even as the position in this space varies, global trade governance has remained effective. Over the longer term, Invernizzi and Dür expect a return to a largely rules-based mode of trade governance—one that benefits many actors within the United States, as well as globally.

Schultz's contribution focuses on the potential return of territorial conquest. He engages with the concern that US retrenchment, China's rise, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine hint at coming challenges even to settled borders, as revisionist states are emboldened by reduced alliance credibility (highlighted by Carson and colleagues' essay) and norm erosion. In contrast, Schultz highlights institutionalized equilibria at the dyadic and regional levels, asserting that these make the widespread contestation of settled borders very unlikely. This is not to suggest, of course, that conflicts will not escalate, especially in areas with already-contested borders (and lacking stabilizing equilibria), but rather, again, that the international system may be more resilient than some fear.

The final essay, by Bush, Donno, Pevehouse, and Schneider, focuses on domestic politics—in autocratic states—as a source of stability rather than change. In response to international pressures and incentives, autocratic states adopted some liberal practices, especially after the Cold War. For instance, they allowed for limited electoral competition and committed to respect for some types of human rights. The external environment has shifted, suggesting that autocracies may abandon these liberal practices. Yet Bush and coauthors suggest that reforms will remain locked in for domestic reasons: practices adopted to satisfy foreign audiences are now important to domestic groups.¹³ Governments fear that abandoning these practices would generate a backlash from opposition groups. Hence, while we are observing an erosion of accountability, rights, and transparency in some established democracies, we are unlikely to observe the abandonment of all liberal practices in mixed and autocratic regimes.

13. Simmons 2009.

International Relations Scholarship and Scholars in Uncertain Times

While the range of topics covered by these fifteen essays is wide, not all of the important areas of international relations that may be in flux are represented in this special issue. Our choice to issue an open call for submissions means we did not receive submissions on every topic; in other cases, submissions did not receive sufficient support during the review and editorial process. For example, none of our published essays focus on the impact of changes in technologies for warfighting, on nuclear proliferation or nuclear weapons use, or much on either inter-state or civil conflict. This may be because our fundamental understanding of conflict processes has not been as severely affected by recent technological, domestic political, and institutional changes. And while many of our essays point to the rise of China and relative decline of the United States as having significant impacts in specific issue areas, none of our essays focuses directly on great power competition between China and the United States, which many see as a defining feature of contemporary international relations. In fact, Goddard and Newman suggest that great power competition may end up being less influential in future global order than some anticipate.

Our collection also does not have contributions focused specifically on the role of the Global South. Global South states are contributing to new forms of global order, sometimes as alternatives to the institutions of the existing liberal international order. Global South countries also find themselves facing new opportunities. In the development finance realm, for instance, many governments have an expanded menu of options.¹⁴ The emergence of China—but also of Brazil, India, and various Gulf States—as an important source of financing may give governments more leverage vis-à-vis institutions such as the World Bank.

Periods of change often provoke introspection among scholars: scholars ask, for instance, why events like the end of the Cold War were so unexpected, or why the possibility of a global financial crisis rooted in the United States was not anticipated. In some ways, these questions are somewhat unfair because they demand that our theories are able to predict over a long temporal scope as well as to explain. In other ways, these questions are entirely apt. They challenge us to ask whether it is the values on key independent variables that have changed (for example, relative power, democratic constraint), or whether it is instead the underlying causal processes that are evolving (for example, neo-royalism).

The contributors to this special issue take a range of positions on how much, and in what ways, international politics is undergoing fundamental changes. They collectively sketch a research agenda for the future, one that is informed by existing scholarship and that engages with a series of longer-term trends and more immediate shocks, suggesting new ways of thinking about governance in the midst of a fragmenting international order.

14. Bunte 2018; Zeitz 2024.

For many scholars, the current moment feels uncertain and unprecedented not only with respect to our theories and frameworks, but also with respect to the broader climate in which we conduct scholarship. Of course, scholars in many places have experienced political and economy precarity for decades, undermining their ability to conduct research and to exercise academic freedom. In the United States, the erosion of the rule of law is a newer phenomenon; attacks on academic freedom, reductions in research resources, and restrictions on immigration are undermining the conduct of scholarship. There is a palpable disdain for expertise; while this is not new, it has intensified. In this environment, we appreciate the willingness of so many scholars to reflect upon how we can best use our expertise to understand the challenges facing international politics.

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